Why Wellbeing Is Important

Research has shown that being in employment positively impacts your health and wellbeing, and working people tend to be happier and healthier than those who do not work. However, work can also be bad for your health, as negative working situations can be detrimental to your quality of life both inside and outside the workplace.

At Bupa, we believe that we can improve global health through the workplace, by enabling businesses to help their people live happier and healthier lives.

Healthy workplaces do not only benefit employees and society, but also employers. Research demonstrates that companies that help their people improve or manage their health see higher productivity, decreased levels of absenteeism, better customer loyalty, greater profitability, and lower rates of employee turnover. Bearing this all in mind, it is clear that a corporate focus on employee wellbeing is crucial, and should inform the business strategies of all companies.

Longer, healthier, happier lives is central to our strategy

Bupa's purpose is 'longer, healthier, happier' lives. It is a commitment to our customers and to our people – as well as to the communities in which we operate. As a company dedicated to improving people's health, we know the importance of employee wellbeing. At Bupa, this means creating a culture and environment in which our employees are actually healthier as a result of working for us. Achieving this goal is central to our business strategy.

Holistic approach to employee wellbeing

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is driven by physical, psychological, social and environmental factors. That is why at Bupa International our own employee wellbeing programme (called 'My Well World') recognises this interplay by focusing on these four key areas:
- Healthy bodies (physical wellbeing)
- Healthy minds (psychological wellbeing)
- Healthy culture (social wellbeing)
- Healthy workplace (environmental wellbeing).

Healthy Bodies

We want to play an active role in helping reduce preventable deaths. We are doing this by helping our people understand the risk factors associated with preventable diseases (e.g. cardio vascular disease, diabetes, cancers, and chronic lung disease). To do this we give all our people access to information and programmes which encourage them to engage in activities which modify these risks such as educating people about tobacco usage, nutrition and diet, alcohol consumption and the importance of physical activity.

Many risk factors associated with preventable diseases are rising as a result of modern lifestyles, with health issues such as obesity trebling in the number of cases over the last 25 years. Being overweight is associated with a higher risk of other preventable illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, joint disorders and certain types of cancer. This increase is largely as a result of a widespread decrease in physical activity. Obesity can also have an impact on health and safety at work, for instance, by affecting employees' ability to carry out tasks safely. There are several ways employers can and should help their employees tackle weight issues, e.g. by making a range of healthy options available in site canteens and promoting increased physical activity.

At Bupa, we partnered with the World Heart Federation to promote the health benefits of walking more. Working with our Bupa colleagues around the world we set a target to walk five million miles for our Ground Miles Challenge. By the end of January 2014 we had reached that target. Achieving this has unlocked funds to invest in programmes to protect thousands of children from heart failure and early death.

Healthy minds

Mental health problems are the greatest cause of sickness absence, and the economic downturn alongside continual organisational change has only exacerbated this. According to the CIPD, two-fifths of organisations have reported an increase in stress-related absences over the past year, and a similar proportion claim to have seen an increase in reported mental health problems too.

We have worked with clinical psychologists to design a management training programme for senior managers and leaders called 'Performance Energy'. This programme has been developed in response to the increased demands from organisations, and is designed to help leaders prevent stress, fatigue and ill health in their workforce. The programme provides training on the physiology of resilience and energy, making good choices and maintaining a sense of control, as well as education about the impacts of different mind-sets and attitudes at work.

It is important that businesses speak to their employees (or ask them via surveys) to find out the causes of stress in their specific workplaces, and work with their people to generate useful solutions. A one-size-fits-all solution is not the answer. Workplace stress can happen for many reasons, and may be triggered by feelings of being out of control, ambiguity during times of change or a general lack of work fulfilment. In this instance employers should help their employees see the connection between their day-to-day activities and the overarching goals of the company.

Healthy culture

It is also important that employees feel they have supportive relationships at work. While this can sometimes be as simple as ensuring that people feeling able to talk to colleagues when problems arise, creating a genuinely 'healthy work culture' is much more complex, and is made up of employees perceptions about the business – it's managerial practices, leadership behaviours, employee involvement and rewards systems. As such, managers should reflect their company's wellbeing policies in their actions, as this consistency can improve employee trust. Organisations can gauge and measure these and other cultural factors through employee surveys, supplemented by workshops and focus groups.

Managers play a vital role in supporting employee wellbeing. It is about building an environment where employees can have open and honest conversations about the challenges they are facing. Managers need to be aware of the different

lifestyle demands employees may have (especially in diverse workforces) and help them to manage these demands more effectively. Managerial openness to flexible working can also help to achieve greater commitment and employee engagement. That having been said, employees should recognise that flexibility is a two way street, and be adaptable to help the business succeed too. Flexible working opportunities are not just about attracting, engaging and retaining employees, but are also about driving up the bottom line. Indeed, over 50% of employees report that flexible working helps them achieve a better work–life balance, which makes them healthier and more productive and reduces the amount of time that they take off sick.

Healthy workplace

There are many ways in which the physical work environment can impact employee health and wellbeing.

Organisations have a Health and Safety responsibility to provide essentials such as clean indoor air, safe drinking water, ergonomic workstation designs and disability management practices. Getting these basic things right, can help prevent problems later on. For example, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) such as back pain are very common drivers of absenteeism and can be caused and aggravated by poor and uncomfortable working conditions.

It is clear that prevention is better (and can be more cost-effective) than cure, so organisations should strive to create work environments that promote social interaction (e.g. spaces for people to get together) and healthy choices (e.g. healthy meal options, onsite gyms and local gym subsidies when this is not possible). However, it is also important to provide appropriate and early support for when issues arise.

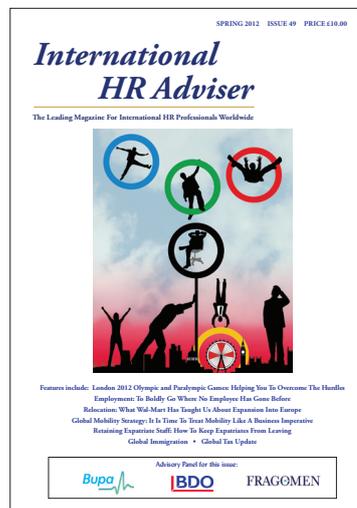For any organisation considering employee wellbeing, the aim should

be to provide holistic programmes with a range of different activities that are accessible to most employees, whatever their current health, fitness levels or shift patterns. The most successful wellbeing programmes are likely to be those that are flexible, social, affirmative and fun. Remember to consider diversity issues so to avoid unintentional discrimination, by looking to understand cultural barriers and exploring how they can be overcome. The best way to do this is to involve employees from the very beginning of the process, and by setting up wellbeing champions or teams to design meaningful activities that are aligned to both the wellbeing goals of the business and the priorities of employees.

For more information about Bupa and its global business health insurance plans, please call: +44 (0)1273 256 012 or visit: bupa-intl.com/company