

## “Employee happiness”, “wellbeing at work”, “chief happiness officers” are these just the latest fads?

*In the mid 2000's Google promoted a software engineer called Chade-Meng Tan to the role of 'Jolly Good Fellow'. His role was to enforce 'employee contentment'. The rationale for Google was that if it could support a healthy work environment for its staff (from both the physical to the psychological) it could see reduced levels of absenteeism, increased morale, engagement and commitment.*

*Once Google did it, and with some success, other organisations quickly followed suit and in the last decade employee happiness and wellbeing at work have gathered much traction in the business psychology space. In addition to this month's podcast on wellbeing at work*

*(<https://www.spreaker.com/user/11113094/episode-4-abp-ivan-robertson-full-interv>), this article takes an overview of some of the issues surrounding issue.*

### Theory

The theory behind encouraging wellbeing at work policies is simple: happy employees are productive employees and productive employees can generate more profit.

It makes sense to think that employees who are happy at work, with their roles, with their work environment and with their work colleagues are more likely to stay in situ, keeping valuable knowledge retained within the organisation.

### How do we quantify workplace happiness?

Attempts to quantify the feelings of wellbeing through metrics (taken before and after the introduction of wellbeing at work policies) are available, for instance there is a 'job-related affective wellbeing scale' which has found to be related to measures of job stressors as well as job satisfaction and physical symptoms, which potentially could show an indication of happiness in the workplace and more and more companies are using metrics to justify the cost of their well-being programmes for the business and also to quantify the effects of the policies on the workforce.

### Are there figures to support wellbeing at work?

The latest CIPD report (2018) on wellbeing at work attempts to support the effects that wellbeing at work policies can have on employees. Take for instance the issue of happiness at work reducing absenteeism. The CIPD report stated that 'happiness at work' policies can reduce absenteeism (suggesting that this is for both minor illnesses and mental ill health and for both short-term and long-term absenteeism). The report claims that for companies that adhere to wellbeing policies in the workplace have seen absenteeism reduce to around 5.9 days per employee per year, a number which the CIPD report claims is a UK 'all-time low figure'.

The business benefits for reduced absenteeism is clear. More working days equates to more productive days which in turn leads to more profitable days for the company, but not everyone has bought into the concept and the CIPD report stated that 1 in 6 organisations are still not doing anything to improve their employees' wellbeing at work.

What is holding companies back?

#### *Cost*

Cost is a major factor that prevents organisations putting in place clear health and wellbeing policies. Some companies are able to afford a vast array of 'perks' in order to provide help provide a happier workplace. For instance, Expedia offer up to \$14,000 per year per person in travel perks, other companies claim to offer unlimited holidays, free food and even on-site table tennis to keep happiness levels high. But not all companies have the financial prowess to offer these additional perks and, as *Professor Ivan Robertson* explains in this month's podcast on wellbeing at work (<https://www.spreaker.com/user/11113094/episode-4-abp-ivan-robertson-full-interv>) these perks are often chosen at random instead of through evidence-based employee wellbeing benefits.

#### *Cynicism*

Cynicism is a major drawback too. The CIPD report also suggests that whilst the top level within organisations (the c-suite) may have bought into the idea of well-being at work, only half of the respondents thought that their line managers have bought into the concept. Professor Robertson suggests that middle managers may deem 'well-being' as an additional burden on their already full plate and often worry about how they can achieve the business objectives on their agenda if they need to consider well-being too. If they believed in the business benefits of supporting their staff through well-being programmes, then they may be more likely to buy into the idea of well-being at work. i.e. they need to believe that ultimately they are more likely to achieve their objectives quicker and easier with a healthier, happier team.

The other explanation for cynicism could be that line managers would worry about which of their subordinates could (and would) abuse the system. For instance, some employees would wrongly claim that they are under stress or that they have symptoms of anxiety or depression and need time off work or a reduced workload in order to recover under a wellbeing policy. This would place additional pressure of line managers to reallocate the workloads amongst the rest of the remaining team but the chances of missing objectives increases, repercussions occur, and this whole scenario would look bad on them. This makes managers wary about promoting well-being policies amongst their staff for fear that they will be taken advantage of.

#### *Where do we go from here?*

There is a real difference between happiness gimmicks and a work and wellbeing culture that is accepted and supported by all the staff, from the c-suite down and this needs to be addressed.

Very clear boundaries of what is acceptable and what isn't needs to be established including how line managers can deal with unhappiness in the workplace. Doing this may remove some of the confusion and some of the cynicism.

The costs of introducing wellbeing policies must be addressed too. Companies that are considering spending money on wellbeing issues need to do so within their wider organisational priorities and budget requirements. If they can afford to offer wellbeing perks this may be a welcomed addition by staff but if they can't afford to do so, all is not lost.

Following the simple premises of valuing your staff, managing them with the right levels of praise, encouragement and empathy rather than fault-finding should be enough grounding to see your organisation on the path to success.