

What's The Word On Wellbeing In 2023



A wellbeing agenda in the workplace is an imperative, for both employees and organisations. Research has shown that workplace wellbeing is key to engagement, performance, productivity and improves overall wellbeing both in and outside of work. Wellbeing is also an essential for a workforce who have the ability to be resilient in times of change, something that has become particularly important with the way many now work.

Three years post pandemic we have experienced a multitude of change in the workplace, including how we work together, where we work, increasing pressures on finances in business and home and as a result a whole new wave of workplace wellbeing challenges.

The World Health Organisation states that, in particular, organisations are responsible for the wellbeing of their employees and that alleviating burnout is the right thing to do. However, understanding the importance of employee wellbeing doesn't necessarily mean that it's easy for organisations to implement new strategies to support and improve wellbeing.

SO, HOW ARE YOUR PEOPLE DOING, REALLY?

Pre-pandemic, Gallup's survey (Employee Burnout: Causes and Cures) reported that 28% of full-time employees felt burned out at work very often or always. Despite many declaring that during the pandemic they had found more time for themselves and their families, there is a sustained recognition around the prevalence of burnout; a physical and mental condition described as an "occupational phenomenon" by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Envoys 2021 "Return To The Workplace" suggested a concerning increase in burnout, with 78% of respondents saying they felt close to burnout in the past year.

In 2023, stress in particular which acts as a pre-cursor to burnout, is at a record high (Gallup, State Of The Global Workforce 2023) with 44% of employees saying they experienced a lot of stress the previous day, but we also know that often this is an aspect that isn't translated into the physical symptoms and unwellness we see.

Prolonged periods of stress diminish capabilities to think with clarity and coupled with uncertainties around the high cost of living, bringing a new challenge in anxiety that is now also on the increase. Managers are particularly susceptible to these aspects, carrying the weight of their own remit and now needing the skills to recognise, support and signpost to those in challenge around them.

WHERE IS THE DISCONNECT?

With 87% of organisations now having wellbeing initiatives in place, why are we still seeing these challenges and why are they increasing?

It's clear there is a growing void between wellbeing at work discussion and positive impact. The CIPD's research suggests a disconnect between the increase in wellbeing interventions being implemented and the impact they have. With evidence suggesting that the majority of employees do not feel they are being supported, or perceive that support has now decreased since the pandemic.

THE SPECIFICS OF STRESS

It's hard to pinpoint what exactly is 'stressing' everyone with so much going on in life, and Gallup's research doesn't ask for specifics, but there's no doubt that work itself can be a significant source of stress. When coupled with external factors, like the cost of living or relationship issues, our daily stresses are likely to compound.

Enabling people to recognise prolonged periods of stress, key stressors and the differences between stress and anxiety can help to prevent longer term health challenges, such as panic disorder. Prolonged periods of stress in particular can also pave the way to burnout, again creating long term and significant health issues which may require clinical intervention.

Although Leaders and Managers cannot change external sources of stress, they can make a difference in overall stress in employees lives. Gallup's analysis finds that when employees are engaged at work, they report significantly lower stress in their lives.

Enabling employees, at all levels to recognise stress, its key symptoms and tactics to manage their stress, in work and life, benefits everyone in terms of their health, wellbeing productivity and financial security, short and long term.

BLURRED LINES

Much has been made about the pros and cons of remote, flex and hybrid working. WFH models bring different benefits, such as time to pick the kids up and more focussed thinking space, whereas others enjoy the time in the office and find this more conducive to collaboration and productivity.

Gallup's analysis suggests that engagement in the workplace has 3.8 times as much influence on employee stress as work location. What does that mean? It is suggested that what people experience in their everyday work and their feelings of involvement and enthusiasm, matters more in reducing stress, than where they are physically sitting as a part of their role.

If remote workers are showing decline in performance and wellbeing, Gallup's research suggests it's important to give focus to whether it's a location problem or a management problem. This requires a recognition that no location can 'fix' poor management, and the office alone as a space cannot create a great organisational culture.

This all seems to point to the need to ensure that managers must be equipped with the skills to notice, understand and respond to people's needs in order to maintain engagement - with productivity and wellbeing as a result.

"The support, upskill and coaching of Managers and Leaders is integral to a workplace wellbeing framework"

Clare Walkeden, WellSpace (Wellbeing Lead)

FIT YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK FIRST

Gallup estimates that low engagement in the workplace costs the global economy \$8.8 trillion - that's 9% of global GDP and what they believe is enough to make the difference between success and a failure for humanity! So, is the scale of the challenge as considerable as Gallup suggests?

Poor management leads to lost customers and profit but it also leads to miserable lives. Gallup's research finds that in terms of wellbeing, having a job you hate is worse than being unemployed - with those negative emotions ending up at home, impacting relationships with family.

If you're not thriving at work, you're unlikely to be thriving at life.

"Basic mental health awareness training is fine, and useful to a point, but in order for leaders to develop the soft skills and awareness needed, training which enables them to understand who they are as leaders and empower them is needed first" suggests **Lisa Whittleton, founder of Illuminate VR.**

Managers are the lynchpin of engagement with 70% of team engagement attributable to them, according to Gallup. It recognised however that there is a movement of Managers who are quiet quitting, as well as employees...

IT'S OH SO QUIET...

Quiet quitting is a growing phenomenon that lives in the same space as presenteeism, where employees are in work, but doing the minimum whilst feeling uninspired, unengaged and considering their options.

Whilst this is a challenge, Gallup's research notes there is also opportunity for Managers who can recognise what's really needed to engage and persuade. Notably, when asked 'what would you change about your workplace to make it better?' in relation to quiet quitting, 16% of responses in the Gallup research related to aspects of wellbeing, including:

- Communicating shifts in advance to allow me to better organise my free time
- Less overtime
- Would like to work from home more
- Would like to have longer breaks so I can eat without rushing
- Set up a health clinic in the workplace
- Taking employee health and life seriously
- We don't have a place to relax or to get together with colleagues for a coffee break

WHAT'S NEXT...?

Workplace wellbeing is both necessary but also at times complex. Increased stress levels, potentially leading to burnout and anxiety, are likely here to stay, with quiet quitting proving that employees are no longer accepting of workplaces where they don't feel seen, heard and appropriately supported.

A proactive and strategic approach, that provides a toolkit for employees, at all levels, to recognise what positive and challenged wellbeing looks like for them, how to access self support and further intervention, such as counselling, is key to creating workplaces with real wellbeing.