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Well-being interventions - do they actually work during critical organisational change?

Dr Samantha Evans

While recruitment, training and career development have always been part and parcel of the HR function, the concept of employee well-being is becoming increasingly more important for today's employers, and as such is now very much on the HR agenda. The HR professional body, the CIPD (Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development) is a strong advocate - so much so that they have as their tagline: "championing better work and working lives". The CIPD argues that employee well-being is about organisations assisting and supporting their staff to maximise their physical and mental health and is a key factor in value creation for employers, employees and wider society.

With employees in the UK feeling they are working harder than ever and their perceptions of workload pressure being higher than the European average, the concept of employee well-being is even more critical for UK employers. But what does this mean, in practise, for organisations? Well-being is considered to cover the five domains of health, work, values & principles, collective & social, personal growth. Each domain has a variety of elements and hence the range of well-being initiatives available to organisations can become rather overwhelming. Therefore, it is important to ask if it actually pays for organisations to invest in their workforce's well-being and how can employers know which interventions will work for their staff.

Some research is beginning to look at these questions with studies establishing links between employee well-being and performance (Bryson, Forth and Stokes, 2014). But what happens when your organisation is experiencing tough times – can employee well-being interventions really work? Is it worth organisations even trying to improve employee well-being in such situations? Research conducted by Dr Samantha Evans at Kent Business School has found that it is. She has recently worked with a large financial organisation who is in the process of shutting down its London operation with redundancies being made over a two year period.

The organisation has been mindful of its responsibilities towards its employees and offered a number of employee well-being initiatives alongside more traditional outplacement services. This support for well-being has included mindfulness workshops, positive change seminars, personal development coaching, counselling, and sophrology sessions. Dr Evans surveyed and interviewed staff to assess their levels of anxiety and the value to employees of the well-being initiatives on offer. She found that while staff were understandably experiencing high levels of stress some of the less conventional well-being interventions, such as sophrology sessions, proved to be the most useful in managing their well-being. For example, employees were able to incorporate certain techniques into their daily lives to help reduce stress and anxiety. One employee told Dr Evans that “it’s helped me 100%. I’ve done the breathing techniques; the visualisation exercises and the body scan and it really helps me to relax”. Another talked about the value of such techniques in the workplace, “It really has helped and I pick up on some of the techniques when I need them, for example I draw on them when I’m in stressful meetings”. Dr Evans’s research suggests there are benefits to be gained from investing in employee well-being - even during the most difficult of circumstances – as such interventions will still have a positive impact on employees’ physical and mental health and help to improve working lives.

Bryson A., Forth J. and Stokes L. (2014) *Does Worker Well-being Affect Workplace Performance?*, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1363
(<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1363.pdf>)