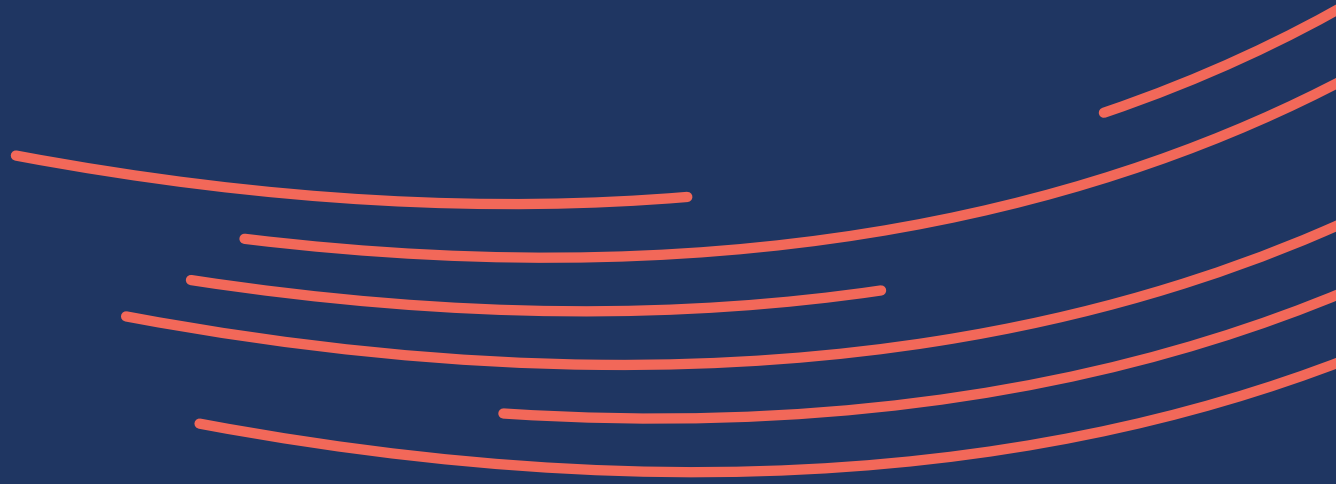


What's Next for Employee Wellness

New Ways HR Leaders Are Championing Well-Being



Introduction

During the last two years, employers have understandably increased their focus on employee well-being. But the need for this focus isn't new. Even before the pandemic, companies recognized the increasing stress employees felt in a fast-paced work culture.

Now, as companies settle into the next phase of work — which for many includes a hybrid schedule — HR leaders must retool the office to empower well-being.

Well-being is more than physical or even mental health. HR advisory firm Future Workplace says employee well-being has expanded to focus on “building a culture of holistic well-being, including physical, emotional, financial, social, career, community and purpose.”¹

The evolution of well-being coincides with employees' returning to the office with heightened needs and expectations of their organizations. After working more independently for two years — and doing that successfully — they do not want to return to the office to be micromanaged.² Flexibility is key, with 93% surveyed saying they want flexible hours, and 76% saying they want flexibility in where they work.³ But that's not all.

Employees want employers to emphasize mental health and clearly communicate policies and their purposes.⁴ The cost of not meeting these needs is high: Employees have shown they will quit if companies don't meet those requirements.

Understandably, employees benefit from a work environment that supports wellness, but companies benefit as well. Proven correlations between well-being, engagement, productivity, retention and safety ultimately benefit companies' top and bottom lines. Employee well-being is no longer optional; it is an essential strategy that creates a competitive advantage.

HR leaders must find new ways to empower holistic well-being in the workplace to create lasting culture change.

¹Meister, Jeanne. “The Future of Work Is Employee Well-Being.” *Forbes*, Aug. 4, 2021, www.forbes.com/sites/jeannemeister/2021/08/04/the-future-of-work-is-worker-well-being/?sh=3c9e-30664aed.

²“Workers Pushing Back on Office Return After 2 Years of Remote Work.” *Inside Edition*, Apr. 7, 2022, www.insideedition.com/workers-pushing-back-on-office-return-after-2-years-of-remote-work-74244.

³Murray, Alan, and David Meyer. “Workers Want Flexibility, and Are Willing To Walk If They Don't Get It.” *Fortune*, June 16, 2021, fortune.com/2021/06/16/workers-want-flexibility-and-are-willing-to-walk-if-they-dont-get-it-ceo-daily.

⁴“Four Things Workers Want Implemented by Their Bosses Post-Pandemic.” *World Economic Forum*, May 7, 2021, www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/employers-pandemic-covid-19-mental-health.

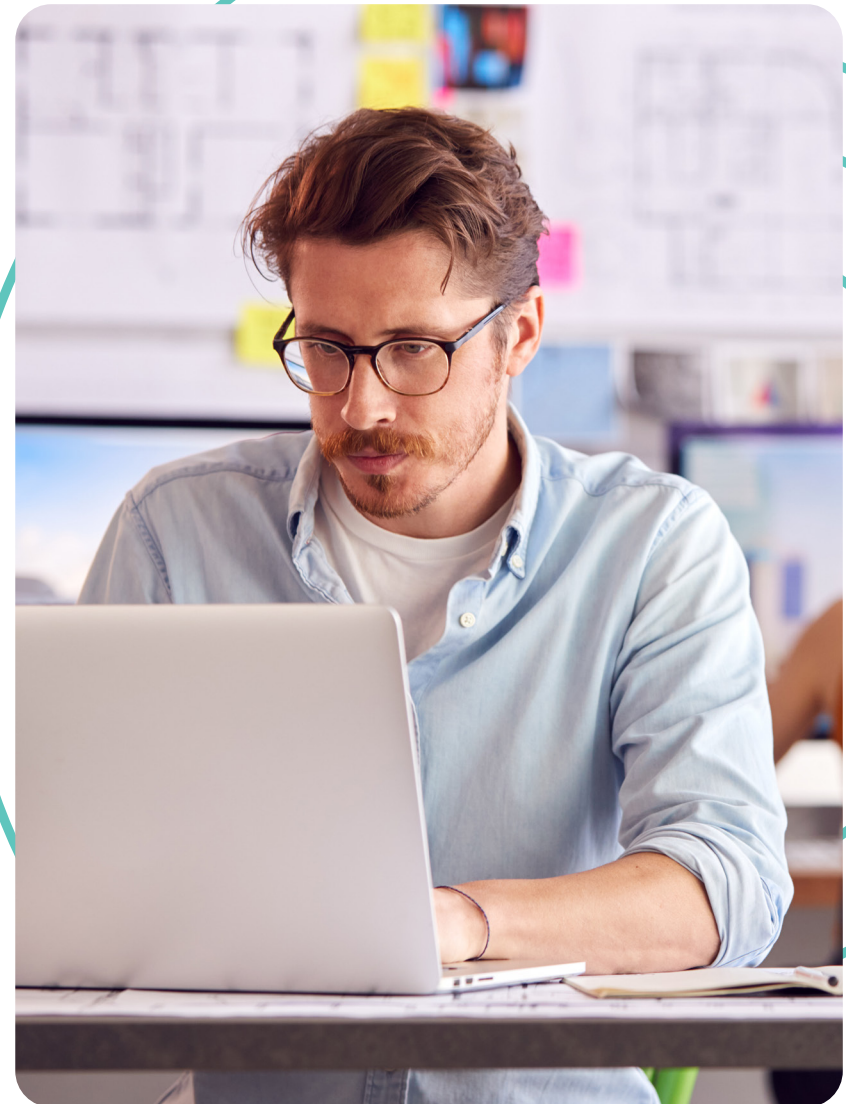
An evolution of well-being

For years, companies offered wellness programs that focused on helping employees improve their physical and mental health. But those well-intended programs didn't always address employee well-being.

Although wellness describes a healthy lifestyle, such as eating nutritious foods, exercising and getting enough sleep, well-being describes "broader holistic dimensions of a well-lived life."⁵ Research by Gallup says these dimensions include:⁵

- Career well-being: Having a career you like
- Social well-being: Having meaningful relationships
- Financial well-being: You manage your money
- Physical well-being: You have the health and energy to get things done
- Community well-being: You like where you live

Just as the idea of wellness has grown to encompass well-being, employees have increased their expectations of how employers should support well-being. With these rising expectations, companies — and specifically, HR leaders — must rethink how they support their employees.



⁵Pendell, Ryan. "Wellness vs. Wellbeing: What's the Difference?" Gallup.Com, March 22, 2022, www.gallup.com/workplace/340202/wellness-wellbeing-difference.aspx.

Well-being challenges occur whether employees work at home or in the office

Change has been the operative word these last two years. With employees quitting and millions of posted jobs open, companies realize they must focus on employees beyond engagement, career or salary and on their overall well-being.

“If companies previously overlooked the employee value proposition, it is definitely part of the conversation. It’s unavoidable,” said Adam Panucci, director of culture and change, California Resources Corp.

A McKinsey survey found that:

- One-third of employees said the return to work had negatively affected their mental health.
- Half of the employees who hadn’t yet returned anticipated a negative effect on their mental health.⁶

Yet remote workers’ well-being often suffers as well. According to The Conference Board, the increased workload employees have taken on has a greater negative effect on the mental health of remote workers than those on-site.⁷ Furthermore, for those working solo, loneliness and isolation, lack of opportunity, and proximity bias can affect well-being.

These statistics emphasize how critical it is for organizations to address well-being, regardless of where employees work.



⁶Coe, Erica, et al. “Returning to Work: Keys to a Psychologically Safer Workplace.” McKinsey & Company, July 15, 2021, www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare-systems-and-services/our-insights/returning-to-work-keys-to-a-psychologically-safer-workplace.

⁷“Mental Health Support Increasing, but Workers Still Struggle.” Conference-Board.Org, May 9, 2022, www.conference-board.org/press/mental-health-survey-2022.

The growing role of HR

Just as employees have developed a new perspective of what they need and expect when it comes to well-being, HR leaders are figuring out their own roles.

It hasn't been easy for HR leaders. During the pandemic, they had to create processes on the fly to get the job done. Now, as the crisis subsides, HR leaders are trying to be less reactive, Panucci said. "They are a little more thoughtful in asking questions. Instead of 'what supplies or procedures do we need,' it's more along the lines of, 'who do we need to be in order to work from home?'" he said.

That may mean providing more autonomy for employees working from home or offering more trust, communication and alignment, he explained.

As HR leaders move from the crisis management of the pandemic to active engagement of the present, they shouldn't forget the mental toll it has taken on employees, Laura Tamblyn Watts, president and CEO of CanAge, cautioned.

"As the pandemic has rolled on, there's been so much exhaustion, and we haven't done enough to understand what recharges team members," she said. "That's going to be an important discussion point: what recharges people, what brings connection, and how is culture going to be portable?"



Employees: Employers can do more

A recent survey reinforced Watts' point:

- Nearly 30% said employers didn't promote the company's mental health resources.
- 70% said companies could do more to destigmatize the need for improved mental health.⁸

Just as they did during the pandemic, HR leaders must create a new way of operating. "The traditional HR way of doing things doesn't work, and the difference is that the culture needs to be psychologically safe," said Kristin Durney, co-founder, human resources executive and corporate wellness consultant, Mental Wellness Unleashed.

Durney said that psychological safety is the ability to bring our true, authentic selves to work, where we feel accepted and not judged. People feel comfortable voicing dissenting opinions and ideas, and even if those ideas aren't implemented, the individuals feel heard.

"Human resources has to help executive leadership understand what psychological safety means and how that's also related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). HR leaders are trying to help combine not only five generations of employees, but psychological safety, inclusion, collaboration and learning," Durney said.



⁸Over Half of U.S. Workers Continue To Feel Mentally Unwell and Require Time Away From Work." www.unum.com, June 29, 2022, www.unum.com/about/newsroom/2022/June/Unum-research-highlights-ongoing-mental-and-behavioral-health-crisis.

How HR can champion well-being

With these challenges HR leaders face in mind,
what steps can they take to foster well-being
throughout the organization?



Bring expert skills to the table that blend art and science.

“We always say we want to be at the table, but you also need to bring a lot of different skills that HR traditionally didn't have,” Panucci said. Those skills include a deeper knowledge of data and how it ties into business. It also includes seeing into the future.

“HR is one of the rare functions that's trying to read a crystal ball because you're talking about people and how they're going to react. This is about people and their emotions, but it's also about how those emotions affect business results,” he explained.

Panucci said that most senior leaders look at the business and not at the people from a high macro level. That's where HR leaders can add value — using their skills to influence future decisions and not just react to ones already made.





Use multiple approaches to get employee input.

Companies often have a disconnect between how leaders versus employees perceive a culture. HR can use strategies to better understand the bigger picture, Durney said. “Human resources is enhancing their ERG groups and benefits packages, adding lunch and learns and town halls,” she said. Employees are asking for programs on developing resilience and adaptability, and leaders need to listen.



Be trustworthy and listen.

Panucci said that to become an organization where well-being “sticks,” employees must feel comfortable telling leaders the truth and know the leaders will act on it.

Another step in creating trust is holding leaders accountable for their roles and actions. Leaders need to tell their employees, “I’m going to be accountable for providing you with clear alignment and expectations, and I’ll hold you accountable for meeting those expectations. I’m going to be accountable for removing obstacles to make sure that there are no barriers to what you need to get done,” he said. As leaders do this, they start creating a culture of what behavior is acceptable and what is not.

Panucci added that creating a trustworthy organization starts with senior leadership. “It has to be authentic and intentional and reflect the true culture, not the ‘shadow’ culture,” he said.





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Ensure that age inclusion is embedded in DEI efforts.

With belonging a critical part of well-being, it's troubling that age-related stigmas and stereotypes are still "acceptable" forms of discrimination, Watts said. "And of course, it's not acceptable, but it's rife within businesses and companies. Good HR leaders should know that age inclusion is not only the right and legal thing to do, but also a smart thing to do from a workplace retention leadership and productivity standpoint," she said.



Be prepared for employee sentiment to change quickly.

Watts said that even as companies use employee sentiment data to anticipate needs, such as those in a hybrid work environment, those answers may change dramatically. “Understand your data is taken during the unusual circumstances of a pandemic. HR leaders need a bit of imagination to consider what a hybrid revolution looks like outside of that kind of pressure cooker,” Watts said.

What will be meaningful for motivating people? Watts said, “That’s going to be something that HR leaders need to dig into, because those personal, empathetic and social connections are what downplays risk and up plays culture.”





Think outside the box for well-being opportunities

In a Conference Board survey, 88% of organizations offered mental health resources, but only 29% of respondents said they were helpful.⁹ Companies need to look at their offerings at all points, including:

- Exploring what mental health benefits employees find meaningful¹⁰
- Revising benefit plans to address mental well-being, work-life balance, caregiving and financial well-being¹¹
- Researching a wider range of less common but effective newer approaches, such as meditation and resilience training⁹
- Rethinking HR practices to see how they support holistic well-being
- Bringing mental health under the DEI umbrella and creating opportunities to reduce the stigma of talking about mental health⁹

⁹“Mental Health Support Increasing, but Workers Still Struggle.” Conference-Board.Org, May 9, 2022, www.conference-board.org.

¹⁰Law, Julie. “3 Ways HR Can Support Mental Health as Workers Return to the Office.” HR Executive, May 16, 2022, hrexecutive.com/3-ways-hr-can-support-mental-health-as-workers-return-to-the-office.

¹¹Miller, Stephen Cebs. “Employers Enhance Well-Being Benefits for a Post-Pandemic Workforce.” SHRM, June 16, 2021, www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/employers-enhance-well-being-benefits-for-a-post-pandemic-workforce.aspx.

HR leaders will have their hands full as they juggle the challenges ahead while also focusing on well-being.

“We’re having HR leaders literally reach out and say, ‘how do I do this?’” Durney said. Some organizations work with consultants or third-party vendors with the specialties in the needed areas to figure out a road map, she explained.

As HR leaders work to manage these issues, Watts said, HR has to pay attention to their own well-being in addition to the well-being of others. That will sometimes take courage, she added. “And it’s going to mean buy-in from the C-suite to make sure that whoever they roll up to understands that HR professionals are humans, too.”

Many HR leaders are in uncharted territory when it comes to championing well-being. Without a guidebook, they must create their own. Using their expertise, ability to seek and implement feedback, and openness to new ideas, HR leaders can support solutions that increase employee well-being.





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