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Building a culture of organisational wellbeing:

Engaging employees in workplace wellbeing

Workplace wellbeing initiatives have a vital role to play in fostering employee engagement. But how can organisations maximise engagement with the wellbeing strategy itself so that employees participate in activities that encourage healthy, active living creating a virtuous circle with broader employee engagement and high-performance working?

Ensuring workplace wellbeing activities are attractive to a wide number of employees is a significant implementation challenge – almost 60% of employers cite low employee engagement with wellbeing as the greatest obstacle to changing unhealthy behaviours and it is obvious that the success of a wellbeing strategy hinges on significant employee participation.

Offering incentives to those who participate in health programmes is widespread in US organisations – 61% now offer a financial reward, up from 36% only three years ago. Could such incentives work in the UK and if not, how else can employers engage workers in health promoting activities and how can this form part of a programme to build a culture of organisational wellbeing?

Wellbeing and employee engagement

The costs of employee disengagement are clear, as are the business benefits of positive engagement. Promotion of employee wellbeing has a part to play in building broad employee engagement, although the relationship between

these two aspects of work is complex and almost certainly two-way.

What is clear, however, is that there is a growing body of research suggesting that employee engagement, creativity and productivity can be improved by adopting particular 'healthy' or 'good work' practices, such as improving line manager communication skills, building organisational culture and producing a healthy working environment (including opportunities to balance personal or family and working life).

David MacLeod and Nita Clarke were asked in 2008 to take an in-depth look at employee engagement by the then secretary of state for Business, Innovation and Skills, Lord Mandelson. The so-called MacLeod review¹, published the following year, was carried out against a backdrop of economic recession and the researchers examined in particular whether a better focus on engagement could help UK businesses to emerge stronger from the downturn to meet the challenges of rising global competition.

The review concludes that a better understanding of

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employee engagement and its underlying principles, coupled with wider sharing of good practice, could produce a step change in workplace performance and employee wellbeing. Engagement, the authors conclude, goes ‘to the heart of the workplace relationship between employee and employer’ and can help unlock productivity and transform the working lives of many people ‘for whom Monday morning is an especially low point of the week.’

The logic is ‘blindingly obvious’ MacLeod finds: if it is the workforce’s performance that determines whether companies succeed, taking action to encourage employees to perform should be at the heart of business strategy. Because most other factors of production are standardised – for example, products on the supermarket shelves are much the same the world over – it will be the difference in employee engagement that makes the difference to customers’ experience of the organisation.

Other research in the US finds that employees who believe their employer actively promotes wellbeing are eight times more likely to state they are engaged at work compared with those who do not believe that their organisation promotes health, and three-and-a-half times more likely to state that the employer encourages innovation and creativity.

The link between wellbeing and employee engagement is clear: “If people feel well and content, they are more optimistic, will give their best at work and be more resilient. They are also more interested in what they are doing and are more likely to give everything that the organisation wants from its employees,” according to Sonia Wolsey-Cooper, membership and people director at AXA PPP healthcare.

Although the US-based research cited above only suggests an *association* between wellbeing and engagement, rather than providing evidence of a causal link, it does nevertheless offer powerful grounds to conclude that an organisational emphasis on wellbeing has an effect on employees’ perception of their employer. As levels of employee engagement continue to be threatened by job pressures in a post-recession environment, it is surely even more important for employers to grasp opportunities to target those aspects of work – such as employee wellbeing – with potential to strengthen and sustain employees’ commitment.

The role of incentives

The US experience suggests that offering incentives to employees to take part in managing their health at, and through, work is effective in boosting their participation and engagement with wellbeing. For example, just offering a water bottle or t-shirt for attending a health event will produce an attendance rate of between 10% and 15%, according to some research.

Participation increases to 40% to 50% if the employer provides cash or more valuable merchandise – for example, cinema tickets for completing a health risk assessment or subsidised gym membership. Even more significantly, employee participation in health activities rises to 80% to 90% if these incentives are linked to a specific company wellbeing policy or strategy.

The latest survey of US employer practice sponsored by the National Business Group on Health² finds that employers are becoming more aggressive in their use of both financial incentives and penalties in the wellbeing field. For example, in 2009, only 8% of responding companies imposed penalties, such as surcharges on healthcare premia, for failure to complete a required health management activity (such as the achievement of weight control). This increased to 20% in 2012 and is forecast to more than double in the next few years. The design of incentives and penalties is becoming ever more focused on outcomes, rather than mere enrolment in a health programme.

Research undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers³ as part of Dame Carol Black’s 2008 review of the health and wellbeing of the working age population found that some UK employers offered a range of direct and indirect incentives for participation in wellbeing activities, including: direct financial incentives, time off for taking part, token gifts and promotional merchandise such as pens and t-shirts, team-building away-days, internal competitions between departments and divisions, company donations to employee sports and social clubs, and employer donations to external charities chosen by employees participating in activities.

Motivation for incentives has to be right

AXA PPP healthcare is not averse to being creative in the use of incentives for participating in its wellbeing initiatives,



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particularly at the lighter end, but “would worry that people might get cynical about the organisation’s motivation if we moved to US-style cash ones,” according to Sonia Wolsey-Cooper. She adds that the motivation for introducing cash incentives has to be right – people have to believe that the organisation is working in their best interests in addition to those of the business.

There is a danger that cash incentives produce only short-term changes in behaviour – not the kind that lead people to make lasting changes that give them better control of their health. AXA PPP healthcare, although not offering cash incentives, does look at the balance of spending on wellbeing – for example, between preventative and treating health services. “These are not strictly decisions about incentives but are about using the cash available to produce the best health benefits,” she adds.

The UK is still some way off the US practice in terms of incentivising healthy behaviours. Many consistently high-performing US companies now routinely communicate with employees’ spouses about the incentives on offer for participating in wellbeing activities, and indeed, provide them with the same opportunity to earn financial rewards as their partners.

Building a culture is more important than incentives

Are there any negatives associated with incentivising employees to engage with the specifics of a wellbeing strategy? A global survey by Buck Consultants in 2010 found that, despite the fact that many employers said that they planned to expand the use of incentives for participation in health programmes, 61% reported that incentives already introduced had been only moderately or less than moderately effective in boosting engagement with wellbeing activities.

Some practitioners argue that incentives should not be necessary if the design of the wellbeing strategy is closely aligned with the needs of employees and, crucially, if the organisation has successfully engendered a culture that supports individuals to take responsibility for their own health. In other words, building a culture of health should tap into employees’ propensity for self-esteem by encouragement of positive long-lasting behaviour change.

Organisations that devote time and effort to building a culture of health tend to have higher employee participation rates in wellbeing activities, regardless of whether they provide incentives. For example, one consultant survey finds that participation in health risk assessments by employees is 29% higher on average within organisations that strongly emphasise a healthy culture compared with those that do not.

But be realistic

However, it is important to be realistic about the extent to which employees are engaged in wellbeing at work: “You will never get all employees engaged in all activities – there will always be a group who latch onto everything and others taking a genuine interest in their wellbeing but also a significant group who will dip in and out of wellbeing activities depending on factors such as the ease of getting involved, their personal interest in a particular issue and how well programmes are promoted and implemented,” according to Sonia Wolsey-Cooper.

It is important to build variety into programmes to engage people, she believes, and to use available funds in the context of the organisation’s strategy to develop a variety of initiatives that are accessible. HR and other stakeholders need to work hard at refreshing initiatives regularly: “Initiatives tend to generate lots of energy to start with but this wanes over time, making it important to build variety into what the organisation offers,” Sonia adds.

Maximising participation

The workplace provides potential for health programmes to reach large numbers of people who would otherwise be unlikely to engage in changing health behaviours. But it is easy for participation rates to fall once the novelty of a programme wears off, making it important to review and evaluate programmes regularly, and to target particular at-risk groups with different activities.

Yet many employers struggle to track participation rates in wellbeing programmes and this lack of good data can act as a barrier to targeting groups or areas of the business where participation is an issue. AXA PPP healthcare is careful about how it uses health data to track participation in health activities, due partly to data protection provisions around the use of sensitive data, so tends to focus on



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broad trends in the use of its treatment services, and uses this information to highlight potential ergonomic or environmental issues in parts of the business, for example, with lighting (if the data suggests headaches are an issue) or work station design (if a cluster of back problems exists).

Practical ways of increasing participation in wellbeing programmes include:

- holding health fairs or workshops on health topics
- entering external workplace health competitions as a way of demonstrating to employees that the organisation is engaged in the issues
- sharing wellbeing experience with other employers and considering joint activities
- building material on wellbeing activities into staff training and induction sessions, and into line manager briefings
- considering purchasing interactive, personalised health management tools which can be helpful in boosting participation in associated health programmes albeit their use should always be voluntary
- using all internal communication media to sustain the health message, and consider producing your own wellbeing publication or online content, or using that of your health benefit provider (communication needs to be targeted and creative, employing all the different channels available, as different people take notice of different media; it is also important to vary the prominence given to different wellbeing activities to keep them fresh in employees' minds).

Social marketing and new media

Using marketing concepts is a good way of increasing engagement with a wellbeing strategy, particularly amongst hard-to-reach groups. For example, design a marketing campaign targeting a particular employee behaviour or characteristic and use appropriate communication media

for the target group. Focus the message by using new media for younger employees whilst continuing with more traditional approaches for other groups.

Using the most appropriate technologies to personalise an employee's experience of the employer's wellbeing programmes is an effective way of promoting participation. Growing numbers of employers are looking to use social media tools, online discussion groups and gaming software to support workplace health activities. Around one fifth of organisations in the US use social media to boost engagement with wellbeing and this proportion is expected to grow to over a third in 2013.

Develop wellbeing champions or advocates, and use this network of individuals to publicise the programmes on offer; 45% of US employers use employee testimonials and stories to create personal connections across the workplace about health, according to the latest US National Business Group on Health/Towers Watson survey. Also, encourage employees to use social communities to foster interest around the programmes.

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