

CORE VALUES

BY STEVE SMETHURST

“Let’s get one thing straight,” says Ben Willmott, CIPD adviser, employee relations. “Wellness is not just some woolly fad about installing new gyms and ensuring there are carrots on the staff canteen’s menu.

“It’s about better management, improving the productivity of the business and ensuring individuals are able to perform – and want to perform – to their full potential. That’s how the agenda should be seen by HR,” he says. “There’s no point in providing subsidised gym membership if people are coming in afraid that they’re going to be bullied by their manager.”

And with everyone looking for a competitive advantage, it seems that employers are increasingly interested in the wellness agenda – whether through flexible working, employee assistance programmes, advice lines, counselling services or even gyms. According to the CIPD’s 2006 *Absence Management* survey (see panel, page 28), just over a quarter of organisations have an employee well-being strategy, or similar, to help improve the physical and mental health of their workforce. Of these, more than 80 per cent rely on their HR departments to manage and drive forward the employee well-being agenda, with occupational health departments or health and safety taking up the slack.

So why has wellness become so popular? “Because it works,” says Ivan Robertson, managing director of business psychologists Robertson Cooper. Like Willmott, he maintains that when people talk about well-being, the wrong things come to mind. The first is that it’s just about gyms, eating the right food, getting enough sleep, drinking enough water and taking screen breaks. The second is that it’s concerned with less conventional therapies and therefore about “lying in darkened rooms listening to whale music”.

While these, of course, are not bad things to do, Robertson argues that they are only part of the story. He says that people feel at their best when they have successfully completed a difficult challenge and received good external feedback.

“The more you can generate experiences like that, the more psychological well-being you create. It’s about good management and linking the level of challenges to goals and capabilities, and making sure it’s a positive experience more often than not,” he says.

One organisation that has taken this route is the City of London Police. It has seen “significant

Subsidised gym memberships may be a good perk, but if you really care about the health of your employees you should start from within – and that means good management

improvements" over
a two-year period, says HR services
director Carolyn Woolley.

In 2003, City of London conducted a *Quality of Working Life*
survey that found it needed to do more work on its culture and make its
leadership as robust as possible.

"We've done a lot of work on wellness," says Woolley, whose organisation needs to
comply with the Home Office's "Healthy police services" strategy and Health and Safety Executive
standards (see panel, page 26) in relation to stress management.

"Having done the survey and got a baseline for where we were, there were areas that needed attention,"
Woolley says. These included flexible working and training requirements.

"After only 12 months we saw significant improvements in terms of employee commitment to the organisation,
their perception about our commitment to them, and people's feeling of well-being," she says.

Woolley insists that it has led to an improvement in the service that City of London provides. "Two years ago, under the
police performance assessment framework, we were around 22nd or 23rd out of the 43 forces. Now we are very close to the
top. I'm not suggesting that's all down the HR team, but there must be a link," she says.

But how does flexible working relate to wellness? Simple, says Woolley. "If you have a terrible journey into work, you can't
really expect your employer to do anything about it, but if you have flexible working, say, it alleviates some of the tension and stress.
There's comfort in knowing you can make up the time later in the week and you won't get into trouble."

Woolley agrees that while employers don't have a responsibility to introduce such schemes, "morally and ethically it's got to be the
right thing to do".

"Our attitude is that we want to be the absolute employer of choice. We want the best people to come to us. That means we will do
whatever we can to make their lives as easy and as compatible as possible," she says.

This is also the message from Sue Waldock, HR director at Rank's gaming division. She started to look at the wellness agenda
when the operating hours for casinos were extended to 6am. "We wanted to know what the impact would be on employees as they
would now be considered as 'night workers'. We wanted to look at motivation and
retention, as the healthier they are, the longer they'll stay and the better service
we can give our customers."

The result has been that Rank's turnover has dropped and, according
to a recent employee opinion survey, they are happier too. Among
the changes is that no shift lasts longer than 10 hours, and the
maximum period before a break is now four hours. Also,
morning shifts don't start before 6am, otherwise people's
sleep rhythms are disrupted too much. The company also
tries to give more notice than before of shift patterns
so people can plan their sleep more effectively. As
Waldock says, anything to reduce turnover and
absence and to keep people at work has to be
useful – "and they are hard measures".

Taking tiredness and stress at work
seriously is typical of the way the
debate on mental health, for
example, has switched in the
past five years away

“We want the best
people to come to us.
That means we will
do whatever we can
to make their lives as
easy as possible”

BE PRUDENT WITH YOUR HEALTH

Financial services firm Prudential has been able to prove
the value of investing in employee well-being following
the success of two pilot studies. The company has since
introduced a wellness strategy to move its focus to
preventing rather than merely managing absence. Andrew
Powles, people policy manager, recalls that in 2004 the
firm spent little time promoting healthy lifestyles and was
only reaching people who fell ill. "We were tackling the
symptoms, not the causes, and were missing an opportunity
to reach all our staff," he says.

The first pilot for 100 people involved a mini-health
screen, online health assessments and lifestyle coaching. It

also ran an eight-week nutrition programme. Before the trial,
members of the pilot group were absent for an average of
six days each per year. This dropped to two days. Participants
were an estimated 6.9 days a year more productive.

The second pilot, for 500 people, reduced short-term
absence by 11 per cent, raised productivity by 1.8 days and
reduced turnover by 3 per cent.

"The driving principle of the strategy is enabling people
to make simple lifestyle changes," says Powles. Following
the pilots, by 2008 the company aims to have moved the
proportion of resources and time spent on "wellness"
compared with "managing absence" from 20:80 to 80:20.

STRESS-BUSTING GUIDANCE

The Health and Safety Executive's management standards for work-related stress help organisations to work with their employees on simple steps to tackle this issue by providing a framework against which to develop an effective risk assessment.

They are based on a staff survey that asks questions around the causes of stress identified by the HSE in each of the following areas: job demands; control; relationships at work; support; job role and organisational change.

» www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards

from an often negative debate on mental illness to one more about the positive side of mental well-being.

The government's mental health tsar, Louis Appleby, says that "the general public has already twigged that if you're not emotionally healthy, you're probably not physically healthy either. You won't be in a position to form strong relationships, take advantage of training or do well at work."

But how much can work affect a person's well-being? Appleby warns: "Events accumulate for people. If you end up as a stressed, unproductive employee, it's probably not just for one reason. Even if you think

it's to do with a row with your partner, the row might have happened because you were stressed at work and took it out at home."

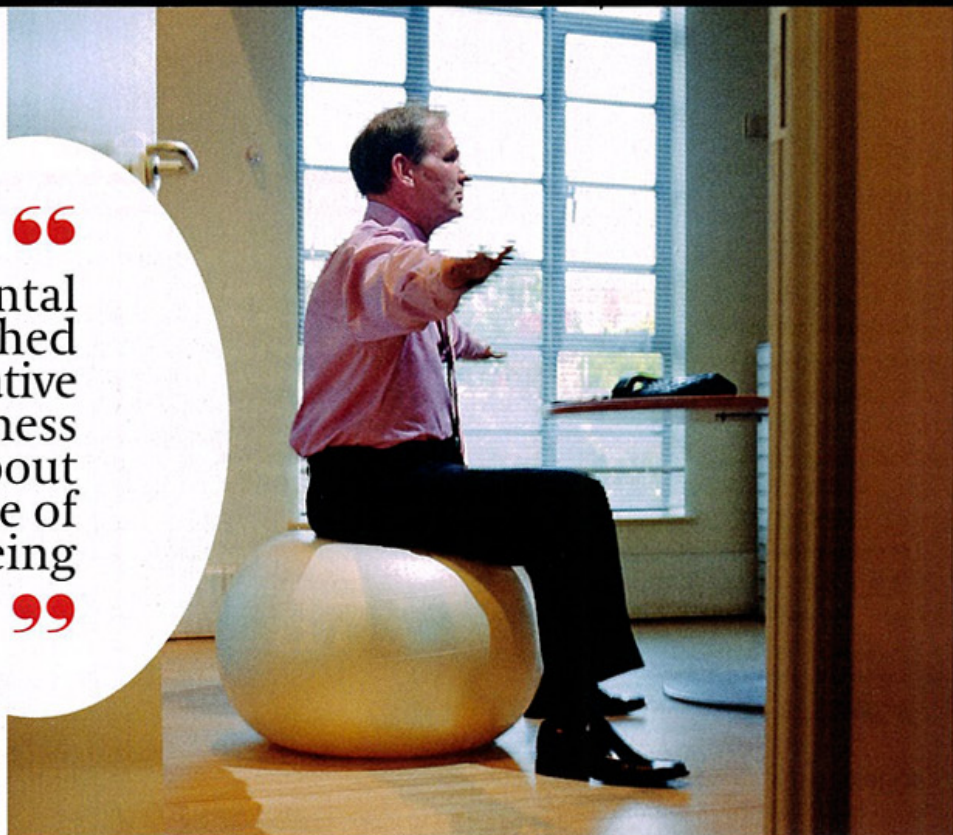
To improve the nation's mental health, the government is running Action on Stigma, an initiative to enable employers to reduce the incidence and impact of mental health problems (for more information, see » www.shift.org.uk/employment.html). Mental ill-health is experienced by one in six people at any one time, and employers lose an estimated 80 million work days each year to stress, depression and anxiety.

"Employers have been very supportive of the initiative," Appleby says. "They

“
The general public
has already twigged
that if you're not
emotionally healthy,
you're probably
not physically
healthy either
”



“
The debate on mental health has switched from an often negative debate on mental illness to one more about the positive side of mental well-being
”



want guidance on how to train up staff – knowledge, attitudes and skills.”

But is this just another initiative for larger companies with greater resources? “No,” says Appleby, although he concedes it is easier for bigger employers. “Smaller companies are affected too,” he says. “If you’re a small employer, one person going off sick can be much more disruptive. So there’s a big incentive for smaller organisations to do more as the effects will be proportionately greater for them.”

However, the “wellness” agenda, as a whole, hasn’t swept everyone away. A note of caution is sounded by leading occupational physician Mike Goldsmith, executive chairman of Medigold Health Consultancy, who is also chairman of the not-for-profit Commercial Occupational Health Providers Association.

“We feel quite strongly about this,” he says. “Looking after the healthy is fine. It sounds good and it’s great copy for journalists – but employers need to be careful. If you talk to health economists, spending money in this way is a long-term game. That’s partly why the government is so enamoured of it. We have a ‘nanny state’ and it sits very well with them.”

Goldsmith is quick to state that he’s not knocking health and well-being – “I’d be mad to do that,” he says, “but employers mustn’t be smoke-screened into thinking that occupational health doesn’t matter

BETTER HEALTH FOR CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

Transforming the health of any employee is a challenge. Transforming the health of construction workers is almost Herculean. According to the Health and Safety Executive, workers in construction are far more likely than those in most other industries to suffer work-related ill health. As Julie Clay, marketing manager for Constructing Better Health (CBH), points out: “They’re lifting heavy goods, they’re breathing in dust, it’s noisy and they are mainly men. All the research shows that men are not that good at looking after their health. Plus, construction has a high proportion of transient workers, a lot of small organisations that employ fewer than five people, and no one is really responsible for their long-term occupational health.”

CBH began life as an industry-led pilot from July 2004 to July 2006 in Leicestershire. Its aim was to find out what people actually responded to in terms of improving their health. More than 400 companies participated in the pilot, which was funded by the government, industry bodies, contractors and product suppliers, as it attempted to raise awareness with talks and voluntary health checks at construction sites.

Clay says the talks were short and were about easy ways to minimise risk. “One example was to do with wearing gloves. If you’re working with cement, dermatitis is a risk, and a glove with a small hole in it is almost as bad as no gloves.”

Instead of handing out manuals and saying “read this”, the advice was all practical. An early learning point was to avoid making the literature look corporate.

“It was okay for the bigger companies,” says Clay, “but for the smaller operators it didn’t get through. After a while we changed to a red-top, tabloid-style campaign. It was quite old-fashioned, with all its double entendres, but the people we were trying to get through to read *The Sun*, not the *Financial Times*.”

The health checks also proved popular. They were voluntary but tended to be overbooked. Of the 1,700 workers who undertook health checks, more than a third were referred to specialists or their GPs.

Following the success of the pilot, a national workplace health scheme for construction is being developed. CBH will provide simple, practical advice and guidance for health risk prevention. It will include an advice line, website, research data, signposting to complementary services and newsletters.

It should improve the health of thousands of people. As Clay says: “Building is a macho industry. Hopefully this scheme will begin to change attitudes.”

● See » www.fitbuilder.com/workers.html for further details

any more. The well-being agenda is a good thing, but let's not forget the vital role occupational health has to play. They are the experts and they focus on the essentials – pre-employment screening and sickness absence management and prevention.”

Goldsmith will have many sympathisers – the government is pushing the wellness agenda through the appointment of Dame Carol Black as the first national director of the government's health, work and well-being strategy, launched in 2005. Black is spearheading initiatives that promote and improve health in the

WELL-BEING: A SNAPSHOT OF THE UK

According to the CIPD's 2006 *Absence Management* survey, the most common investment in terms of employee well-being is the provision of private health insurance. More than half of respondents provide this for at least some staff. Just over half also provide counselling services. About a third offer support to employees who want to stop smoking – an area that may see more activity in the run-up to the UK ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces. This comes into force in the summer, and will outlaw smoking rooms in employers' premises.

More than 30 per cent provide employee assistance programmes and almost 30 per cent provide regular health checks for staff.

The major obstacle to well-being initiatives is a lack of resources. Nearly half identify this as a problem. And only 7 per cent of organisations have evaluated whether their well-being initiatives have contributed to lower sickness absence rates or brought other benefits.

» www.cipd.co.uk/surveys

“
Employers mustn't
be smoke-screened
into thinking
occupational health
doesn't matter
any more
”

workplace. But concern has been expressed that the government's plan to tackle the health of the UK workforce isn't far-reaching enough. For example, a report by the Work Foundation and the London Health Commission, *Healthy Work, Productive Workplaces*, said the strategy didn't consider the root causes of ill health, such as job design or management culture.

However, many dispute Goldsmith's assertions on return on investment. Ivan Robertson, for example, says that it is possible to put financial figures on the relationship between psychological well-being and turnover/performance.

“You can see correlations of 0.3 or 0.4. It's the same that an assessment centre would produce when selecting or promoting employees,” he says. “For a workforce of 2,000 on an average salary of £25,000, a well-being intervention that improves psychological well-being by a fairly conservative amount will bring a monetary gain (in terms of enhanced productivity and

lower sickness absence) of around £4,000 per person,” he adds.

Chris Jessop, chief executive of Nuffield Proactive Health, introduces another perspective. He says that the biggest driver for wellness programmes is not the impact on the bottom line, but the value they add to the benefits package. “As we move into a period of relatively full employment, the onus has fallen on nurturing the talent that you have, rather than simply managing absence,” he says.

But at City of London Police, Carolyn Woolley says her message to HR is plain. “If you have sound well-being programmes, if you take an interest in your workforce, you will see an improvement in performance. If you look at the organisations that have done something in this area and look at their performance – as opposed to those that have done nothing – the results speak for themselves.” ■

● For more on this issue, see *PM's Guide to Health and Well-being* on page 43

