

How to Design an Online Wellness Programme to Support Your Employee's Health and Well-Being during a Pandemic

The healthier your employees, the happier and more productive they are.

A 2010 study by Harvard Business Review found that for every US dollar invested in wellness, companies average a return of USD.2.71 through increased productivity, high morale, team camaraderie, decreased absenteeism, and reduced healthcare cost.

Effects of Coronavirus on Employee Wellbeing

Globally, the spread of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) has deeply disrupted all our lives. It has caused a host of medical, economic and political problems as well as stress and anxiety that's negatively affecting our well-being.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), all sections of our society – including businesses and employers – must play a role during this pandemic to reduce its impact. Health and well-being, financial stability, and job security are top concerns for employees right now and employers can help address those fears in meaningful ways.

Employee Wellness Programme Dimensions

Employee Wellness Programmes are employer-sponsored programmes designed to support employees (and sometimes, their families) as they adopt and sustain behaviours that promote well-being and enhance organisation productivity.

Wellness centres can, therefore, address and promote holistic dimensions of well-being through:

1. **Physical Well-being:** ensures all employees physical bodily functions are running smoothly. This not only includes the skeletomuscular system as with fitness but also the digestive, circulatory, and other body systems. Initiatives addressing anything from exercising to nutrition to sleep, contribute to physical wellness.
2. **Mental Wellness:** refers to one's ability to manage their own emotions and effectively express it to others. The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to his or her community." It includes all aspects of emotional and psychological well-being; affecting how employees act, think and feel.

3. **Financial Wellness:** commonly refers to one's financial stability as a function of income, expenses, and debts owed. Achieving this state requires financial literacy, which is an area where an employer can assist their employee.
4. **Social Wellness:** this is the state of one's personal social network. As a social species, humans depend on one another and their well-being critically depends on a sense of belonging. Social wellness, therefore, boosts team cohesion and improves engagement.
5. **Intellectual Well-being:** this refers to the active participation in scholastic, cultural, and community activities. When employees are intellectually well, they continuously work on expanding their knowledge and skills, which lead to a more stimulating and successful life. Organizations help to nurture intellectual well-being by promoting creativity, curiosity, and lifelong learning.
6. **Purpose:** Being and feeling well includes having values and beliefs that provide a purpose in life, which allows an individual to feel at peace and in harmony with themselves and others. It also includes the ability to stay open-minded to others' beliefs. Addressing purpose in wellness programmes can be tricky since it is an individualized journey. However, raising awareness of this important dimension can help employees become more purposeful and satisfied with their lives, both professionally and personally.

But how can an employer provide employees with a holistic health and wellness experience when their team is working remotely?

Designing an Online Wellness Programme

The priority for employers during this period should be to safeguard their employee's health and safety.

Through online wellness programmes, employers can ensure that their employees remain productive even while working from home. These programmes should not be a standardised programme, as organizational needs and resources differ. Instead, they should prioritise and customise the programme to reflect what is important for the employees now and what the organisation is able to offer.

Below are the eight ways employers can adapt to design a successful online wellness programme for its employees.

1. REMOTE WORKING CAPACITY BUILDING

There are many upsides to working from home. For example, your employees have more control and flexibility over their working day, fewer distractions, less commuting time and the ability to build healthy habits throughout the workday.

However, there are also downsides that can be aggravated by extended periods of remote working. For example, feeling isolated in their new working environment, growing anxiety in uncertain times, struggling to make the separation between home life and work-life or being productive in a potentially crowded household.

To support your employees, get used to working from home, employers can run various online training, develop how-to-videos and offer one-on-one support to enable the employees to adapt to their unfamiliar work environment.

2. PROMOTE REGULAR PHYSICAL HEALTH

Adults should undertake at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity per week.

Physical activity has many positive effects, including reducing the risks of non-communicable disease like type 2 diabetes and preventable cancers.

Engaging in regular exercise is also important for maintaining physical and emotional fitness. Therefore, as work routines change, you need to remind your employees of the importance of regular exercise.

For example, you can provide access to digital fitness solutions or use mobile apps to maintain social interaction through corporate challenges. These are all effective ways of promoting physical wellbeing, connecting colleagues and injecting some fun into the working environment.

3. SOCIALISING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Lonely people are more likely to have poor health, poor cognitive performance, emotional health challenges and pessimistic views.

That's why reduced productivity, increased sickness, higher turnover and reduced performance are some of the outcomes associated with loneliness. During this period of increased remote working, you need to ensure your employees maintain a strong sense of purpose.

Some tactics you can consider are:

- Utilise video technology for virtual meetings regularly to try and replicate in-person meetings as much as possible and make sure everyone has the chance to contribute;
- Encourage virtual 'tea break moments' to build or maintain colleague-to-colleague connections;
- Encourage in-call verbal communication and feedback rather than over-using emails or other electronic messaging methods.

4. ENCOURAGE FINANCIAL WELLBEING

Financial wellbeing is the ability to manage your financial life while preparing for the future and any unexpected hardships along the way. Poor financial wellbeing has a detrimental impact on employee's health, which can bleed into the organisation's issues.

While employees are embracing different working practices, employers may consider offering some key components of financial wellbeing, like:

- Encouraging employees to dedicate time to understand their financial situation. This means getting control of their household budget, setting their financial goals or understanding their investments;
- Set challenges around saving, particularly if employees have less daily expenditure, then encourage them to save the money;

Have online training on personal financial management.

5. MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health issues can be caused by addiction, family commitments, financial concerns, sleep deficiency, job security and relationship breakdown. The prevalence of COVID-19 is triggering some of these factors and causing employee anxiety on how the disease will affect them and their family members.

Extended periods of remote working, potentially self-isolating, could further fuel feelings of anxiety and loneliness due to less connection with colleagues or making it difficult for employees to switch off and balance work and home life.

Employers should ensure that employees who need help know exactly what benefits and services are available to them and how to access such support.

6. SUPPORT TALENT GROWTH ACROSS DISTANCE

Talent growth is a wide area of concern for any organisation and a lot of thought and effort is required to formalize how to support this.

It however also affects employee's well-being therefore it also needs to be addressed when designing a wellness programme. For remote workers, employers can put in place talent growth measures that provide clarity on performance metrics used to evaluate their progress and support talent growth such as:

- Conducting weekly status meetings, both individual and group, via video conferencing tools for all members of the team.
- Using an agile project management tool to track individual assignments, task estimation, and progress.
- Offer online training that has evaluation tools to measure understanding.
- Subscribe to an always-on digital library of resources such as books, papers, articles, subscriptions etc available to all employees free of charge.

7. COMMUNICATE THE WELLNESS PROGRAMME

Create employee awareness for the wellness programme while ensuring participation. Employers can do this, using well-established techniques of awareness and behavioural change such as:

- Create a wellness campaign to promote the programme with logos and slogans for various components like "Every Body Walk Now," "Wellness Wednesday," "Recess" or "Time Out for Aerobics";
- Have visible endorsement and participation by upper management;
- Develop wellness training based on sound research;
- Communicate through multiple channels like e-mail, fliers and online presentations;
- Repeat the message regularly.
- Update the message with recent information.

Ongoing communication and awareness are important for maintaining engagement in the wellness program.

8. EVALUATE THE SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAMME

Finally, as with any investment or project, evaluating the effectiveness of the wellness programme is important in sustaining budgetary and employee support and in revising or implementing new programmes.

Employers should establish metrics and baselines at the rollout of any wellness initiative, which will vary depending on the programmes implemented. For example, measure participation rates, programme completion rates, reduction in health care costs and percentage of employees who walk every day. Employers may also want to measure the return on investment (ROI).

Regardless of the tools or measurements used, evaluating the effectiveness of the wellness programme is an important step in the ongoing management of the programme.

IN CONCLUSION

To get the best return on investment during this current crisis and after, companies should design online wellness solutions as part of a coordinated wellness programme. By incorporating various online components to a wellness programme, employers can implement a programme as unique as their workforce.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Annabell has been working as an HR Professional and Consultant for the last 14 years. She has provided HR related consultancy in areas of Employee Wellness and Well-being for companies with 5 – 800 employees. She has published a number of online articles on the same and been a speaker and trainer on Employee Well Being in Kenya and Uganda.