**Better health, better business: the shared-value of workplace wellbeing**

*Ensuring the wellbeing of employees is a duty of care for any leader, say a group of Vitality health and wellness panellists as part of a global workplace health discussion. And, through Vitality’s shared-value approach, it’s not only the employees who benefit.*

“We spend a third of our adult lives at work”, says Daniella Freinkel, Head of People at Vitality Global. “So, this really needs to be a space that we can thrive in as employees, and for us as leaders, we have a key responsibility to positively influence employee wellness”. Freinkel is addressing a group of Vitality specialists as part of a panel discussion on the increasing need for sustainable workplace wellness programmes to promote a healthier business culture.

“We see in research globally[[1]](#footnote-1) that when an employer understands the important role of employee wellness, the benefits extend to everyone in the value chain: employees, their families, the business itself – with knock-on effects to broader society. This shared-value approach is one that Vitality is recognised for globally, and it continues to prove itself time and time again across health settings,” adds Freinkel.

Workplace wellness is not a new topic. The concept of the ‘forth bottom line’ has been around for the last few decades as a means to promote the health and wellbeing of the workforce – albeit in a reduced capacity as it traditionally only focused on physical health[[2]](#footnote-2). “When we talk about ‘workplace wellness’ we’re referring to a range of health-promotion activities and initiatives within a company to support healthier people, and healthier behaviours,” continues Freinkel. “This includes health screenings or access to health assessments, education and awareness campaigns, discounts or rebates on fitness or health club memberships, complimentary healthy snacks or meals, etc. But, it’s important to go beyond physical health to encompass all parts of healthier living, including mental and financial health.”

**Investing in your workforce**

This aligns to the core pillars of the Vitality platform – a global wellbeing programme that spans 40 markets around the world impacting over 30 million lives. The programme combines behavioural economics, clinical research and data analytics to encourage members to lead a healthier lifestyle. In addition to promoting health checks, smoking cessation, healthier eating and increased exercise, the programme prioritises mental and emotional health, as well as financial wellbeing.

“Vitality is a science-backed approach to employee wellness,” says Francois Millard, SVP of Product R&D at Vitality Global. “In business or corporate settings, employees are encouraged to keep track of their progress towards a healthier future with rewards for making better choices with a premium range of health, lifestyle and leisure benefits. As with all pillars of our programme, these benefits, or incentives, are offered to members to nudge the necessary health changes, for the long term[[3]](#footnote-3)”. The ongoing goal? “We help companies to **build a culture of good health because we know this leads to better ROI for the business: healthier (and often happier!) people tend to perform better at work, are more productive, take fewer sick days and manage their time more efficiently**[[4]](#footnote-4)**. The list goes on,” says** Millard.

**“And this also helps you to become an employer of choice,” adds** Freinkel**. “Because top companies are getting more and competitive with what they offer employees for joining them – or staying with them – and this comes down to more than just a free gym membership or lunch”.**

**The panel offers results-driven rationale for embracing workplace wellbeing as an employer.** Research from a Vitality initiative called *Britain’s Healthiest Workplace*[[5]](#footnote-5) shows the benefit of a range of these types of health interventions, including that employees in good health are 17% more productive than those in poor health, are better motived at work and more resilient to change.

**Pippa Andrews, Corporate Director at Vitality UK, says that this type of research gives great insight into workplace health. “We have data from across the UK from hundreds of organisations and thousands of employees. All that data paints a picture of our UK workplace health, and suggests more can be done here to ensure better health (for employees) to achieve better productivity (for the employer)”.**

**In this report, 2022 results show that last year alone, employees lost ~20% of working hours due to poor health which represents a loss of 51 productive days – per employee, per year. “This doesn’t mean employees are always absent from work,” adds Andrews. “They may actually be at work but not able to be as productive as they want to be because of health-related issues, stress or burnout.”**

What is heartening to see is that mental health is being more and more prioritised globally. We’ve seen the toll that poor mental health takes on an individual, their family and the workplace. The economic cost is significant, with a missed workday due to mental health costing a company upwards of $300 a day for full-time workers[[6]](#footnote-6).

**Vitality insights in the workplace**

Called the 4:4:60 model, there are four main risk factors (poor diet, physical inactivity, smoking and excessive alcohol intake) that lead to four chronic diseases (cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic lung disease and various cancers) which are directly responsible for 70% of deaths worldwide[[7]](#footnote-7).

According to Dr Seranne Motilal, Senior Health Insurance Specialist at Vitality Global, these risk factors – and the results of poor health tied to these risks – extend to the workplace and “aren’t merely something that people deal with when they’re ‘off the clock’.” Workplace wellbeing initiatives are therefore crucial to help identify risks and then help engage employees with strategies to mitigate or manage these risks.

“We know that navigating health and wellbeing is often hard so our role as Vitality is to make it as simple and rewarding as possible for both employers to action and employees to use. We’re proud that our programme is time-tested and trusted by some of the largest insurers in the world who continue to see its value[[8]](#footnote-8). We’ve built a dynamic platform that fits into an existing corporate structure or system to enable this.”

Dr Motilal adds, “What I believe makes Vitality a truly powerful tool for any organisation is that the personalised and rewarding experience starts with small tweaks rooted in lifestyle habits so that we first get to know members and build a baseline of trust before we move into the higher-stakes domain of behavioural change”.

**No such thing as a free lunch**

“Wellness programme engagement is more than just showing up at a health screening for a free t-shirt or claiming a complimentary smoothie or meal at a team-building event,” says Dinesh Govender, CEO of Vitality SA. “These are great short-term incentives to drive talkability and hype, sure, but we need active – and ongoing – engagement to consider a health intervention successful”. She adds, “Your workplace wellbeing is only as good as your engagement metrics, and so it’s important to be able to measure and report on these accurately.”

Here, engagement can mean a host of things including regularly taking part in health events, using health tools and services, actively engaging with communications and accessing resources such as online assessments and learning modules – in addition to improvements in health metrics like losing weight or quitting smoking[[9]](#footnote-9). Govender suggests that real-time reporting and feedback is needed for both the employee and the employer to track these engagement metrics. “Guided by a core purpose of making people healthier, Vitality has learned what workplace health takes and has invested in the data analytics and technology to help businesses achieve this.”

Millard says he calls it the ‘Vitality difference’. “Overall, across our corporate wellness clients, we see on average that 82% of enrolled members are engaging with us and 38% of our corporate membership base complete their full biometrics with us[[10]](#footnote-10),” he says, adding that these are impressive numbers that set the Vitality programme apart.

**Health communication: a window to change**

Iona Maclean, Head of Marketing for Vitality Global says that regular – and engaging – communication is also needed to boost the overall effectiveness of any behavioural change initiative. “We’ve spent considerable time researching, testing and rolling out employee wellbeing campaigns and have seen what works best, and in what contexts,” she says.

Maclean’s advice is to incorporate behavioural science insights into the communication journey. “We know that there are patterns of decision-making across demographics, geographics, linguistics, etc., so we make sure our communications tap into what people want, and overcome any friction points or objections an employee may have, right up front.

As part of her team’s approach, a behavioural communication framework called EAST[[11]](#footnote-11) is applied, with the addition of F to this acronym. Here, there is an emphasis on making things fun, easy, attractive, social and timely for employees. “A weight loss campaign as an example,” says Maclean, “needs to be targeted to the right people, at the right time and with the right messaging and incentives for it to work.” Moreover, these initiatives need to be enjoyable and have a lasting impact so that the employee builds up ‘habit resilience’ to make the positive behavioural change sustainable.

**The future of work = wellbeing**

The panellists emphasise that the workplace has undergone a major shift over the last few years with both employees and employers alike learning to adjust to new ways of working and collaborating.

In a paper published by RAND Europe in collaboration with Vitality[[12]](#footnote-12), researchers looked at hybrid workplace habits and the link between mental wellbeing and job performance.

“This study had over 1 000 UK-based Vitality employees,” says Daniel Kotzen, Director of Product & Advanced Analytics at Vitality Global, and co-author of the paper. “And a rich dataset of varied sources ranging from Microsoft-powered workplace behavioural data (like email and instant message patterns) to self-reported surveys and HR inputs”. From this data, the researchers were able to correlate workplace behaviours with worker wellbeing across different employee types.

The study findings showed[[13]](#footnote-13):

* Employee workplace behaviours are associated with wellbeing and can positively or negatively impact work outcomes/performance.
* There is no one-size-fits-all approach as employees have unique personal and job characteristics, attitudes to work, etc. that must be considered when designing robust wellness interventions.
* By changing work behaviours, we can improve people's (work) outcomes, with holistic mental wellbeing – job and life satisfaction, overall mental health, burnout, anxiety, and work-life balance – acting as the key mediating factors.

“The big take-home from the research for me”, says Kotzen, “was how much of a role employers themselves play in cultivating healthy and productive work environments.”

**The bottom line**

In the US alone, the corporate wellbeing market is estimated to be worth over $20 billion and Forbes projections are that this will grow to just under $90 billion by 2026[[14]](#footnote-14).

Advice from the panel for a successful wellbeing programme with money well spent is to focus on the 3Rs: make the healthy behaviour routine; reward it; and report on it. “As part of our strategy sessions we’ve now started to integrate wellbeing into our annual goal-setting,” says Govender. “We ask our employees to set targets for their health and wellbeing to help them prioritise their health and reduce risks of stress and burnout, in particular. Maybe this means getting an extra workout in each week, or adding an hour of sleep. This feedback mechanism, when used sensitively and without making the employee feel more overwhelmed, has gone a long way in showing our employees that we value them and care about their health.”

The concluding message from the panel is that the impacts of health on the workplace are significant. Companies who invest in wellbeing will reap the long-term rewards, because healthier employees build wealthier businesses.

For more information about Vitality’s evidence-based approach that encourages and rewards members for healthier living, visit the [Vitality Global website](https://www.vitalityglobal.com/).

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