

WELLNESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Research shows that only 8% of South Africans are engaged in the workplace, which is why it's crucial for companies to invest in genuine and effective wellness programmes

BY Nazley Omar

Workplace wellness is about much more than receiving a pay cheque every month and the occasional thumbs up. Not only does it help employees feel involved, committed, passionate and empowered, but it affects their overall performance and ultimately, the company's turnover and employee retention.

Linda Ronnie, senior lecturer in organisational behaviour and people management at UCT's Graduate School of Business, says South Africans feel disengaged in the workplace due to a lack of trust between employees and employers, inadequate communication, poor leadership and unfair treatment.

"A psychological contract plays a key role in employee well being. This unwritten contract between the employee

and the organisation is primarily concerned with what each of the parties expects to receive and give in their employment relationship. Unfortunately, the implicit and unwritten nature of the contract means its significance is often overlooked in the work environment," she explains.

► CORPORATE WELLNESS: THE PAY OFF

Executive business coach Penny Holburn says the current economic downturn has negatively impacted the way some companies approach employee wellness. "Due to the state of the economy, some employers are of the view that employees should be grateful to have a job. Their main concern is the bottom line and employee wellness often

Executive intelligence

isn't on the agenda," she observes.

Furthermore, the stress experienced by South African employees is critical. A recent Bloomberg study revealed that SA is the second most stressed country in the world, after Nigeria. So, beyond the obvious impact on workplace performance and the bottom line, employers have a social responsibility to help reduce the physical and mental effects of depression and anxiety on their staff.

An investment in a genuine wellness programme not only gives employees the resources to stay healthy, but also demonstrates that the employer cares about their staff, which helps attract the best employees.

Deirdre Elphick-Moore, Learning & Development Manager at Just Property, says ensuring the psychological well-being of every employee is no easy task, as each person has their own expectations and needs. For this reason, empowering individuals and building their physical and psychological resilience must be a starting point.

"Employee engagement happens when the work environment enables employees to give their best each day and helps them realise their full potential. Managers and leadership need to know how to implement methods that develop employees and motivate them to contribute effectively to the organisation," she says.

► WHAT MAKES A GOOD CORPORATE WELLNESS PROGRAMME?

The psychological contract is fulfilled when employees feel cared for and safe in their employment relationship.

Ronnie says that in order for this to happen, the following essentials need to be present:

- High quality management and leadership.
- Open and honest dialogue and collaboration.
- Personal development and educational opportunities.
- Involving employees in company wide initiatives and sharing relevant organisational information.
- Encouraging creativity and innovation.

Holburn says people are psychologically at ease when they're in a job that suits their personality, skills and aspirations. "They feel happy when they can talk comfortably about problems, new ideas and general work issues with their colleagues and management. They feel valued when they get feedback and know what's expected of them. Compassionate managers who motivate to achieve results and provide regular feedback create engaged employees."

Unfortunately, even when companies have genuine wellness programmes, many of them are under-utilised. Part of the reason for this is that some employees are unwilling to talk about their personal problems, while others don't seek help until things are drastic.

For such programmes to be effective, regular briefing sessions to help employees understand what tools and resources are available and how they work are crucial. Companies also need to teach employees to recognise the symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression and seek help before these become unmanageable.

"There needs to be a clear process for getting this help. While having a wellness programme is great, people need to know that it exists. They need to know all the offerings, as well as when and how to utilise them, and they must feel comfortable and safe enough to do so," says Holburn. ■

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Improving your workplace happiness

While corporate wellness programmes are a key aspect of psychological well-being, it's important for employees to take ownership of their own happiness. Here's how:

- **Leave your baggage at the door:** Don't allow your past work experiences to affect the way you approach your current job. To understand the role you played in an unhappy situation, you need to look at what signs you may have overlooked, analyse situations where you should have spoken up, but didn't, and decide what you can do differently, moving forward.
- **Express your needs:** Transparent, meaningful conversations are key. When you have a grievance in the workplace, discuss it with management and propose a solution in a professional manner.
- **Have a career plan:** Know how you'd like your career to progress over the next one to five years and set realistic monthly goals that will help you get there. Track your progress.
- **Clarify your values:** Let your values guide your decisions and priorities. Make sure the company and the work you do are aligned with these values and you'll be more driven in your job.
- **Challenge yourself:** If you're uninspired or feel as if you've stagnated, it's time to take control of your professional progress. Volunteer to take on more responsibility, improve your skills, further your education or discuss promotion opportunities with HR.