



Exploring the wellness at work: causes and benefits

Face to face with Professor Sir Cary Cooper(*)

Interview by Fabiola Silvaggi

In your opinion, how has changed the concept of prevention and health promotion within the companies?

Health promotion in the workplace has taken off partly to do with the world recession. Private and public sector organizations have dramatically downsized over the last ten years to reduce their labour costs, which has meant the most businesses and public sector bodies are now 'too lean and mean'. As one HR Director put it, we are now concentrating on 'regrettable turnover', that is, we can't afford to lose any key people. So the wellbeing agenda is part of keeping the workforce healthy and productive which means 'health promotion' is now a bottom-line issue.

What are the affects and the benefits of wellness in the workplace?

In my book *Wellbeing: Productivity and Happiness at Work* (with Prof. Ivan Robertson and published by Palgrave Macmillan, London) we highlight the bottom-line data on wellbeing interventions in terms of employee health and productivity. The evidence is now very convincing that creating a wellbeing culture at work leads to less sickness absence, less presenteeism and increased productivity (although we need more data on the latter).

Why the wellness at work should be a core part of a business strategy?

Wellbeing should be a core business issue because businesses need to minimize sickness absence and presenteeism (people coming to work either ill or job dissatisfied and delivering little added value), and most importantly we need to increase our employees' productivity. Many countries in the EU have poor productivity per capita, which is inhibiting the EU growth agenda. Wellbeing is no longer a 'fuzzy, have to have' part of HR and occupational health, it is a part of the core productivity and growth strategy.

In your opinion, where are the greatest difficulties in reintegration / inclusion for chronically ill workers within companies?

The main problem of integrating people back into the workplace is primarily people with mental health issues. When it comes to someone with physical disabilities or illnesses there is less of a problem than those with mental ill health because there is a stigma associated with it, and managers don't understand or know how to deal with employees' suffering from depression and anxiety. We

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need to get rid of the stigma of mental ill health in society and in the workplace and get people with these issues back to work and into treatment.


What are the causes of presenteeism at work?

Presenteeism is caused by people feeling insecure at work. If you have seen many people losing their jobs during the recessions, with jobs now no longer for life, then you will turn up to work ill or job dissatisfied because you are worried that your absence will go on your personnel record. This job insecurity is the main driver of presenteeism.

What can the law to facilitate the adoption of prevention strategies in the workplace?

Health and wellbeing promotion cannot be helped by law, it is about senior managers understanding the bottom-line impact of not engaging in creating a wellbeing workplace that will make the difference. Also we will need more socially skilled managers at all levels of the workplace to create a wellbeing and healthy culture—the current generation of managers may not understand this but the next generation does—given what they are taught in business schools throughout Europe, or at least I hope so!

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