Holistic Well-Being @Work
Executive Summary
Executive Summary

Insights for What’s Ahead

A more holistic view of worker well-being has become critical as employers prepare for a post-COVID-19 world while managing the current period of great uncertainty. Integrated efforts and communications around different aspects of well-being can help workers at all levels manage stress, engage, and adjust to change.

Over the last year, people around the world have been struggling with health issues, burnout, and isolation. Research suggests that mental and emotional health issues rose to the top of challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, especially among women and people of color.1 A recent survey by The Conference Board shows that 60 percent of US workers rank mental and psychological well-being as one of their biggest wellness concerns.2 On the organizational side, employers are striving to meet the needs of their workforce and investing in new tools and resources for mental health and well-being. A recent analysis by the Business Group on Health finds that among US employers the average budget for well-being programs increased by 36 percent between 2019 and 2020 to $4.9 million. Among employers with a headcount of 20,000 and above, well-being budgets averaged $10.4 million.3

This study examines what organizations are doing to implement comprehensive well-being initiatives. Building on these insights, we recommend specific actions to build healthier, more resilient work environments. To gather our insights and recommendations, we conducted two surveys in the US: one of 1,135 employees and another of 235 human capital practitioners responsible for their organizations’ wellness initiatives.

We also conducted in-depth interviews with nine US-based leaders from six organizations headquartered in the US and Europe.

In the study, we define holistic well-being at work as any strategy, initiative, program, and/or activity that supports multiple, connected aspects of well-being, including physical, mental/psychological, social, financial, environmental, professional, and spiritual dimensions. Our insights include:

Worker well-being is evolving into an increasingly multifaceted, integrated, and cross-functional element of many organizations’ people and business strategies.

While traditionally workplace well-being initiatives have mostly focused on physical and mental health, our survey shows that organizations are now enhancing their offerings and benefits to support multiple aspects of well-being. Practitioners are also engaging both internal and external stakeholders to help with strategy, communication, and implementation to a larger extent than before.

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the introduction of new workplace well-being efforts while requiring a shift in how existing initiatives are offered. Study participants acknowledged that COVID 19 was by and large behind a strategic shift in prioritization of well-being initiatives. The crisis has not only brought health and well-being to the forefront but also necessitated changes in how existing benefits are offered (e.g., gym discounts, health days in the office, workshops, etc.). This is compelling many practitioners to rethink their approach to and communication about well-being programs, leading to some unique and innovative solutions.

Heavy workloads and time constraints emerge as more important barriers to using well-being programs than other factors. Even though organizations are enhancing their well-being initiatives, in this study limited participation was cited as a top barrier to effective implementation of well-being initiatives. Our data suggest that lack of awareness or comfort using well-being programs are not the main concern. Rather, heavy workloads and time constraints might be preventing workers from using the programs they need. This finding has important implications for program implementation.

Given these challenges, and based on our data, we propose the following five actions to establish a successful holistic well-being strategy that considers the needs of workers across the organization:

1. **Start with your work culture.** Begin by building a work environment that supports wellness. Review any existing communications, policies, and practices that might reduce workers’ ability to engage with your well-being initiatives or that might lead to burnout (e.g., overwork, worry about taking time off). Work with senior leaders and people managers to model healthy behaviors. Simple actions include reinforcing the importance of well-being in written and verbal communications and demonstrating behaviors, such as taking breaks and vacations.

2. **Provide a wide range of offerings.** Many well-being initiatives tend to focus on workers’ physical and mental health benefits, but other elements of the worker experience, such as social connectedness and professional well-being, are as important. In our survey of US workers, respondents ranked social and professional well-being higher than financial well-being on their list of concerns. A model that highlights the interconnectedness of multiple aspects of well-being can also help build a more positive and resilient work culture.

3. **Engage stakeholders across the organization.** Partner with other areas of human capital (including people analytics and diversity, equity, and inclusion) as well as with business leaders, ERGs, and other stakeholders to increase support for well-being initiatives. This helps practitioners embed their strategies and solutions throughout the organization and allows for more effective communication and socialization of programs.

4. **Use surveys and other people data to understand the specific needs of your workforce.** Breaking down responses into meaningful categories (e.g., by business, level, generation, gender, etc.) helps ensure your current strategy is
addressing the right issues. Analytics can also capture the complexity of workers’ experiences around well-being and address unique challenges that might otherwise remain hidden.

5 Consider augmenting your offerings to address the most pressing challenges. Use data to identify urgent needs, such as those of parents, frontline workers, or those working in regions where a crisis might be happening. Inform stakeholders about the resources available to them, and make it OK for them to use the programs. Find ways to build awareness for those who are not at a desk all day (e.g., factory workers, drivers, etc.). Communicating about well-being initiatives with those groups can be more challenging than with those who have access to email at their desks.
About the Authors

Laura Sabattini, PhD, is a Principal Researcher in the Human Capital Center.

Rebecca Ray, PhD, is the Executive Vice President, Human Capital, at The Conference Board.