Your Definitive Guide to the Employee Wellbeing Landscape
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Look around you.

Do you see employees working at their standing desks, running for a quick break with their dog they’ve brought to the office for the day, or maybe playing an intense game of ping pong in your rec room?
We’ve come a long way since the days of factory work and assembly lines.

Companies no longer consider their employees to be mere cogs in the wheel, and it’s become commonplace for CEOs and other executives to say that their employees are their biggest asset. But there’s a reason so many leaders espouse this philosophy: People give companies their competitive advantage and employees’ knowledge, creativity, and innovation is what drives the business—and the bottom line.

An employee’s physical, mental, and emotional state can have a very real impact on the way they feel and perform at work.
With this increasing focus on employee experience, it only makes sense to put time and resources towards employee wellbeing. An employee’s physical, mental, and emotional state can have a very real impact on the way they feel and perform at work.

When employees are healthy and happy, this is great for them, great for you, and great for your company’s performance. But unfortunately, this is not always the case. Harvard Business Review reports that the effects of poor health cost US companies $225 billion every year.

And employers are jumping on this area of opportunity: Nearly two-thirds of companies (59%) offer some sort of wellness program, and 53% want to create a culture that promotes health and wellness, according to the SHRM 2017 Employee Benefits Report.

The effects of poor health cost US companies $225 billion every year.

The evolving wellbeing landscape: from wellness to wellbeing

While the idea of offering wellness benefits is not new, the approach has changed significantly over the past few years.
INTRO

Historically, “wellness” programs were siloed or one-off initiatives—the Benefits team might organize flu shots on one specific date, for example, or the office manager might coordinate a team outing to a popular fitness class. The lack of an integrated approach meant that employees didn’t know about the resources that were available to them and there was low engagement with these programs.

Employer-sponsored “wellness” programs also tended to be paternalistic or focused on a so-called “high-risk” population within the company. This type of wellness program told employees exactly which actions they needed to take and didn’t leave a lot of room for individual choice. This meant that the majority of programs were ineffective—or simply ignored.

Research in the 2016 SHRM Benefits Full Report indicates a trend: Employers are dialing down on one-off initiatives like flu shots and health screenings while at the same time taking a more holistic, strategic approach to employee wellbeing.

As the world of work is changing, employees are
beginning to understand that everything from recruiting to office snack selection to standing desks and flexible work hours is all part of the “employee experience.” Josh Bersin writes, “Starting as potential hires and recruits, employees look at everything that happens at work as an integrated experience that impacts daily life in and outside the workplace, including overall physical, emotional, professional, and financial wellbeing.” In turn, companies are striving to create an integrated employee experience in order to secure and retain the best people for their organization.

“HR is refocusing its efforts on building programs, strategies, and teams that understand and continuously improve the entire employee experience.”

JOSH BERSIN

Everything is connected

We all know this anecdotally: When we’re sick or tired or stressed, we simply can’t perform at the top of our abilities. And if we need to leave work to go to the doctor or pick up a prescription or scream from the top of a mountain because we can’t take it anymore, that means we’re losing out on hours (or days) that we could be at the office, and our performance suffers as a result.

And now there’s an ever-growing pile of data to back this up: Employees with high overall wellbeing have *41% lower health-related costs* compared with employees who are struggling. And *other research* shows a link between health and wellbeing and engagement at work.

It’s not just about physical wellbeing, either: Employers are looking at ways that they can promote mental health by building resilience and reducing stress (to name a few examples). Companies are also looking at their policies and programs to see how they can support employees and avoid having them reach the point of burnout.

In the coming pages, we’ll dive a little deeper into the various approaches to building a culture of wellbeing at your company. Ready to get inspired? Keep reading!
Considering your approach to wellbeing

What exactly does wellbeing mean at your company? It’s important to take time to identify the principles that will guide your approach. The following questions will help you set yourself up for success.
Questions to keep in mind when starting a wellbeing program

What are the patterns/problems you’ve identified? If none yet, how will you keep tabs on this over time?

Whether it’s through anecdotal observation, data collected through engagement surveys, or HR statistics like sick days and attrition rates, take time to understand how your people are feeling. Are they stressed and tired? Energetic and enthusiastic?

If your company is relatively young or small, these patterns may not have emerged yet. If that’s the case, it’s still important to create a game plan. What are some potential problems you anticipate? What sort of data do you think will be useful in helping you to keep tabs on employee morale and wellbeing?

Graph Source: The Willis Health and Productivity Survey Report 2015
Are there aspects of your culture/organization that are making burnout/illness more common among employees?

Using the information you’ve gathered in order to answer the previous question, you may have already identified some general problems such as stress and burnout. Now can you zero in a bit more to see what aspects of your company culture are creating or exacerbating the situation.

For example, do you see salespeople getting stressed and burnt out at the end of every quarter as they hustle to meet their quota? Are your engineers quitting once they get promoted from individual contributor to manager positions because they hate overseeing others? Or is your entire company working around the clock because that’s what people believe they need to do in order to be successful?

If you do see a connection between your company culture or structure and employee experience, think about what you can do to address this. The answer may be in manager training, communication with employees, or in adopting new programs to help you move away from unhealthy patterns.

6 SOURCES OF BURNOUT AT WORK

1. Lack of control
2. Values conflict
3. Insufficient reward
4. Work overload
5. Unfairness
6. Breakdown of community

Source: https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/pressure-proof/201308/six-sources-burnout-work
What types of results are you looking for?

If you’re considering launching any sort of program, it’s a good idea to think about what types of results you’d like to get. Are you hoping to achieve a certain percentage of participation? Looking to lower the cost of your health care spending? Or do you want better ratings on your employee engagement survey, fewer sick days, or lower attrition rates?

You may find it helpful to think about which metrics will matter most to your stakeholders as well as your employees. This may mean measuring results across a few different dimensions. One quick point to note here: according to the Willis Health And Productivity report, companies that take a Value on Investment (VOI) approach (measuring things like engagement and retention rather than health care expenses) tend to be more satisfied with the impact of their programs. So even though VOI is tougher to measure, it may be worth the added difficulty!

64% of organizations cite improving employee health & building a culture of wellness as the top goal of their wellness program.¹

¹Source: The Willis Health and Productivity Survey Report 2015
PART 2
Finding the focus of your wellbeing program

Once you’ve determined what you’d like your wellbeing program to address and how you’d like to measure its success, it’s time to start thinking about what you’d like the content of your program to be. Let’s take a look at some of the main areas where wellbeing and work intersect.
Company Culture

The term “company culture” means a lot of things to a lot of people, but in the context of wellbeing, it’s helpful to think about whether your company helps employees live a happier, healthier life. How are you supporting them to be their best selves at work? This could be anything from offering flexible working hours to cultivating a diverse and inclusive environment to instituting an open PTO policy.

Do you have a set of company values? If so, you may find it helpful to think about how you can encourage company values through your offerings. For example, if “service,” is a value, perhaps you can grant employees a certain number of hours or days each quarter to participate in community service projects. If your company values inclusion, consider how you can make sure that employees from various backgrounds are supported, whether it’s through your compensation and promotion policies, the way you assign
administrative tasks like note-taking and scheduling, or the resources and forums for communication you offer.

**Workspace/working environment**

Even if you don’t realize it, your workspace has an impact on how your employees behave and feel. Everything from desk setup and office layout to eating and breakout spaces can influence the working environment.

Are you promoting movement and collaboration with standing desks and breakout areas? Do you provide a kitchen or common area where employees can gather and eat together? Are you encouraging breaks for activity and rest with games and quiet areas?

Think about ways that you can design your office in order to promote connection, focus, activity, and collaboration (or whatever makes the most sense for your employees).
Healthy eating/nutrition

There’s no denying that what we eat has an impact on how we feel, and it can affect our work as well. Our diet has a big impact on both causing and preventing heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, and some cancers. Eating four to five servings of fruit and four to five cups of vegetables a day can prevent some of these negative health outcomes.

Any time you provide food for employees, you’re making a choice that will affect their wellbeing. The Harvard Business Review reports that some small changes in things like placement of food in the cafeteria and portion sizes of snacks can have a big impact on employee eating habits (check out the sidebar for more info on this).

Afraid your employees will freak out if you replace their candy jars with kale smoothies? The CDC reports that employees tend to

OPTIMIZING OFFICE SNACKS

The Google Food Team and the Yale Center for Customer Insights used the 4 P’s of behavior change to help Google employees make healthier eating choices. Here’s a quick overview of each one.

Process: The way choices are presented can have an impact on how people make decisions. For example, placing something first in a line or in the middle of a set of three makes it more likely to be chosen. People also tend to choose the first or last thing they’ve heard (when someone is reciting a list of specials), and food that is easy to see or easy to reach.

Persuasion: You can highlight healthier options and make unhealthy options sound less appealing by doing things like
be supportive of changes to their workplace food environment. Here are just a few ways you can promote healthy eating and nutrition in the workplace:

- Replace processed food with fresh fruits and vegetables in your snack areas and kitchens
- Highlight healthy options in your cafeteria with signs or other visual elements
- Look for more nutritious items to serve during meetings and gatherings
- Switch from self-serve bulk bins to smaller, individually portioned items (people tend to underestimate how much they’re eating when they serve themselves)
- Create an onsite community garden or farmers’ market
- Offer workshops or one-on-one sessions with a registered dietitian

**Possibilities**: Make changes to the set of choices being offered. For example, you could offer only one dessert option at a time rather than several different desserts all at once. People tend to eat one serving size, no matter how large it is. Replacing four-ounce self-serve cups with individually wrapped M&M packages led to a 58% reduction in serving size at Google.

**Person**: Influencing the individual is the key to changing their behavior in a lasting way both inside and outside work. Providing information, tools, and a mechanism for monitoring progress is the best way to help people make lasting change. At Google, employees who received information on the connection between blood glucose and weight gain plus devices to monitor their blood glucose reported that making healthy choices was becoming habitual.
Why does fitness matter? Well, the World Health Organization believes more than 60% of the global population is not sufficiently active, yet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describe regular physical activity as “one of the most important things you can do for your physical health.” And fitness has benefits beyond just making people generally healthier: Employees who get at least 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week miss on average 4.1 fewer days of work per year.

Unfortunately, many modern work environments are sedentary, with employees sitting at their desks for extended periods of time. It’s no wonder that it’s become increasingly common to hear the refrain that “sitting is the new smoking.”

As an employer, you have an ability to promote a more active lifestyle for your
employees, whether it’s through onsite classes or facilities, subsidies for fitness classes or gym memberships, or by increasing opportunities for movement throughout the day with standing desks, walking meetings, or regular stretch breaks.

Stress

Whether it’s a big project with an approaching deadline, unrealistic goals and expectations, or a tense relationship with a coworker, it can sometimes feel like stress is lurking around every corner in the modern-day workplace.

In fact, 80% of workers reported feeling stress on the job and over half said they needed help learning to manage it. Four of the top ten most expensive health conditions to U.S. employers are related to heart disease and stroke (high blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes, and chest pain). And stressed out employees are more likely to experience a stroke. Plus, health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.
And stress can impact your employees in other ways, too: Stress can lead to disengagement, lost productivity, and, ultimately, turnover.

Whether you offer onsite massages, provide a quiet space for meditation, or ask leaders to set a positive example by taking time off and demonstrating their own work/life balance, you have the opportunity to reduce employees’ stress—or at least give them the tools they need to better manage it.

Burnout

In many fast-paced work environments, there’s not only pressure to perform, but the expectation that you’ll work ridiculously long hours in order to prove your dedication to your company and its success. The problem with this approach is that it’s not sustainable. Eventually even the most dedicated employees will reach a breaking point.

The Mayo Clinic describes workplace burnout as “a special type of job stress—a state of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about your competence and the value of your work.”
one of the physical symptoms signifying burnout is imminent. It might be that the person is having trouble falling or staying asleep, no amount of sleep is enough, or they may be self-medicating with sugar, alcohol, drugs, and/or caffeine.

3. Watch their worldview:
Another common symptom of oncoming burnout is general negativity—be it cynicism, isolation, frustration, lack of enthusiasm, depleted motivation, or all of the above. If a positive performer has started to slide into daily doldrums and/or diatribes, something is probably going on.

4. Check their concentration (or lack thereof): Another thing you might notice is a loss of memory or concentration. They might become forgetful or distracted, whereas they used to be razor sharp. In the case of a buildup of stress, the mind has become focused on that negative stressor and nothing else.

Burnout can affect employees in all sorts of ways: their ability to sleep, their energy levels, their likelihood of abusing drugs, alcohol, and food. And, of course, left unchecked, any of these disturbances can lead to even more severe health issues.

As an employer, your approach to avoiding burnout can begin at the executive level. You have the ability to create policies and programs that encourage (or discourage!) a healthy work/life balance. Look at things like your PTO and sick day policy, personal days, and flexible working schedules. And be sure to coach managers so they practice setting a good example for their direct reports. Make it everyone’s business to create a workplace that supports taking time away when you need it.

Since part of burnout also relates to an employee’s sense of self-worth, think about how you can bolster their self-esteem. You may decide to offer things like learning and development opportunities, employee recognition programs and events, or the ability to offer and receive mentorship.
Are finances something you should think about in the context of employee wellbeing? Absolutely! Here’s why: In its 2016 Employee Benefits survey report, SHRM noted that 61% of HR professionals described their employees’ financial health as no better than “fair,” and 17% reported their employees were “not at all financially literate.” And PricewaterhouseCooper’s Employee Financial Wellness Survey found the following: 52% of workers overall are stressed about their finances, 46% spend at least three or more hours during the workweek dealing with or thinking about financial issues, and 45% said their finance-related stress had increased within the past 12 months.

It’s not a stretch to say that concerns about finances can impact employees’ stress levels and their productivity.

When it comes to financial wellbeing
programming in the workplace, you may choose to focus on retirement planning, debt reduction, and saving for future needs (to mention a few). If you already have a 401k program in place, you may also wish to incorporate a workshop or some other form of training to help employees get the most out of it.

“Financial stressors are not only negatively impacting employees, but are costing employers. Stressed employees are found to be less productive, take time off from work to deal with their finances, and are more likely to cite health issues caused by financial stress. These findings are concerning and potentially significant for companies looking to evaluate the return on investment of a financial wellness program.”

- KENT E. ALLISON,
PARTNER & NATIONAL PRACTICE LEADER

1Source: PricewaterhouseCooper’s Employee Financial Wellness Survey
Types of wellbeing offerings

Let’s say that you’d like to offer something beyond what you can do in-house. What types of external resources should you offer your employees? There are a number of different approaches. In this section, we’ll look into some of the most common types of wellbeing offerings and what types of results you can expect to achieve with them.
Health assessments

For many companies, health assessments are synonymous with wellbeing—they offer employees the opportunity to conduct self-reported assessments or provide biometric screenings and stop there. By conducting these types of screenings, they’re able to get baseline data and help detect any diseases or potential problems. The reason to invest in this type of wellbeing offering is quite simple: It helps you to detect potential health issues early. This can mean identifying diseases like cancer before they’ve become life-threatening. However, assessments are only one small piece of the wellbeing puzzle. Let’s look at some of the other options you can consider.
Event-based wellbeing activities

Some companies organize one-off or short-term event-based activities. These can include things like lunch and learns, seminars, and webinars on a topic relevant to wellbeing; competitions like running in a 5k; and benefits fairs around open enrollment. These types of activities are used to generate excitement and enthusiasm around signing up for something or participating in an event that’s happening at a specific point in time. Event-based activities generally have a positive impact on enrollment and help make programs top of mind for employees, but the effect tends to be temporary. Because this approach is time-sensitive and isn’t sustained, event-based activities don’t generally lead to long-term behavior change.

Perks, discounts, and rewards

Perks, discounts, and rewards include everything from gym membership and massages to subsidized mental health care and paid time off. Some companies also incentivize employees to complete wellness activities by offering rewards.
These types of benefits are a great hook to get people to do something about wellbeing—they make it easy and accessible to go to a gym, talk to a counselor, etc.

Letting employees know that there’s a payoff to participating in a particular program or platform is one way to boost enrollment. And enrollment is definitely the first step in getting the return on investment you want from your programs.

Wellness portals

Wellness portals are primarily information-based. They’re generally an organized set of resources that’s somewhat self-service for employees. Some portals also serve as gateways to every other category: health assessments, perks and discounts, information on events, more in-depth wellbeing programs, etc. Wellness portals make it simple and easy for employees to get access to information and to take specific actions, which can lead to enrollment and engagement.
Activity-based or gamified platforms

Activity-based or gamified online platforms often take the form of short-term or one-off challenges. These are light-touch efforts that lead people to try to improve their health behavior. These types of platforms tend to boost enrollment and engagement among employees that are already healthy or already have interest in healthy behavior. You may see some success while these programs are running, but in most cases they don’t translate to long-term positive changes for employees.

Deep-dive, habit-based online platforms + coaching

For employers who have a goal of building a culture that is healthy and high performance-oriented, this is what works—it’s not about activities or earning badges or awards; it’s about giving employees the comprehensive support they need to make a lasting, healthy change in their life. By focusing on habits and providing support and resources through coaching, you give your employees the greatest chance of success.
When you’re ready and your company wants to tackle the long-term ROI and VOI of habit change, this is your best bet. Note: this is not to be confused with disease management programs that only work with your highest risk 3%, but instead the type of programs that drive long-term health improvements with a majority of your population leading to a transformed culture of health.

Deep-dive, organization-based programming

Some companies also choose to focus on organization-based programming. This is especially common when you identify problematic aspects of your culture or operations. Organization-based programming can include things like educating executives and managers on topics like the importance of work/life balance, stress, resilience, etc. and making changes to your policies and programs to encourage healthier behaviors. If done correctly, the impact of this type of programming can be massive since it leads to change from the top down.
If you’re already part of the 53% of employers who want to create a culture that promotes health and wellbeing, congratulations!

You’re already a thought leader in that respect. Now it’s time to get leadership and other stakeholders on board.
There are a number of reasons why you could make the case for building a culture of wellbeing at your company.

It may be that you want to compete for and retain top talent and believe this will help you stand out among other employers. You may be looking for ways to cut down on your health care costs or sick days. You might see how cutting down on stress and burnout can lead to greater productivity and reduced recruiting costs by whittling down your attrition rates. Perhaps you take a holistic view of your employees and believe that taking care of their wellbeing and encouraging them to build lasting healthy habits is simply the right thing to do.

Are you nodding along to all of the above? That’s cool, too! As we discussed in the intro section to this eBook, everything is connected. It’s just a matter of what you choose to focus on.

**TOP CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS OF WELLBEING INITIATIVES**

- Number & percentage of participation in programs
- Healthcare cost trend
- Health assessment data
- Employee program satisfaction
- Changes in risk level status year-over-year

*Source: Willis Health and Productivity Survey Report*
Some companies are also beginning to make the connection between wellbeing initiatives and business results: Studies have shown that successful wellness programs can increase revenue by 40% and shareholder returns by 28%. And 78% of respondents to the Willis Health and Productivity report agreed or strongly agreed that senior management understands the link between employee health and workforce productivity.

As you continue to think about building a culture of wellbeing, remember that there’s no single solution—your company and employees’ needs will likely evolve over time. So make sure to create a cadence for evaluating the success of your existing programs and considering new ones.

Ultimately, your goal is to create a company where employees feel valued and respected, where they’re given the tools they need to be healthier and happier.

We hope you’ve found this guide useful in understanding the employee wellbeing landscape. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to get in touch!

The LifeDojo Team

ABOUT LIFEDOJO

LifeDojo is an employee wellbeing platform that combines one-on-one coaching with ongoing habit-building programs to ensure your wellbeing initiatives work for all employees. LifeDojo helps companies engage their entire workforce, sustain long-term behavior change, and reduce overall healthcare costs.