

WELLBEING IS...

# A boardroom priority



DR PAUL LITCHFIELD OBE CHAIR, WHAT WORKS CENTRE FOR WELLBEING

**Dr Paul Litchfield is an expert in occupational health and a leading voice on workplace wellbeing** – most recently as Chair of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, a research body. Here he sets out his thoughts on the rising recognition of the importance of wellbeing and what it means for business.

## What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing is a concept that almost everyone thinks they understand intuitively, but many struggle to articulate what they mean. Philosophers talk about hedonia and eudemonia, while the healthcare community view it as a synonym for good health, especially mental health. Ordinary people use words like happiness, satisfaction or quality of life and what it comes down to is how we are doing as individuals, as communities and as a society. That is how the UK Office for National Statistics has defined it, after extensive research. And they have come up with a series of measures, to help us understand how different groups compare, and how things are changing over time.

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## Why does this matter for business?

Most business leaders want to improve the wellbeing of their people, but it might not be their top priority, especially when times are tough. The impact of wellbeing on other outcomes therefore becomes critical. We need more evidence from the world of work, but here are some of the things we do know:

- Experimental work shows that improving wellbeing can boost productivity by as much as 15%.
- Companies invest greatly in promoting the engagement of their people, but paying attention to wellbeing makes that engagement sustainable. Without it, burnout is a real risk.
- Impaired wellbeing often manifests as mental ill health, which is now the main cause of sickness absence in much of the world.
- Presenteeism is even commoner with reduced wellbeing and is estimated to cost businesses at least one and a half times their absenteeism bill.
- Organisations promoting wellbeing for their people are three and a half times more likely to be creative and innovative.
- Customer experience is strongly correlated with the wellbeing of the employee with whom they interact.
- Millennials and subsequent generations are motivated less by money and look to work for organisations that foster their wellbeing.



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## Where businesses should focus

Many businesses have got the message that wellbeing is worth paying attention to, but the way they translate that into action is largely ineffective. A recent CIPD survey showed that less than 10% of companies have a strategic approach to wellbeing linked to their business objectives. The majority engage in isolated, time-limited initiatives linked to a particular aspect of physical or mental health. I sometimes refer to this as the “fruit and pilates” approach to wellbeing. Inevitably such initiatives only deliver limited benefits and they tend to run out of steam as their novelty wanes.

Smarter organisations look at the key drivers of wellbeing and put in place measures that are likely to influence those in a workplace context. Respected academics around the world have produced various lists of the aspects of life which impact on wellbeing. These can be grouped into five key areas that seem to have relevance in a business context.



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10%

- **Health** – this is a powerful driver of wellbeing, but it’s only part of the story. Physical, psychological and emotional health are all important, but the emotional component comes out strongest in regression analysis. Yet, how many people at work know how to react to a colleague crying at their workstation?
- **Security** – feeling safe is a basic human need, but it’s about more than just hard hats and accident avoidance. Levels of crime in the area and the risks of travelling to work need to be considered. Financial insecurity is a growing concern with two thirds of UK employees now borrowing money (often at high interest rates) to meet basic needs.
- **Relationships** – the way people interact with their line manager is the strongest predictor of a range of business outcomes, and yet, research shows that a meeting with the boss is the most unpleasant activity in the working day. The breakdown of a family relationship destroys wellbeing and is a common occurrence for the mid-life and mid-career people that most companies depend upon. Facilitating support in an appropriate way can make all the difference.

- **Environment** – there is growing evidence that a well-designed work environment can boost wellbeing and it doesn’t have to be expensive. Even more influential is the cultural environment that exists in the company; with openness, honesty and application of the principles of organisational justice being key.
- **Purpose** – human beings need to have meaning in their lives. Work can provide a potent sense of purpose and many companies are resetting their aims to focus on their impact in society, as well as being profitable. Not everyone will be satisfied by just that, and businesses can also leverage their volunteering activity to provide meaning for their people.

In practice, most companies will be addressing many of these issues already. However, they are likely to be uncoordinated and driven by a range of people from different disciplines. Having an overarching wellbeing framework allows a business to exploit the synergies that exist, and to conduct a gap analysis to identify where additional activity might be warranted.

[Article continues...](#)

## Why wellbeing should be our number one priority

There is enough evidence available to allow businesses to progress this agenda in a way that is intellectually valid. That evidence base is fragmented because it is generated by researchers from health, social science, economics, philosophy and other backgrounds. Knowledge therefore sits in silos with little cross-reference and no common methodology. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing is committed to remedying that deficiency and is producing evidence syntheses translated into plain English and actionable recommendations.

Nevertheless, the knowledge base does need to be improved, and the future focus will be as much on the “how” as the “what” in “what works”. Areas of particular interest include moving beyond the impact of wellbeing on productivity, which is relatively easy to measure, and generating robust evidence to quantify better the relationship with customer experience and innovation. Those are the critical success factors for business, in a world dominated by service industries and rapid technological advance.

Companies that embrace the concept of wellbeing are likely to reap the reward of being early adopters in an emerging field of science. That is why boards with an eye to the future need to make this a priority. [W](#)



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