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Employment: Working Well

By Felix Kugel

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The Employment section did not involve the reporting or the editorial staff of The Moscow Times.



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Wellness in the workplace is nice to have, but is it an absolute strategic essential? Can an organization's performance and success depend on it? It's hard to imagine that many people would answer affirmatively. Yet our large-scale study of organizational effectiveness, and specifically the drivers of employee engagement, has found that workplace health and well-being can have a major impact on the engagement, retention, creativity, and productivity of employees and, ultimately, on the financial performance of the organization as a whole.

We asked nearly 30,000 representative employees across 10 sectors in 15 countries worldwide to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with 100 different statements addressing the major building blocks of organizational effectiveness. We then tested for statistically significant correlations between positive assessments of their organization's use of these building blocks and positive responses to the statement "My organization actively promotes health and well-being." Our analysis revealed that employees who responded favorably to the proposition that their organization actively promotes health and well-being were eight times more likely to indicate that they were engaged than employees who responded unfavorably; four times less likely to indicate that they planned to leave within the next year than those who responded unfavorably.

An Urgent Need

As our study shows, promoting wellness in the workplace is probably wise under any circumstances. But in today's business environment, it assumes a special urgency. In response to high competition on the global market, many organizations worldwide have sought to remain competitive and survive by reducing their workforces and streamlining their operations. Employees remaining in their organizations have inevitably been asked to pick up

the slack and do more with less. A recent online poll of almost 700 employees conducted by our company found that fully 2/3 of respondents had not taken all of their vacation by the end of 2013. They were simply under too much pressure to get work done and, perhaps, too insecure in their jobs to withstand that pressure and take full advantage of an earned benefit. Not surprisingly, evidence is mounting that workforces are increasingly discontented and disengaged.

An unhappy workforce actively planning to seek greener pastures as soon as the opportunity presents itself is unlikely to be engaged. Our study of organizational effectiveness, which was conducted between December 2011 and January 2012, found, for example, that only 44 percent of U.S. employees were willing to describe themselves as engaged. The situation was no better elsewhere: the global average was only 34 percent. It is in the context of this developing crisis of retention and engagement that our findings concerning wellness reveal their true significance. Actively promoting health and well-being is one of the most effective means an organization can employ to address this challenge. Yet, it is worth noting that fewer than half of our study's nearly 30,000 respondents identified their organization as actively promoting health and well-being.

Best-Practice Recommendations

What, then, can an organization do to promote a culture of wellness and drive engagement? Our advice is both general and specific. In general, organizations should take a system-wide approach that begins by making wellness a strategic imperative. A wellness initiative should never be treated as a free-floating desirable whose business benefits may or may not be realizable at some indeterminate point in time. A wellness priority must be aligned with the organization's strategic goals. To achieve this alignment: 1) leaders at the highest levels must actively support wellness initiatives, they must recognize wellness as one of the most powerful tools at their disposal for realizing business strategy; 2) wellness must be a consideration as the organization builds capacity, structures its operations, and assigns roles; 3) wellness must be incorporated into essential people systems and processes; 4) wellness must be embraced as a core value defining the organization's culture.

Specific Remedies

Our organizational effectiveness study provides the basis for more specific, concrete advice. In looking for possible drivers of "My organization actively promotes health and well-being" among the other 99 statements making up the study, we found that positive assessments of health and well-being in the workplace depend on a wide variety of factors that may not seem related to health and well-being at all. For example, safe working conditions drive perceptions of workplace health and well-being, but so too does a senior leader's ability to communicate the organization's strategy to employees. Presumably, employees who have a good understanding of the strategic goals they should be working toward experience less stress and achieve higher levels of wellness.

Our analysis revealed the following five top individual drivers of health and well-being. Of all the individual actions an organization could take, these five would do the most to contribute to the physical and psychological wellness of employees: 1) allow employees to maintain a reasonable balance between their family and work life; 2) ensure that there are people ready

to move into jobs when positions become available; 3) ensure that the organization becomes involved in supporting the community; 4) attract and retain talent effectively; 5) invest in people's learning and development.

In the end, workplace wellness cannot be maximized by any single action or handful of actions alone. It must be approached strategically and comprehensively. When it is, organizations stand to make significant gains in productivity and performance. Actively promoting health and well-being in the workplace is one of the most important measures an organization can take to address the developing engagement and retention crisis.

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