

Why wellness needs to be a business transformation priority

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When the acronym VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) was coined by the US Army in the 1990s to describe how crazy the post-Cold War years were, those early proponents had no idea that this would continue to be true for years to come. VUCA continues to be applied in our 21st-century world to describe the effect of frequent change in organisations and the global economic climate that can be a cause of disruption, hyper-competitiveness, turbulence, high velocity and radical flux.



“We know that strategic workplace change can be effectively achieved when it is done with clear intention and planning,” says Stephen Rothgiesser, MD of The Change Consulting Group. But too much change or change that is impulsive or insufficiently planned for can push employees over the edge in terms of their ability to cope with daily responsibilities. To add to this, there is an upward trend in the level of stress and uncertainty about future job security, often due to the introduction of new technology and the perceived threat of workplace automation and robotics. This can have a knock-on impact on workplace productivity, as well as the mental and physical wellbeing of employees.

Rothgiesser adds that “most organisations don’t have clear systems in place to achieve successful change implementation; added to this, the pace and ongoing nature of organisational transformation requires an agility and resilience that many organisations simply haven’t yet developed.”

The consequence is that stress, anxiety and depression are shooting off the charts. According to the 2018 Benefits and Trends Survey conducted by Aon Employee Benefits in the UK, the number of employers reporting employee stress and mental health-related illnesses rose from 55% in 2017 to 68% in 2018. On top of this there is a worldwide stigma about reporting mental health issues in the workplace. So, it is likely that the true extent of mental health issues in the workplace is under-reported.

In May 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) included burn-out for the first time on its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) list, which is the global benchmark for health diagnosis. Burnout has been classified by the WHO as “[a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed](#).” In other

words the concept of burnout is only applied in the context of work because of the prevalence of this phenomenon worldwide.

The WHO officially identifies three dimensions of burn-out:

1. feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion.
2. increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job.
3. reduced professional efficacy.

Alongside the human cost of mental illness, there is also a considerable economic burden. For example, in 2017, the *Financial Mail* reported that [mental health problems cost the South African economy billions each year](#). Dr Ali Hamdulay, CEO of the Metropolitan Health Group, explains that “mental illness in the workplace leads to decreased productivity, increased sick-related absenteeism, poor work quality, wasted materials and even compromised workplace safety.”

Looked at another way, studies have linked increased employee wellbeing with a positive impact on job performance, healthy competitiveness and profitability. To realise these mutual benefits there needs to be an organisational paradigm shift from employers trying to ‘squeeze every last drop’ out of their employees to instilling a culture that values work-life balance and a sense of personal wellbeing. It also means that proactive stress management and wellbeing strategies need to be built into organisational transformation planning and implementation.

Somatic psychologist and author of *The Mindful Body*, Noa Belling is a Principal Consultant with The Change Consulting Group specialising in corporate wellness in the context of organisational change. Alongside important factors like easy access to healthy food and allowing spaces and activities that promote relationship building and harmonious teamwork, Noa has the following tips to offer for individual on-the-spot stress relief that can be easily incorporated into the workday. Over time these kinds of mindful interventions can make a significant difference to our ability to think clearly, be productive even in the face of challenges, promote emotional resilience and feed into a sense of wellbeing.

- Take any opportunity for physical activity during the workday, especially when sitting at a desk for long hours. Examples are taking the stairs instead of the lift, breaking for a brisk walk to clear the head and allowing some meetings to occur while walking rather than always sitting at a desk. Physical activity is an excellent way to release stress hormones and can also stimulate creative thinking.
- Pause at your desk now and again to carry out a quick body scan to release tension (such as by consciously relaxing, stretching out or breathing into areas that feel tense) before resuming work.
- Adjust your posture to be more centred and upright while taking a few deep breaths to encourage your feeling comfortable in this position and not tense. This simple act can trick your brain into believing that you, not your stress, are in charge. As a result feelings like anxiety and overwhelm can move more into the background as a clearer, more focused and determined headspace moves to the fore.
- Take a one- or two-minute break at your desk to deepen and even out your breathing. This can help build a sense of emotional strength and resilience again as you trick your brain to believing that you are taking charge of how you are feeling. For example, inhale to a count of three or four and exhale to the same count, repeating a few times. This simple act has been found to energise your body and activate your prefrontal cortex, which is your brain’s home of intelligent thinking, good planning and clear-headed decision-making. One study in the banking sector linked 10 minutes a day of even, deep breathing (in this case carried out in one go once a day, but that you could break up through the day) with consistently better decision-making and reduced stress levels. In other words the simple act of breathing deliberately and evenly can be empowering.

For organisations, where high stress and burn-out are taking a noticeable toll, Rothgiesser advises taking a strategic approach where the systemic challenges are first properly diagnosed, and appropriate remedies are identified and planned so that a sustainable solution can be implemented. For example, issues could sit with a few vocal individuals, or could affect the entire organisation. A staff engagement survey can be used that is targeted to address this question in order to glean valid data. Or focus groups could be run in various parts of the organisation, or the HR function and line managers can be used to identify concerns in this regard as they arise. As part of this it is important to ascertain what the true cause for the

frustration or burnout is. Is it a personal issue pressing in on work? Is it a tiresome relationship dynamic in the team or with a leader? Or is it to do with organisational culture? Different kinds of triggers require different kinds of remedies.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all wellness programme,” says Rothgiesser. “Organisations are highly variable and the causes of anxiety and burn-out are multi-faceted and ever-changing given the life-cycle of an organisation and the challenges currently facing employees.” For this reason and in order to implement sustainable organisational solutions, wellness programmes should be based on an accurate understanding of the people and organisations involved.

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