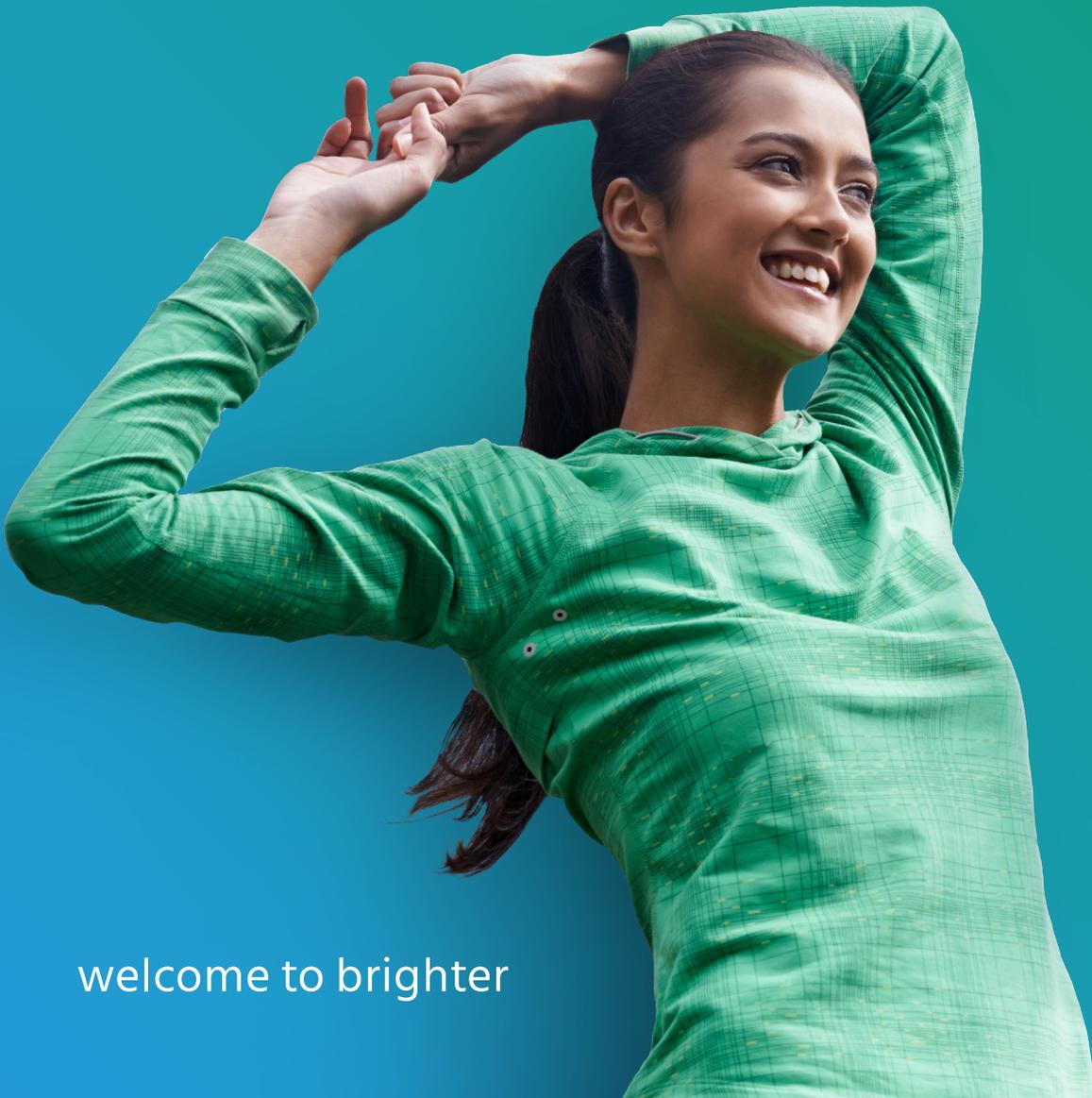


Creating a framework for managing employee wellbeing



Small to medium-sized businesses may already hold the keys to managing employee stress

As an HR manager in a small to medium-sized enterprise (SME), how do you react when an employee comes to you worried about racking up personal debt or complaining of physical or mental burnout?

Do you feel your own stress levels rising as you anxiously decide where to turn? Or do you calmly consult an employee wellbeing strategy containing a list of resources that can help?

Largely due to the numerous pressures under which they operate, many small to medium-sized businesses unfortunately find themselves in the former position. All too often, they simply don't know where to start when an employee presents with a stress-related problem. And no wonder. HR managers at these companies say:

- They recognise the need for a wellbeing strategy but struggle with limited or no budget and a lack of senior management buy-in.
- They don't know how to start conversations about what they should be doing as a business.
- They lack benchmarking data that reveals how they compare with other businesses and how peer organisations are managing employee stress.

For these reasons, as well as the fact that employee stress can often go unnoticed or unreported, HR managers at many firms wait until an employee presents with a major stress event before considering what support structures they have available. This reactive approach is dangerous, because the impact of employee stress can be immense. Stress is arguably an even bigger issue for smaller firms than larger organisations, because smaller companies depend on key staff so much more.

However, what we have also found from working with small to medium-sized firms is that many businesses have multiple support structures in place that could combine to create one successful health and wellbeing strategy — but managers are unaware of the offerings available and how to build a framework around such a strategy.

Adopting a systematic approach to documenting the benefits and support services already available, while identifying any people risks and areas that need attention, can help employers articulate their overall employee wellbeing strategies — and get more out of those offerings already in place.



Understanding the four pillars of wellbeing

Research indicates that employee wellbeing is influenced by four interconnected factors:



Physical health: One of the largest annual studies of wellness in the UK, *Britain's Healthiest Workplace*¹ report, shows that workers surveyed were biologically four years and two months older than their chronological age based on lifestyle and health-risk factors. What's more, lack of exercise, poor diets and other factors led to a profitability loss of 30 days for every employee each year. So it's clearly in SMEs' interest to offer a range of support that promotes physical health.



Mental health: Our research into mental health at work shows that 56.4% of surveyed employees suffer from at least one dimension of work-related stress; however, just 11% say they would disclose mental health challenges with their managers. Yet workplace interventions can be hugely successful, and mental health benefits and support services have a crucial role to play here.



Social health: Employees of businesses that actively promote work-life balance in a family-friendly environment perform up to 19% better, their sleep quality is twice as good and productivity metrics are improved. Enabling employees to participate in charity work, connect socially and join like-minded interest groups is good for business.



Financial health: Our research has also revealed that 50% of people are worried about saving for retirement, 45% about meeting day-to-day expenses or being unprepared for the unexpected, and more than one-third about repaying debts. Employers are in a unique position to help: 82% of employees trust their employer for financial advice and support, a greater proportion than those who trust an independent financial adviser.



With these four pillars in mind, many SMEs have found the following framework useful in helping them plot out the support they already offer. In fact, employers are often surprised to find they have reasonably good coverage, whether across free employee assistance plans on the mental health side or extended medical treatments for physical ailments. Interestingly, many businesses also uncover gaps in their financial support packages — or realise they don't have financial wellness cover at all. This is a critical omission, as most people will suffer financial stress at some stage in their lives.

¹ Mercer. "Britain's Healthiest Places to Work Revealed", December 2019, available at <https://www.uk.mercer.com/newsroom/britains-healthiest-places-to-work-revealed.html>.



Measuring employee engagement

A good starting point is for companies to ask themselves the following questions about employee engagement levels:

- What steps do you take to measure employee engagement?
- What are your current employees telling friends and family about working for your company?
- How much do you know about the different motivators and approach to work, health and wellbeing across each generation of your workforce?
- What are you doing to ensure each of these generations feels engaged and valued by your business?

Collating as much information as you can about what is important to your employees can help you build a wellbeing strategy that is relevant to both them and your business.

After exploring these questions about employee engagement, you should consider:

- How you currently communicate your benefits package and support services
- Whether you need to adopt a different or more varied approach to communication
- Actions you can take to improve employee engagement
- Ways to enable ongoing monitoring of engagement

Mapping out an employee wellbeing framework

Having obtained a better overview of factors influencing employee engagement, companies can then begin to build a wellbeing framework by identifying their current offerings, and any gaps, across the four pillars of employee wellbeing under the categories of prevention, intervention and protection, as follows:

	Physical wellbeing	Mental wellbeing	Social wellbeing	Financial wellbeing	How are current benefits and support services communicated?
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health mobile apps • Discounted gym membership • Wellness health stations • Cash plan contributions for health assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holiday entitlement • Discounted yoga and mindfulness sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social clubs • Lunchtime walking groups • Breakfast/“Lunch and Learn” sessions to promote discussions on wellbeing/mental health • Giving employees their birthdays off • Day off for charity work • Team-building events/days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial wellness coaching • Income protection policy • Pension salary sacrifice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR emails • Annual employee benefits presentation • Employee-engagement solutions
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpline for musculoskeletal, cancer and eye conditions • Specialist centres for cancer scans, tests and diagnosis • Group income protection (GIP) early intervention and rehab services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health support • Bereavement counselling through life assurance policy • GIP employee assistance programme • Support with claims issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising external factors, such as carer responsibilities, with flexible working practices to support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pension governance support • Group leaver service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR emails • Annual employee benefits presentation • Employee engagement solutions
Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private medical insurance (PMI) policy • Dental policy • Cash plan health and wellbeing benefits • Eye test reimbursement • Occupational health support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMI mental health cover • GIP mental health support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buddies for new joiners to allow integration • Line managers trained in good communication; e.g., empathy skills and the importance of listening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMI rewards • Pension governance support • Personal accident benefit • Season-ticket loan • Life and GIP benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR emails • Annual employee benefits presentation • Employee-engagement solutions

Armed with this information, SMEs will find it easier to answer the following questions:

- What in-house initiatives can you run alongside the support services already provided by your existing employee benefits package to form a comprehensive wellbeing strategy?
- How can you plan effective communication of benefits and support services to all employees?
- How will you measure success to help you understand what works for your employees and identify areas for improvement?
- How should you plan for the evolution of your strategy?

Without an effective wellbeing strategy, companies may be missing opportunities to have a positive and proactive effect on the health and welfare of their workforce and, in turn, their business. By using this framework to familiarise themselves with the benefits and support services already available, identify gaps, and help them put a strategy document in place, giving hard-pressed HR managers the tools to help employees deal with — and mitigate — their stress, to everyone's benefit.

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