

WORKING

TOWARDS

WELLNESS

CORPORATE AUSTRALIA WAS ALREADY CONCERNED ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH. THEN COVID MADE THE ISSUE UNAVOIDABLE.

NOW THAT IT'S A TOPIC OF BOARDROOM DISCUSSION, COMPANIES ARE WORKING TO TRANSFORM THEIR CULTURES, KEEP EMPLOYEES HAPPY AND ATTRACT NEW RECRUITS.

STORY BY SUSAN HORSBURGH



When Steven Worrall started as managing director of Microsoft Australia and New Zealand in 2017, he worked hard to make his mark – all while his father was dying of cancer and his mother was descending into dementia. But juggling the new role with the management of his dad’s palliative care at home, he felt himself buckling under the strain. “I wasn’t keeping up,” says the father of three, “but I felt I just had to push through.”

It was only later he realised he should have traded his stoicism for support. “Being a bit more open and vulnerable with those around me at work would have been a better way for me to go.” Since then, Worrall has advocated for more “psychologically safe” workplaces as chair of Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia (CMHAA), which launched in 2020. The aim? “To make talking about mental health in the workplace normal and natural.”

COVID has fast-tracked that goal. About five million Australians suffered from a mental health condition before the pandemic, missing on average 10 to 12 work days annually. In 2020, the Productivity Commission found mental illness cost the country up to \$39 billion in lost participation and productivity. But lockdowns and home-schooling wiped out many people’s emotional reserves. According to the World Health Organization, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression rose 25 per cent in COVID’s first year. In response, there’s been a cultural shift in the workplace, with emotional wellbeing no longer a no-go topic. “What it’s done is bring the issue very much to the fore,” says CMHAA executive director Kim Hamrosi. “As a business, you can no longer avoid tackling it.”

Two years ago, companies had to deal with the mental health emergency at hand, dishing out Uber Eats vouchers and extra

days off, but now business leaders are taking the long view, eager to create a happier workplace and more enticing proposition for potential recruits. Mental health is now a strategic issue and the focus has switched from the individual to the organisation, from treatment to prevention. “We don’t want to just be about yoga, resilience training and fruit bowls,” says Hamrosi. “It’s really about what we can do as organisations structurally... that upstream view.”

To give employers guidance, the National Mental Health Commission last year released a *Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces* – a best-practice approach, which Beyond Blue’s chief community officer, Patrice O’Brien, says has long been missing. “People often think a ‘mentally healthy workplace’ means the big, glossy things, like mental health days. But often what it means is ensuring people have good role clarity, great leadership and the resources and support they need to do their job well – and then they’re recognised when they deliver.”

In today’s competitive talent market, Jono Nicholas, the head of mental health consultants The Wellbeing Outfit, spends a lot of time with organisations discussing their employee value proposition. “Beyond financial incentives, that centres around ‘How do you create a great place to work?’” In a workplace that fits the bill, “you feel like you’ve got friends at work that have your back, that like you for you. You feel as if you can be authentic and express your ideas. And you also feel you can work towards being the best version of yourself, as opposed to being on a treadmill churning out work, not learning or growing.”

Instead of being initiative-led, businesses would be better off listening to what their staff actually need. Financial stress is an emerging wellbeing issue, which means organisations could offer financial advice when an employee, for instance, gets a pay rise or returns from parental leave. “[Another] practical thing a leader can do is [encourage] people to take two weeks leave in the next six months,” says Nicholas, who is also EY Oceania’s chief mental health advisor. “It’s concrete and not that sexy but it makes a massive difference.”

Leaders set the example for staff to follow. “If leaders are working really long hours and not looking after their own wellbeing, it sends an implied message,” says Beyond Blue’s O’Brien, “even if it’s not what’s being said.” Yet despite the focus on senior leaders, all the data shows that it’s team leadership that matters. Manager training, for example, is one of the best evidence-based investments an organisation can make. “If your manager cares about you, knows your kids’ names, doesn’t call you after hours or ask you to do unreasonable work, your day-to-day experience is fundamentally different, no matter what the CEO does in a big company,” explains Nicholas. “When you look at wellbeing, team leaders are also the group that are most stretched personally – [aged] between, say, 28 and 45, often with carer responsibilities. They might have financial stress because they’ve just bought their first house.” If they can be supported and trained to manage their team well, he says, the impact on an organisation’s mental health will far outweigh that of any meditation app.



Corporate Australia has stepped up its commitment to better staff wellbeing but workers compensation insurer Allianz released data last year revealing workplace mental health injuries are on the rise. For individuals, most large companies offer an Employee Assistance Program but there's been surprisingly little take-up of counselling services given the community demand, possibly due to confidentiality concerns. "Either they don't know it's there," says CMHAA's Hamrosi, "or they don't feel comfortable using it."

Undoubtedly, workplace bullying, harassment and chronic stress can destroy a person's confidence but work can also bolster mental health, offering financial security, social connection and personal growth. As Hamrosi points out, "Good work is good for you." Young people, in particular, seek out employers who support them as individuals and encourage a sense of purpose and they're reluctant to settle for less. "Often you get the best out of people when you let them be open and bring their full selves to work," says O'Brien. "The workplaces that do that will be the ones that attract the best and brightest – and get the best business results."

ADOPTING A FOUR-DAY WORK WEEK

Josh Foreman, the founder and CEO of InDebted, has no delusions about the employee-pulling power of his business. "Hey, who wants to come and work at a debt-collection company?" he jokes. "No-one's running out the door to do that."

Which is why the consumer-finance fintech introduced a four-day work week last year, offering (within reason) unlimited leave and allowing staff to work anywhere, with a quarterly office stipend. The perks won InDebted the top spot in the AFR BOSS Best Places to Work awards this year – and some priceless PR.

Not only that, 98 per cent of InDebted employees have reported better mental health since they were granted Fridays off, suggesting the most effective wellbeing moves might not be "mental health initiatives" at all. With the extra time to themselves, says the CEO, staff can do whatever feeds their souls, whether that's caring for their baby, volunteering at the RSPCA or working on a side hustle. "We're seeing people use those extra days to travel and reconnect with family and friends and that's translated into a much happier, more productive team," says Foreman, who'd noticed widespread burnout last year. "It's certainly had an impact on my mental health."

The startup, which launched in 2016 and grew from 70 to 239 global employees in less than a year (it now has 249), was prepared to take a 20 per cent productivity hit if it meant finding talented people for its hard-to-fill roles, such as software engineers, but the data shows productivity has only dropped 5 per cent and the number of job applicants has skyrocketed by 280 per cent.

A major attraction is the remote-working policy: a strategy manager is currently working in Spain, for example, after house-swapping with a colleague; another is working while visiting family in Brazil; and a cluster of engineers use their \$500 quarterly stipend on a co-working space in Sydney's Manly so they can surf on work days. "If you're going to get the best out of your people," says Foreman, "they need to be in the right headspace."

CREATING MENTAL HEALTH CHAMPIONS

Commonwealth Bank of Australia appointed its chief mental health officer, Dr Laura Kirby, at the start of 2021 but the bank has had staff wellbeing in its sights for some years. With the launch of its Thrive portal six years ago, CBA gave its 45,000 employees



new activities and conquering fears,” says Rebecca Edwards, general manager of People, Culture and Safety. “Our teams have expressed that the energy and joy they’ve shared have lasted long after their experience was over.”

Company-funded outdoor adventures top a list of Kathmandu wellbeing initiatives, including accreditation in mental health first aid, access to a wellbeing app and staff support groups on Facebook Workplace, where people can share their problems. The business also runs Acts of Kindness challenges and offers employees paid time off to celebrate “work-aversaries” and volunteer in military and fire and rescue services.

Employee satisfaction fuels “more innovation, more joy, more fun”, explains Edwards, which makes prioritising wellbeing “critical to the success of any business”.

a one-stop shop to direct their own “mental wellness journey”, with access to more than 1400 pieces of custom, evidence-based content, including guided meditations, exercise and cooking classes, plus links to resources and support.

Off screen, the bank relies on about 700 Thrive “champions” – employee volunteers trained to talk to colleagues they think are having a hard time. “It’s well beyond an R U OK? conversation,” explains Justin Martin, CBA’s general manager of Health, Safety and Wellbeing. “They’re not there to diagnose their condition but they’re able to refer them quickly to the right support mechanisms. That’s been really key for us.”

The bank gauges the collective wellbeing through semi-annual surveys but also trains managers to check in with their team members. “We use metrics as well as more qualitative information – just talking to people to understand where they might be at,” says Kirby. “It’s genuine care for our people that drives this but certainly you see that where you’ve got high-performing teams, there’s generally high mental health and wellbeing.”

TAKING IT OUTSIDE

When your company’s mission is “to improve the wellbeing of the world through the outdoors”, your mental health strategy had better involve nature – and so it does at Kathmandu. To mark its relaunched brand identity last year, the New Zealand-based retailer introduced its Joyful Out There fund, which means the company’s 1800 workers get to go rock climbing, horseriding and zip-lining in the name of team bonding and wellbeing.

“Not only have our people spent time together outdoors, they have also had the opportunity to learn and grow together, trying

BANNING MEETINGS ONE DAY A WEEK

“Mindful Mondays”, “TED talk Tuesdays”, “Thinking Thursdays” – the Affinity office is all about reflection (and rampant alliteration). Since defining its brand purpose in 2015, the 20-year-old digital agency has set about “creating a culture of world-class thinking”.

It began with “Library Hour”, an hour of learning every Tuesday. At 9am, the automated email replies go on and workers study whatever they want, from a conflict-resolution course to a masterclass with movie director Ron Howard. “It’s a gift to say, ‘We don’t want you to do anything except self-guided learning to further your own interests,’” says co-founder and chief brand officer Angela Smith.

Following Affinity’s most recent move – a ban on Thursday meetings – 83 per cent of its 30 staff members reported improved mental wellbeing at work, which helped the agency take out the wellbeing category in the AFR BOSS Best Places to Work awards. “You can’t bring your best thinking every day,” says Smith, “unless you’re happy and engaged.” In fact, not a single employee has left Affinity in the past 12 months.

The company has psychologists give talks on mental health and workers can take a day off if they’re struggling. “Advertising and marketing haven’t had the best reputation for supporting people in the past – it can be high pressure, with a lot of deadlines. We’ve tried to cultivate a proactive culture of mental wellness.”

Some initiatives have met with pushback, says Smith, but the company’s “dogged” commitment to its mental health strategy has paid off. “A great employee experience correlates with a great culture and that means better commercial outcomes. Great EX leads to great CX, which leads to a bottom-line uplift. It’s really that simple.” ●