

# Something to feel good about

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**The workplace can have a significant impact on employee well-being and vice versa. Elina Grigoriou discusses what the term means, and what steps employers can take**

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Well-being is like friendship, which as C.S Lewis said is not a necessity in life but rather a reason to be alive. Many of us can fall slowly, imperceptibly even, into just getting by ? a state we normalise, and think that things can?t be better.

It is important to define and understand what well-being is, as is having the knowledge to inform whether and how we want to support it in our organisations and communities. How would you describe well-being, and how many times in your day, week, year or life do you think you have experienced it? This is the most important detail: if we don?t understand what well-being is on a personal level, how are we expected to help others ensure it for themselves, respond to client requirements for well-being, and know whether it is supported by a project or not?

Well-being is a state of health and comfort in all parts that make up a human being, and results in the experience of happiness and wellness. Well-being is experienced when our physical body is free of pain, feels light, healthy, agile, alert and at ease. It means our mind is clear, bright, perceptive and efficient, information is taken in and analysed easily, learning is effortless, memory is fresh and we can use our reason to process thoughts. Well-being is experienced when our emotions are clear and we respond to others near us; where generosity, positivity and a sense of unity exists with people around us; where love and care can be demonstrated naturally without expecting a return.

Well-being in the workplace specifically refers to the way a company or organisation responds to these qualities in staff and the people who interact with them as part of their work. During a working day, a person will be in spaces and situations that have positive or negative effects on their mind, body and heart. A person?s well-being in the workplace is affected by issues ranging from how they process thoughts to what they eat and drink and what they do physically ? and to the emotions they experience as part of their work or as outputs of it.

## **Whose responsibility?**

Although the issue of well-being has been silently added on to the remit of the person responsible for health and safety or sustainability, a better way needs to be found of introducing it and integrating it into workplaces. There are numerous new titles given to people charged with finding out about their colleagues? well-being and guiding their company or organisation towards adopting it as a concept, or complying with some uniform good practice guidance.

It is in fact very interesting to view how each corporate culture affects the way well-being will be understood, adopted and integrated. A related concept is how safe that responsible person

feels in their position, which influences their ability to show when they lack knowledge and demonstrate their keenness to improve ? which is the case with most such roles.

Some organisations will take on specialist advice to kick-start their approach, until someone has been given an internal remit; this would seem the most appropriate approach currently. Larger organisations that can afford and warrant one or more full-time roles to implement and steer a programme for staff well-being tend to give these staff titles such as well-being manager, wellness officer, health and well-being director, and so on.

In smaller businesses this function can be tucked into the HR team?s duties, but it can be difficult to implement as staff can on occasion be tied up with disciplinary issues or hiring and firing, and this can affect conversations about well-being. This is not to say, though, that the HR team is not ? like all other teams in an organisation ? part of success or failure in supporting staff well-being.

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Let?s consider the different qualities of emotional, physical and cognitive well-being. If shop staff are being treated badly by customers in a systematic way, for instance, this will have a negative impact on their emotional well-being.

If on the other hand the same staff are constantly having a positive impact on their customers? experience and receive positive comments for it too, their emotional well-being will be supported, thanks to the acknowledgement that they are doing the job correctly, contributing to the company?s success, pleasing their managers and knowing that customers leave satisfied.

Where physical well-being is concerned, take the example of a university lecture room: if auditorium design and seating incline is such that the lecturer needs to lift their head up to make eye contact with the students in the highest seats and ensure they feel included, it will affect the back of their neck, and after an hour or more they will start experiencing discomfort or even pain. This pain may not be strong enough to warrant a major response and it may be suffered silently at the time. However, if this happens two or three times a week over a number of years, it can create a long-term physical issue that will initially affect their resilience, and then over time their physical health and well-being, and subsequently their overall well-being.

In an office setting, we could consider the way the interior affects the cognitive well-being of staff; if the space or the way staff behave creates distractions, then people?s attention will be distracted frequently, not allowing them to finish a piece of work in good time or making their thought processes harder. The more the brain can function without such disturbances and with lightness and ease the more it is 'in the zone', in the words of Alasdair White, and the better thoughts and solutions it can create.

The above examples affect a number of roles in any organisation, so when we are considering who is taking on the responsibility of staff well-being, it is clear both that:

- it needs to be driven by a leader, a person who is purely dedicated to this role, ideally with some existing knowledge; and
- well-being must be integrated into, and considered by, every department and all

roles.

## The right questions

What is important to understand when considering well-being in the workplace is that it is a dynamic issue needing ongoing observation, and that doing this will reap benefits for both a company and its people.

The first steps in any organisation are to consider how the emotional, physical and cognitive well-being of staff could be affected. Encouraging conversation and observing teams at work are great ways to broach high-level topics and work out an agenda for discussion. Speaking directly with staff is the most powerful and insightful avenue, and in its own right supports their well-being.

Someone actively listening to you when you share something, without simply waiting for you to stop so that they can say what they want, who is not performing another task at the same time or trying to provide immediate solutions to what you are sharing, is often the biggest investment that employers can make in your well-being and enhancement of your resilience.

Once issues are known, then it can be decided whether they are either high in priority or represent a critical situation for which specialist advice should be sought. The internal well-being team can respond to many issues once specialist advice has been sought and given, and an initial strategy has been agreed, with specialists dropping in to check at regular intervals.

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Knowing how much management time and money to invest in staff well-being activities, and what changes should be adopted, needs to be reviewed using the [Social Return on Investment](#) methodology. This enables you to compare the value of what you will be getting back with the value of what you are investing. However harsh it may sound, not all measures that might support staff well-being can be implemented at any one time, whether due to the existing company culture, limited budgets or team capacity.

An understanding of the limitations that a workplace has for an individual's well-being is important. Their personal life, the socio-political situation and natural conditions are also highly significant. So although there are limits to the effect that improvements at work can have, this does not remove the daily impact of work and the opportunity it presents to support people. If a person's well-being is supported at work when they are undergoing a difficult time personally, their resilience will be higher, they will pull through quicker, and they can grow as a human being as a result of the experience.

The most important issue, though, is to highlight the responsibility individuals themselves have to make a choice to be well. Companies may appoint a busload of specialists and throw millions at a person's needs, but in the end we all need to choose to be well. Well-being is not something an employer or colleague can give anyone if that person chooses to enjoy being miserable or in discomfort. Sometimes we get used to such states, and feel safe within them.

The physical environment nevertheless has a significant impact and offers opportunities to support staff well-being. This could be in the way an office or shop is designed, or the way a school, train station or outdoor park adds value to the societies it serves. But this is a topic for a further article.

**Elina Grigoriou** HonRICS is Design & Sustainability Director, [Grigoriou Interiors](#)

### **Further information**

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