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- Abstract:** The author provides guidelines to employers on how to measure the effectiveness of their health and wellbeing initiatives in the workplace. She cites evidence that linked employees' wellbeing on performance and productivity in the workplace. She explains the benefits of the right approach to collecting, managing and using health and wellbeing data to measure the extent of the influence and what health interventions can bring the most positive effect on employees.
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Using data to direct employee wellbeing

WELLBEING

It is becoming increasingly popular for organisations to make significant investments in the health and wellbeing of their staff. But how can employers measure exactly what they are getting for their money? Jessica Colling reports.

Astute employers and HR teams in large organisations are rapidly realising that the state of their employees' wellbeing has a direct impact on performance and productivity in the

workplace.

Indeed, studies (Mills et al, 2006/7) have proven this link and highlighted the opportunity for returns in productivity that far outweigh the investment required in health and wellbeing solutions. The big-ticket health issues, such as stress and sleep, are proving to be productivity killers in many organisations. Businesses are becoming aware that a good degree of nurturing people into ruder health and, equally as important, a more positive state of mind about their health, can pay dividends for a brands reputation and its bottom line.

While many occupational health practitioners are active in health promotion, it is worth understanding how data can help to justify expenditure on wellbeing interventions. Often, this focuses exclusively on absence management, but there are other ways to use data gathered in wellbeing activities that can help focus these activities and achieve a better cost-benefit ratio.

Less absenteeism, lower healthcare costs, reduced staff turnover and headcount are all influenced by wellbeing, but one of the big problems is measuring the extent of that influence and what health interventions will have the most positive affect on employees.

When a workforce is large in number and geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse, it can be very hard for an organisation to get a picture of the effect of these measures on performance. Add that to the fact that health and wellbeing is seen as a personal and intangible concept and it is no surprise that there is a perception of difficulty in coming to clear conclusions about the issues, challenges, solutions and outcomes.

With the right approach to collecting, managing and using health and wellbeing data, quite the opposite is possible. HR directors should not be in any doubt that while health and wellbeing is about the benefit to the individual, this is only half the picture.

Health and wellbeing data can help an organisation get a lot more from the investment it puts in. This "new source" of information not only gives surprising insights into issues that can be affecting organisational performance, but also adds a new dimension to an organisation's broader business intelligence and forecasting. Data from a human capital management system might uncover that particular employee groups have a higher sickness absence rate than the norm, but it will not be able to tell if there are particular wellbeing issues at play. Being able to delve deeper into cause and effect is vital.

That is why data is considered one of the most important aspects of a successful health and wellbeing programme, from using it to get your approach and objectives right from the beginning to, ultimately, putting the data you discover into the heart of corporate performance management.

Worth the effort

Many organisations, especially those with large numbers of employees, implement online health and wellbeing programmes. There are two main reasons for this: first, to give employees

personal answers to their health and wellbeing questions and concerns; and second, to shape the kind of benefits and culture that will help turn wellbeing into a key business performance indicator.

Online programmes, such as vielife Online for example, require participants to take a detailed health assessment as the starting point for their programme. This provides the source data from which a picture of both personal and organisation-wide wellbeing can be established.

Before an organisation thinks about launching a programme, there are some questions to consider about what it wants to get out of the process, what it will need it for and what constitutes a representative sample. Part of this process has to be about looking at what is typical for the organisation, for example what kind of engagement is normal for staff satisfaction surveys.

This is important to determine the measure of success. For some organisations, 20% of employees taking an assessment and engaging in programmes is viewed as a good response, while others look for a response rate of 80%. Beyond statistical validity of data, there is no right amount - it usually depends on the cultural relevance of health and wellbeing in the organisation; it is not something that can be simply "glued on". Looking at employee engagement data around other employee benefits and initiatives that are provided is an excellent place to start pinpointing business goals and targets.

Satisfactory levels of engagement are also linked to carefully documenting and following the objectives of your wellbeing programme. Some organisations wish to concentrate on creating the data mainly for the individual employee as part of a benefits package, giving them a better insight into what health issues could be affecting them. While improvements targeted at individual employees are likely to have a positive knock-on effect for the organisation, the primary function of the data is "personal use and feedback". For these organisations, specific engagement rates might be less important if it is understood that not everyone will take part.

The second school of thought is where the central concern is sourcing aggregated information that highlights trends and multi-employee issues. Such data can be used to answer the bigger questions about whether the impact on productivity of interventions to achieve positive changes for the organisation as a whole are effective.

This priority might demand a more fixed benchmark on engagement in order to achieve a representative sample of employees, both overall and across different roles and locations, for comparative purposes.

So, considering these key data questions and objectives in advance is a critical success factor. It is the only real way of knowing why you are gathering information, what you need it for and in what quantity.

Gathering data

Once your employees start to sign up and complete assessments as part of an initial promotion, there should be a period of intensive data collection. At the end of this, you should be rewarded with a strong sample of information about the health and wellbeing issues affecting your staff.

This "first cut" is very important and it is essential that it is a good representation of your employees, not just those who are engaged with the wellbeing agenda. For this reason, engagement at the initial stage is critical to sourcing representative data that can offer an early picture of real health issues.

The organisation must target all types of people effectively, otherwise the first cut will be skewed towards more motivated employees and may be "too positive".

Once you have this first cut, deciding what to do with it is the next challenge. It is your base line telling you how well your staff think they are, but having a good set of comparators is essential in creating context. It is important to know how many of your employees are at risk for certain lifestyle behaviours; however, it is also useful to be able to compare this with other data sources, such as your wellbeing providers benchmark data, wellbeing data for the general population or broader information derived from global surveys such as the annual Working well report by Buck Consultants.

Do your employees have the same issues as most people? Are they more stressed? Do they get less sleep? Is their nutrition better or worse than average? Are they physically active? What may seem at first like shocking statistics can actually be relatively normal.

These early measures can help to build a picture of your organisations health, but it is important not to over-generalise. You must compare different factors to understand group variations and trends. These could include location, job role, age and gender, as well as correlations between different wellbeing measures such as physical activity and absence, or sleep and job satisfaction.

For large or global organisations, avoiding generalisation is important because there will be many geographical or cultural differences that must be considered. You must put smoking and nutrition data in the context of the employees nationality and culture, for example.

Making improver

The picture painted by the initial cut should be the basis for understanding where you are starting from, where you want to get to and how you are going to get there.

Understanding and interpreting the first of these areas - where you are starting from - requires a two-layered view. Seeking to comprehend the wider issues affecting the business to the greatest extent is vital, but so is insight into focused areas of concern, such as departments, locations or job roles that appear to buck the norm.

As the basis for prioritising your areas of action and attention, so that you do not flounder by trying to address every issue at once, data is crucial. Delving deep into areas of key concern is critical in dealing with the issues that have the biggest affect on business as well as finding the areas that are ripe for intervention and will demonstrate return on investment.

With your benchmark now clearly set, attention moves on to setting some targets for improvement; where, realistically, are you going to get to? While no two organisations are the same, having access to high-quality industry benchmark data from your health and wellbeing solutions provider is a key asset in understanding what changes are achievable.

The application of interventions, however, does require investment. You need to be sure that you are implementing interventions that address the most critical areas and that resonate with your employees. This is where your intimate knowledge of the organisation's culture needs to be combined with the expertise of your wellbeing provider to design interventions that suit the population. For example, if you have multiple workplace locations, you may need to have different interventions on different sites to address the same issue because of different ways of working.

By this point in the journey, your organisation should have a strong outlook on employee health and wellbeing, have identified the right measures for success and the interventions that will make a difference to your employees. You should now be on a path to seeing improvements and changes, but tracking the data remains important at this stage, for two main reasons.

First, the data that is being generated through the assessments and online programmes that your employees participate in should provide a direct and personal feedback loop to each individual. This informs them of the improvements they have made, highlighting new concerns or even updating them on where they sit on the health and wellbeing ladder. This constant loop is vital in ensuring that personal changes are permanent changes. The last thing you want is for the positive reinforcement to stop and the effort made by employees to follow suit.

Second, the aggregate data that you have at your disposal will be constantly changing as interventions are implemented and the course of events in your organisation shapes employee attitude and wellbeing. Therefore, it is important not to consider data as static. What was reported yesterday may not be the case today, and things will be different again tomorrow. While it is not necessary to have a real-time view of health and wellbeing information, it is essential to be able to view trends and changes over time.

You might not need to change your interventions but you may well need to make tweaks and adjustments along the way. You also need to be able to recognise when dramatic events in the organisation - such as redundancies, office moves, the loss of benefits or structural changes - have affected employee outlook and wellbeing.

Of course, going beyond a one-dimensional view of health and wellbeing data opens up a

whole new world of information, too. Analysis with other HR and business information answers new questions about the effect that health risks and your successful interventions are having on business costs and performance.

For example, comparing wellbeing data alongside data from the human capital management system - absenteeism, tenure, pay and benefits, for example - could show you where low wellbeing scores are affecting performance and where the successful resolution of issues has reduced staff absence.

It is not just HR data that can be brought into the analysis; comparing the wellbeing status of customer-service teams with customer-relationship management data could outline links between poor wellbeing and lower customer service. Being able to see this and act upon it may improve customer loyalty, leading to lower customer losses and increased sales.

Collecting, analysing and acting upon data are critical elements to any successful organisational change and employee health and wellbeing is no exception. It is not, as often is believed, hard to measure and manage.

On the contrary, it is at the heart of making successful and measured improvements, whether that is on a one-to-one personal level for individual employees or in terms of driving the big changes within your organisations culture.

Data is important before you begin a wellbeing programme, throughout the early stages and remains so through the course of your organisations life.

Once you're gripped by health and wellbeing data as a source of insight into performance, neither you nor many of your employees will want to let go.

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