

Building Workplace Wellness

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Building Workplace Wellness: The Basics

What do we mean by “building workplace wellness”?

When people talk about “workplace wellness” they are often thinking about specific health promotion or protection initiatives for employees. This might include things like access to health screening services through the workplace, supports for employees’ health needs (e.g., policies related to sick days, accommodations, or benefits), strategies to promote psychological safety, or ways to encourage work/life balance.

These kinds of initiatives are important: we can all imagine how wellbeing can be impacted by things like not having paid sick days or clear policies around workplace accommodations. However, having health and wellness programs in place doesn’t guarantee that people will use them. Lots of things can influence an employee’s capacity or willingness to engage with workplace programs, and one of the most important is the culture. We will explore the concept of culture and how your workplace can cultivate an environment that supports employee wellbeing.

“Workplace culture includes the norms, values, meanings, and beliefs that sculpt the expectations and behaviour of a workplace.”

– Canadian Standards Association, 2013

Why is it important?

“A survey of over 1,000 HR leaders reveals that workplace culture is the biggest roadblock to improving employee wellbeing and engagement.”

– Virgin Pulse, State of the Industry Employee Engagement report, 2018

Why might culture be a roadblock? Well, we know from research that people won’t use resources or access different kinds of support if they think there’s a penalty or risk associated with it. For that reason, the value attached to employee health and wellbeing has to be signalled very clearly and championed throughout an organization in order for it to be established as “normal” practice. As an employer, you have a much better chance of success where leadership, management, and co-workers understand the benefits of wellness and can collaboratively build a supportive culture.

“A working environment where employee health and safety is valued, supported and promoted through workplace health programs, policies, benefits, and environmental supports.”

– Centers for Disease Control, Resources, 2013

So what are the potential benefits for workplaces with a supportive wellness culture? Benefits for employers and employees include:

- Reduced workplace stress
- Increased staff retention
- Increased staff engagement and inclusion
- Increased likelihood of employees disclosing a health condition

It’s important to note that building a wellness culture isn’t just the responsibility of employers. Employees have an important role to play. For instance, accommodating an employee will have limited benefit if the employee’s colleagues behave differently towards them for getting “special treatment” or if the work environment is so stressful that an ergonomic work station won’t help minimize flare-ups.

Where can you start?

When it comes to building a wellness culture there’s no quick fix. That said, each step forward helps. The How to Support Wellness section provides suggestions to build incremental changes towards workplace wellness.

It is important to understand that having wellness programs doesn’t necessarily mean you have a supportive wellness culture in your workplace. You need to check in with your employees and see how they identify the workplace culture. Ask them if they a) know about the wellness initiatives you have available and b) think those initiatives are relevant and helpful to them.

Read on for more detailed information on arthritis, joint pain, and back pain in the workplace:

Key Factors

Supporting wellness in the workplace looks different in different contexts. Here are some elements that contribute to workplace wellness:

- **Leadership.** Although having a wellness culture is influenced by both employees and employers, without supportive leadership it is hard to support workplace wellness.
- **Communication.** How you communicate with your employees contributes to the workplace culture. This includes one-on-one and organization-wide communication. Communication is both impacted by, and impacts, the culture.
- **Work/life balance.** Employees and employers respect everyone’s need for work/life balance. This is reinforced by leadership demonstrating and supporting work/life balance.
- **Good working relationships.** Good relationships mean employees are comfortable approaching management, talking about their health with management, and talking to management about how to start the process to ask for an accommodation even if they don't know what the process is. When employees have good working relationships with their

colleagues, people tend to show empathy and understanding towards employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain rather than confusion, resentment, or mistrust.

- **Identifying what wellness looks like.** A wellness culture is supported when leadership has considered what wellness looks like in the workplace, included employees in developing that vision, and taken steps to support their employees (and themselves – it’s important to lead by example) to be healthy. This could mean having employee-assisted programs or providing a wellness space to stretch, meditate, or nap.
- **Workplace accommodations.** Having a clear process for requesting an accommodation, as well as general awareness and acceptance of flexibility and accommodations in the workplace, helps ensure that having an accommodation is not viewed as special treatment.

What does a wellness culture look like in schools?

We asked a number of school jurisdictions across Alberta to tell us about what they are doing to support workplace wellness:

- **Formalize wellness into a leadership role.** The *Director of Wellness & Human Services* acts as liaison between the school jurisdiction employees and their wellness.
- **Build a bridge between staff and administration.** Ensure that people in charge of health and wellness supports be visible and accessible. In the school jurisdictions, HR and administration staff are often in a central office. One school encourages their central office staff to visit the schools so that employees recognize who they are and know who they can go to if they have questions or need support.
- **Identify employees who are struggling.** Encourage managers, leaders, and wellness champions to engage with employees so they can tell if an employee seems to be struggling and needs some extra support.
- **Prepare a wellness Theme of the Month.** Send out a monthly newsletter letter that shares information about a specific condition or concern, highlights wellness resources available (e.g., how to maximize using their Employee Assistance Plan (EAP)), and promotes wellness events being offered.
- **Provide new employee onboarding.** As a part of the onboarding process, provide information about the wellness resources available, processes they may need to know, and contacts if they need support. Revisit this information periodically so that if someone needs it, they know where to go.
- **Build wellness into professional development.** This includes providing professional development related to wellness, but also incorporating wellness into professional development in general. For example, start sessions by checking in with people or have a standing item where people can share “what’s going well.”

Why is a Wellness Culture Important in the Workplace?

Every workplace has a culture. Culture is influenced by many factors including the norms, values, meanings, beliefs, and policies of management, employees, and the organization. We know that:

- Workplace culture influences employee satisfaction, engagement, productivity, and retention
- A wellness culture helps employees feel more comfortable about disclosing a health concern
- A wellness culture benefits all employees, not just those with arthritis or other health concerns

The four other website topics, (1) Education about arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, (2) Workplace processes, (3) Accommodations, and (4) Communication, are all elements that contribute to a wellness culture. In addition, if the culture *does not* support wellness, then actions in support of the other four themes will not be successful. Instead they will likely seem superficial or insincere.

What are the benefits for you and your employees?

A wellness culture makes a difference for employees:

- **Lower workplace stress.** Employees with chronic conditions usually experience higher workplace stress. By minimizing workplace stress, a wellness culture translates into increased productivity, fewer days missed, and reduced risk of workplace disability.
- **More flexible for employees with special needs.** A wellness culture means that people with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain feel less singled out. If resources are seen as acceptable and available to everybody, including those with health concerns, children, or a family member they are caring for, all employees will feel supported to come forward and access the resources available.
- **Increased disclosure.** Employees are more likely to disclose arthritis, joint pain, and back pain if other employees are seen as having been accommodated successfully. If employees can see that their colleagues with special considerations are supported, then they will likely be more open about their own health condition at work.
- **Increased employee loyalty and satisfaction.** When you invest in your employees, they feel invested in their workplace. In general, employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain want to work. If you make it easier for them to stay and manage their condition at work, it will likely increase their loyalty and job satisfaction. Further, overall team morale will be boosted if colleagues are seen as being treated fairly.

What difference does it make for you? *What's in it for you?:*

- **The culture affects you too.** Managers and bosses benefit from workplace cultures that support wellness as well. We're all human after all and are affected by those around us.
- **Better outcomes.** Having a focus on wellness in your workplace can also help with metrics that are important to you as an employer. These could include:
 - increased productivity
 - increased employee satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement
 - reduced absenteeism and presenteeism
 - reduced turnover

Stress and the work environment

Developing and maintaining a wellness culture is not just about what you bring to the workplace. It is also about the quality of the work environment in general.

A stressful workplace, whether it is because of the work, the environment, or personal stress, has a negative impact on all employees and is a leading cause of worker burnout. Stress has a particularly negative impact on employees with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain, who have a higher baseline of stress because they manage (and possibly hide) their condition at work. Stress has been known to cause flare-ups in people with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and can worsen symptoms for employees with other kinds of arthritis and pain. Some people have even noted that their RA first started at a time of extreme stress.

The workplace culture can have a significant impact on employee stress. While the culture cannot eliminate stress, there are things that you can do to help foster a supportive culture that minimizes workplace stress.

The Employee's Role

The workplace culture is influenced by leaders and employees. Here are some ways that employees can contribute to and support a wellness culture:

- Be engaged – involve your employees in identifying the workplace culture and identifying what kind of culture they would like in the workplace
- Use education/resources provided – give your employees the tools they need to be involved
- Contribute – encourage employees to use the resources available to them (e.g., accommodations) and support their colleagues to do the same

If employees are reluctant to be involved in your efforts to improve the workplace culture, take a look at why they aren't involved. Is it time? Capacity? Or interest? Understanding why they are not involved can give you powerful insight into the workplace culture and garner ideas of what areas to focus on.

Psychological health and safety

Discussion about a wellness culture also includes psychological health and safety. Organizational culture is one of the 13 factors that contribute to psychological health and safety in the workplace.

So, what is psychological health and safety?

“A workplace that promotes workers’ psychological well-being and actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless or intentional ways.”

– Canadian Standards Association, 2013

Supporting mental health in the workplace. While the primary focus of psychological safety addresses mental health in the workplace, having a workplace culture that is psychologically safe is one that also supports the wellness of its employees.

Supporting mental health also supports employees with arthritis. People with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain have a higher likelihood of having a comorbid (co-occurring) condition along with their arthritis.

- People diagnosed with arthritis, joint pain, and back pain are more likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety.
- A diagnosis of a chronic condition such as RA, lupus, or fibromyalgia may produce a profound sense of loss or despair and concern about their condition and anxiety in managing it.

How to Build a Wellness Culture

Start by taking a look at your existing workplace culture. The MiW Employer's Workplace Self-Assessment Tool gives you a quick picture of the wellness culture in your workplace. If you would like a more in-depth picture of your workplace culture, see the Tools and Resources page for additional literature and resources.

Low Score: Let's suppose that you have responded to the Workplace Self-Assessment Tool and found that you don't know what the culture in your workplace is and if it supports wellness. That's OK. You can begin to understand your workplace culture by asking yourself some of the questions listed below.

Medium to High Score: Even if you already know about workplace culture, it may be helpful to ask yourself and other employees these questions. Take a moment to look at what you are doing to contribute to workplace culture and what is, and what is not, working.

Remember, a workplace culture may seem different to different people, so when reviewing the culture in your workplace make sure that you get input from other employees (managers and employees).

Culture questions:

1. Where are you at?

- **What culture do you have in your workplace?** Stop and think about it – what is your existing workplace culture? Have you spoken to others? How do they see the culture in your workplace? The Employer Workplace Self-Assessment Tool can help you reflect on how your workplace culture supports health and wellness. You may also want to look at whether your organizational culture is positive or negative, and why.
 - What is being done in your workplace to contribute to a wellness culture?
 - What are some signs that you have a positive workplace culture?
 - What are you doing that may contribute to a negative workplace culture?

2. Where do you want to be?

If and when you know what the culture *is* in your workplace, decide what culture you *want* in your workplace.

- **What culture do you want?** You need a clear vision of what a wellness culture will look like in your workplace. You can only move forward if you can see where you're going. Be concrete and specific; saying "a wellness culture" is not enough. If you don't know what a

wellness culture looks like in your workplace, how will you know once you have arrived at one?

- **Who is involved?** Wellness must be embedded and managed at all levels of the organization. This means that if you are trying to make a culture change in your workplace you need to have buy-in from leadership as well as the employees. ***It is important to involve your employees when defining what a wellness culture looks like in your workplace.***
- **What are you willing to give up?** Creating a wellness culture means that you will have to make changes. Those changes include not only what you *need to do*, but also what you may need to *give up* to allow that culture to change. For example, increased flexibility can be very helpful for employees with arthritis, but, to provide increased flexibility means you will have to give up some control.

3. Identify what needs to change

Once you know what your current culture looks like and have a concrete idea of what you would like your workplace culture to be, identify what needs to change for you to get there.

- **Start with the low-hanging fruit.** There are likely some quick, easy, and inexpensive changes that could easily help move towards a wellness culture. For instance, is it policy that your employees need to call-in sick? Provide an alternate option where they can email or text instead.
- **Identify the most important changes.** What are the most important changes that need to take place to support a wellness culture? Be careful not to shut down an idea just because you don't think it will work; see if there is anything that can be done, and if not, break down the idea and see if there is any other way that you can reach the same goal with a different method. If you can't change something, acknowledge it and explain why to your employees why. Be open, honest, and transparent.
- **Or, is it just about communication?** Reviewing your workplace culture may help you uncover some really great resources that employees don't know about or have forgotten about. If the communication is lost, what is the issue? Is it the delivery? The relevance? ***It is important to identify what actually needs fixing before trying to fix it.***

4. Make a plan

Now that you know what you need to do, here is how you do it:

- **Plan what you're going to do.** Make sure that you have concrete actions that link to concrete outcomes. Don't just say, "improve communication about wellness." Your plan should say "Employees don't know what wellness resources exist and to fix this we will: 1) make sure supervisors review wellness resources in 1:1 meetings, 2) offer webinars showing what resources are available and how to access them, 3) have a link to wellness resources on the intranet site with a rotating example of resources available."
- **Is it working?** Make sure that you have a way of telling if your plan is working. What does success look like? After you have tried something, make sure you check back in with your workforce and see if your actions have made a difference or if you should try something else. Opening this dialog won't only give you feedback on your strategies but hopefully will also move the wellness conversation and culture forward as employees see your investment and dedication to investing in a wellness culture.

Having a wellness culture in the workplace means that you have built awareness around wellness at work – this means not only sharing preventative information about health conditions, but also encouraging staff, colleagues, and managers to recognize if an employee is struggling and could use help. Sometimes recognizing and acknowledging challenges and providing non-judgemental support, while directing the employee towards available support, can be a critical first step in supporting your employees and also reinforcing a culture that prioritizes employee health and wellness.

For more information about building workplace wellness, visit our online *Tools and Resources* for articles and links: <http://makingitworkforemployers.ca/tools-and-resources/>