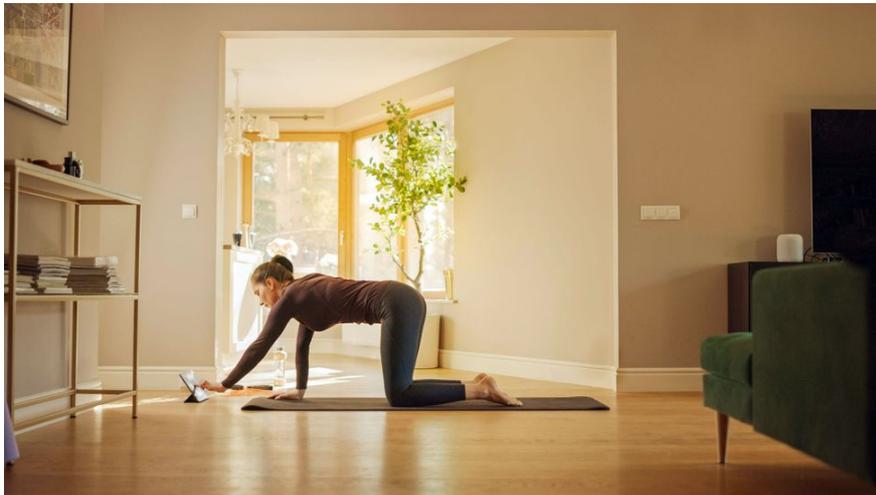


## Can companies actually help workers stay happy and healthy?



**By Kate Morgan**

More employers are providing mental-health benefits to employees. But is this what workers want – and can they actually help keep people well?

When Eliza, 31, first went to work at a large US investment firm six years ago, it was a “we don’t talk about our feelings at work’ kind of place”, says Eliza, who is withholding her surname for job-security concerns. “It’s money, so it’s all about numbers, numbers, numbers. There was no place for a compassionate work culture. That’s what I felt like I worked in for years.”

While the job came with benefits – gym access, catered lunches, happy hours – “it was never like, ‘oh, we have to actually care for people in their lives’”, she says. But two or three years ago, Eliza noticed things beginning to change. “The company started hosting workshops and classes on how to take care of yourself, improve your sleep hygiene, that kind of thing. They were creating a forum to talk about mental health.”

There is a growing expectation, experts say, for companies to take responsibility for supporting employees’ emotional stability. And although a shift towards mental health benefits began before the pandemic, the challenges of the past year have made mental health at work a more pressing concern than ever.

“Workplace mental health was at an inflection point prior to the pandemic,” says Kelly Greenwood, CEO of Mind Share Partners, a San Francisco-based workplace training firm. “I think because of the pandemic, and the dire need to support people through its challenges, that has accelerated.”

In theory, the support is long overdue. But it’s not as straightforward as workers receiving new benefits, then easily finding improved mental health. As these programmes roll out across companies, the reality is that it’s more complicated to

address wellness with employees, and that these adjustments may simply be the tip of the iceberg for keeping employees safe, healthy and happy.



### New benefits, old fears?

In recent years, and across industries, an increasing number of companies have begun adding wellness and mental health care resources to employee benefit packages.

During the pandemic, those offerings have increased exponentially. According to the 2021 Employee Wellness Industry Trends report from Wellable, a company that designs corporate wellness programmes, 88% of companies in the United States are investing more in mental health. More than 80% are spending more on stress-management and resilience resources, and more than half of the companies surveyed are offering new mindfulness and meditation programmes. The report indicates that: “These programmes have been growing in popularity in recent years, and the unique challenges created by COVID-19 have only accelerated the demand. Bereavement, isolation, loss of income, and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones. Encouragingly, employers are taking notice.”

Eliza, who’s seen an increase in the number of wellness programmes, classes and workshops at her investment firm, feels “the pandemic forced this urgency, like, we’re literally going to lose people quickly if we don’t do something”, she says. “We’ve seen more policy changes this year than in the last six years that I’ve worked here. They’ve added a ton of benefits. They’ve added childcare benefits, increased leave policies. Parents were saying, ‘it is impossible for me to work from home. The company swiftly answered that with, ‘our benefits have increased: we will cover up to 80% of in-home childcare’.”

But, while companies are recognising the need, and increasingly providing benefits like access to wellness apps, telehealth therapy sessions and mindfulness programmes, there’s no guarantee workers will take advantage.

*Do I want classes on meditation? Yes. But do they move the needle on the stuff that matters, that will actually change the way an employee feels? No – Eliza*

In many workplaces, a more traditional divide between the personal and professional persists, and lingering stigma keeps many people from even bringing up mental health with their colleagues or bosses. “People are still afraid they won’t get the job or get promoted if they talk about it,” says Barbara Harvey, global lead for inclusion and diversity research at the UK’s Accenture Research. Workers may be concerned that even ostensibly private resources, like virtual access to a therapist, won’t remain totally under wraps if they’re governed by management. And many are uncomfortable engaging authentically in workshops or seminars with their colleagues and bosses listening in.

Laura, a 32-year-old working at a start-up, who has similarly asked to withhold her surname, agrees. “Leadership thinks what people want is to have the forum to break down or talk,” she says, “but that’s backward. People don’t want to really open up to their colleagues, and if they did, they probably wouldn’t do it at a company workshop.”

Simply, employees may not want to opt into corporate wellness programmes because these resources are not entirely the right kind of help. “Do I want classes on meditation? Yes. But do they move the needle on the stuff that matters, that will actually change the way an employee feels? No,” says Eliza.



*Despite more conversation about wellness in the workplace, many workers still feel sheepish about going to HR or a supervisor about mental-health struggles (Credit: Alamy)*

An environmental adjustment

Still, Harvey says any mental health resources are a net positive: “I won’t disparage the apps, or the mindfulness programmes.”

But while those are nice extras, she says that what employees really require are measures that address the root causes of their need for mental health help in the first place. It’s well intentioned, but not good enough, says Harvey, for companies to provide resources that are reactive, designed to help someone already in distress. “If you’re not doing that alongside creating a supportive work environment, then you’re not resolving the problem, you’re just putting a plaster on it,” she says. “The two have to go hand-in-hand.”

This means instituting proactive policies like flexible hours and schedules as well as investing in relationship building among teams and between managers and employees. These, plus regular assessment of whether there’s balance between job loads and the resources workers have to complete them, all contribute to meaningfully lower levels of stress, anxiety and burnout.

“We have mental-health days, but everything’s reactive, not proactive. When you offer a mental-health day because you can see someone’s burnt out, but you don’t lighten the workload, it makes the stress worse,” says Laura. “It’s a noble start, but it’s not a lot of putting your money where your mouth is. I think fundamentally that would start with truly lightening the workload.”

*If you’re not doing that alongside creating a supportive work environment, then you’re not resolving the problem, you’re just putting a plaster on it – Barbara Harvey*

In a recent study, Harvey’s research team found the six criteria that make a supportive organisation, ranging from work-life balance to how safe employees would feel disclosing a mental-health condition to colleagues and leadership. “In supportive organisations, the incidence of mental-health issues dropped by 40%, and workers there felt almost twice as likely to be able to cope with the everyday stresses of work,” she says.

And employers that focus on creating a more supportive overall culture may find their employees more willing to take advantage of the other wellness benefits the company is investing in. In supportive organisations, Harvey’s team found, people found it easier to talk about mental health, and were more likely to know where to go for help and advice.

Ultimately, although some workers are grateful for the extra corporate support with wellness benefits, many experts and workers alike feel there’s an extra step necessary: structural change. So, what actually may make the biggest impact is building work cultures that aren’t just *not bad* for mental health, but that actively promote and contribute to wellbeing.

“In the most supportive workplaces,” says Harvey, “individuals were four times more likely to say, ‘work is good for my mental health’. So much of what work offers is good for our mental state. It gives us a sense of purpose, camaraderie, connection, a feeling we’re achieving something. If you can manage the stress, and you’re given the resources you need, you get these places that are actually really good for you.”

Eliza agrees that resources are nice, but change is really the answer. “All you have to do is ask your employees what they need. And they’ll say, ‘I need to work less hours. I need to be compensated enough to pay for childcare and groceries and to meet my needs. I need more resources at work to do my job. I need to feel safe when I need time off. I need to not be afraid that I’ll fall behind’.”