

Mental health

Wellbeing moves into the workplace

More companies are trying to help improve staff health



The UK government is backing workplace wellness schemes: 'Investing in workplace inclusivity, health and wellbeing is critical' it says
JULY 7, 2017 Darren Dodd

As [ageing populations](#), cost inflation and tight budgets constrain national health spending, more governments are looking to companies to fill gaps in provision that are opening up.

Corporate wellness schemes are firmly established in the US, where companies are the main funders of medical care for staff and so eager to promote better health to keep insurance premiums low. Businesses beyond the US are also keen to develop welfare strategies to reduce absenteeism and improve productivity.

Such workplace schemes are typically designed to offer support and incentives to staff aimed at reducing health risks such as smoking, stress, inactivity and obesity before illness occurs.

The [Global Wellness Institute](#), a non-profit group, says the world market for workplace schemes is worth \$43bn and that the majority of these are based in the US and Europe.

Patrick Watt, corporate director for Bupa — a leading UK wellness provider — is confident that the business case for corporate wellness services has been won. “The question is not now whether to invest but where to invest and what to invest in,” he says.

Critics say workplace wellness schemes are mainly taken up by those who are already healthy and add that they could make some workers more stressed as they try to keep up with highly motivated

colleagues. Others say there is no proof that companies receive any return from such programmes.



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However, a UK government policy consultation last year on [work, health and disability](#) illustrates the increased role it sees for business in preventing illness. The green paper called for “jobs that actively support and nurture health and wellbeing, provided by inclusive employers who understand the link between work, health and disability”.

Among initiatives praised in the report were Barclays’ “This is Me” campaign to build awareness of mental health problems, which has now spread to more than 70 organisations across London.

“Businesses drive our economy and are rightly focused on growth, productivity and delivering a return on their investments. Investing in workplace inclusivity, health and wellbeing is critical to these goals,” the government said.

Given talk of mental health in the workplace used to be almost taboo, “to think that businesses are now prepared to have an on-site psychologist is quite incredible”, Bupa’s Mr Watt says.

Many companies are using schemes such as [Mental Health First Aid](#), which was developed in Australia but is now available around the world, to train staff to spot and help colleagues who may be suffering mental health problems. The UK arm of [Lend Lease](#) became a founder member of London’s City Mental Health Alliance in 2013 and says every project and office now has a mental health first aider working in it.

Wellness schemes also promote better physical health. For example, more than 1,200 workers in 30 countries have signed up to ING’s “wellbeing quotient” project. The Dutch bank provides education, monitoring and coaching in six-month blocks focusing on nutrition, physical activity, sleep and relaxation.

Participants receive a fitness tracker that measures steps, heartbeat, calories burnt, activity and body fat. They have access to expert trainers that include former Olympic athletes who assist staff on their wellness “journey”.

Paul Litchfield, chair of [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#), a campaign body backed by the UK government, says workplace health support has become important to younger people who are

likely to work into their 70s.

“If we want to get the best people then we’ve got to appeal to what they’re interested in and they’re interested in wellbeing,” he says.

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