

The Rise Of The Chief Wellbeing Officer



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Leadership Strategy

I cover positive change for individuals and organizations.

In these unprecedented times, comprehensive wellbeing (mental, emotional, physical, financial and professional) in the workplace is so important. How we support ourselves, and how we support others within our businesses - such as business partners, clients and contacts - is crucial. The good news is that companies are progressively making the care of their people a top priority.

Does this mean there is a new opportunity to create a C-suite position and prioritize wellbeing rather than burying the position in the traditionally compliance-based HR function? The answer is yes, and many health systems across the country are already establishing a new executive position, what they call a Chief Wellness Officer, as a strategy to address the burnout epidemic among physicians and other clinicians.

Jonathan Ripp MD, MPH, Chief Wellness Officer at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, said there were only a handful of Chief Wellness Officer positions when he was appointed to the role in May 2018. "There has been at least a dozen more who have been named in the past year, and several more places that are looking to create the position," said Dr. Ripp. "I would not be surprised if, 10 years from now, it's commonplace for most large organizations to have a Chief Wellness Officer or equivalent, taking this challenge on, and doing so in a way that is effective."

There is even a [course offered at Stanford](#) where participants can learn:

- Leadership skills to spearhead their organization's physician wellness efforts
- Knowledge and hands-on experience developing a customized strategic plan to build and sustain a physician well-being program for their organization
- Expertise in the principles and applications that contribute to physician well-being including creating an efficient practice environment, cultivating personal resilience, and developing an organizational culture that fosters engagement and professional fulfillment (i.e. a culture of wellness)

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I too hope that Dr. Ripp is right and that the Chief Wellness or Wellbeing Officer expands to other industries outside of medicine. There was a [great article 11 years ago](#) highlighting the importance of the Chief Wellbeing Officer role within corporate America, not just in hospitals, so why has it taken so long for this to become a reality?

Maybe the reality of a wellbeing specialist in the workplace is finally emerging because we are finally understanding that wellbeing, and the work of a CWO, starts with purpose or at least is enhanced when people have purpose.

Purpose in the Workplace

A clear sense of purpose is not only beneficial in terms of productivity and performance, but also for the overall well-being and happiness of your workforce. Teams that truly thrive are bound by a collective respect for the company vision and values and are united in a higher sense of purpose in their work. Gallup has done extensive research on how important purpose for employees within the workplace is. They have data illustrating how when employees learn about their organization's purpose it can help them [discover their own purpose](#) and even enhance their contributions to their organization and team. You may have resources like this at your company, but if not, then it is really up to you to be the change you want to see in the world.

We could all learn a lesson from the Japanese concept; Ikigai (pronounced ee-key-guy) which essentially means "a reason for being." It's made from two Japanese words: iki, meaning "life" and kai, meaning "effect, result, worth or benefit." Combined: "a reason for living." Stuart Taylor highlighted this in a [2019 Inside HR column](#), stating that uncovering this ideal on an individual level and driving it in an organization is critical to success. Searching for a clear and driving purpose in our lives, or one's Ikigai, is something humans have been in pursuit of for generations. It is becoming increasingly apparent that purpose plays a key role in the health of employees and the overall success of an organization.

A workplace culture thrives when an organization and its employees identify and nurture their collective purpose. It has also been found that knowing your purpose leads to numerous benefits including improved health and longevity, sleep, mental health, cognitive function, resilience and much more. If this is a surprise to you, check out [Vic Strecher's story on Kumano](#). These benefits improve individuals' lives and allow them to show up when there are increasing demands, deadlines and even pandemics. Purpose is powerful in the workplace, but it needs to be nurtured, and this is where a Chief Wellbeing Officer comes in. This position can work extensively to foster IKIGAI, both personally and professionally.

The Specifics of a CWO

So, what does the reality of a Chief Wellbeing Officer as part of a C-suite look like?

Ideally, both the CHRO (Chief Human Resources Officer) and CWO would work closely and collaboratively just as the President and CEO work together strategically but have different goals and strengths. According to a four decade corporate wellbeing veteran, [Dee Edington](#), he explains, "together these functions can work together to awakening individuals and organizations to their full potential and taking wellness and well-being to a higher level where context and people matter and creating where shared values equal shared results.

Here are a few examples of what a CWO skill set **may** look like:

- Integrating Wellbeing and Firm Performance: The CWO is responsible for creating and maintaining a system-wide culture of wellbeing by working with the C-suite, middle management, and employees to create and maintain the culture and ethos of wellbeing and have business acumen. This means integrating the professional, personal, physical and even financial wellbeing of each employee, as well as embedding this into the larger business strategy. The CWO would also be focused on co-creating a well-built environment either virtual, hybrid or in office. This role would also work cross-functional across division and department to ensure that we muster our courage and act in the service of good and can continue an upward trajectory of human wellbeing and development. This is a strategic role, that is a role that collaboratively collects and analyzes data, performs strategic and annual planning, supports and co-creates developing quality leaders, facilitates a supportive climate, deploys quality, effective and

relevant programs, resources and programs and focuses on quality improvement relentlessly.

- **Experience and Knowledge:** 10-15 years of experience with proven track record of setting strategic vision, understanding of deploying powerful yet inclusive cultural transformation, influencer for C-suite, as well as middle management and front-line employees, extensive knowledge of the employee experience, behavioral modification, business acumen, and passion.
- **Visionary, Creative, Empathetic, Collaborative, Influencer**

Here are a few general examples of how a CHRO/CPO skills/experience may differ:

- **Human Resource Strategy:** The Chief Human Resource Officer (**CHRO**) is responsible for developing and executing human resource strategy in support of the overall business plan and strategic direction of the organization, specifically in the areas of succession planning, talent management, change management, organizational and performance.
- **Strong analytical and problem-solving skills:** Strong supervisory and leadership **skills**. Thorough knowledge of employment-related laws and regulations. Knowledge of and experience with varied **human resource** information systems.
- **10-15 years** with recruiting & retaining top talent, total compensation and & benefits, training and development, compliance, diversity & inclusion
- **Creative, Tactical, Compliance Oriented, Collaborative, Influencer**

Although there is still much progress to be made, there are a few organizations that are role modeling the way in our brave new world. With increasing concern from businesses leaders regarding employee wellbeing, the role of Chief Wellbeing Officer is gaining popularity. [Deloitte](#), and [Kirkland & Ellis LLP](#) were among the leading firms that appointed well-being leaders in 2015. Deloitte realized the importance and created a chief well-being officer in the US, [Jen Fisher](#). Jen drives the strategy and innovation around work-life, health, and wellness to empower Deloitte's people to be well so they can perform at their best in both their professional and personal lives. In the words of Fisher, "It's not that the person in that position does everything, but they lead a team responsible for wellbeing. And by being in the C suite, it makes a statement that the organization takes this seriously and is willing to devote resources to a cultural transformation not a program."

So, in considering the importance of a Chief Wellbeing Officer keep in mind the opportunity to develop as a company and consider the words of none other than Albert Einstein. "We will not solve current or future problems with the knowledge and tools we used to solve past problems." The time for the rise of the Chief Wellbeing Officer is now and it has never been more clear that an organization's' competitive advantage that is inimitable, is their people.

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