



Wellness strategies for a post-pandemic world



Post Covid: Wellness at Work

In this article on the effects of the pandemic on mental health in the workplace, we speak to **Helen Disney** of The Realization Group, **Alicia Ariffin** of SteelEye, **Richard Crook** of DASL, **Anna Zanghi** of Futur-o, **Toby Babb** of Harrington Starr, **Celine Crawford** of Smarkets and **Chloe Barrett** of Chloe Louise Wellbeing about how managers will be expected to support the mental health of staff as they return to work, as well as what skills companies will have to equip their management teams with to help them navigate the tumultuous journey ahead back to the workplace.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created mental health challenges from isolation at all levels of society. As we start to return to a sense of normality, we discuss how the workplace may look post-lockdown. Companies have faced a particular pressure, in continuing to perform and to support and underpin economic activity, whilst supporting individual employees to cope with the demands of working from home whilst home-schooling and caring for children, social isolation and uncertainty about the future. Now they face a new challenge, supporting staff in the return to the workplace, including their mental wellbeing on this journey. Previously overlooked, the mental health of staff is now recognised as being vital in ensuring the smooth continued operation of companies.

Organisations are defined by their leadership. Leadership sets the culture, tone and values which then permeate down and through the wider organisation. The strongest organisations are those with leaders who actively define the culture and values that they want to espouse to both employees and clients and take steps to ensure that these are instilled across the organisation and we are seeing many companies step up to proactively support their staff on this next step out of the pandemic.





As lockdown measures begin to lift, staff will be looking to employers to provide guidance during these uncertain times. We look at what may be expected and what you can do to support your staff during this transition.

Anna Zanghi, who has over 25 years' experience in the financial services industry, and now specialises in employee well being and work design, believes that going back to some semblance of the normal we knew is an illusion.

The year or more remote working experiment, which we have all lived through, has caused employees to question what they want their work to look like going forward. But what does that mean for employers and their management teams? "The tricky part seems to be that each employee has different needs", she says, "Those who enjoyed remote working, want to continue to have that flexibility. Whereas those who felt disconnected and lonely during lockdown want to go back to benefit from the social contact, sense of inclusion, renewing relationships and feeling like they belong to something bigger. So, what is right for one person, will not be right for the entire workforce."



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Anna Zanghi, Co-Founder of Futur-o

And she is not alone in this viewpoint, **Alicia Ariffin**, Head of People and Culture at SteelEye sees the importance of communication with teams to ensure understanding of what individual staff will want going forward; "communication and collaboration across all teams remains a priority to discuss how employees want to be supported when transitioning back to the office. Post pandemic work life has allowed us to see that being in the office 9-5, 5 days a week is not a necessity and we have been able to adopt a more hybrid work model as a company and our staff have benefited from the flexibility that this offers."

Returning to office life isn't all doom and gloom though, as Health and Wellbeing Coach, **Chloe Barrett** explains; "while we seem to talk a lot about the negative mental health effects of returning to work, there seems to be little discussion about the positive aspects. Those who have struggled with the social isolation of working from home will benefit from the routine and inclusion of the workplace."

Ariffin agrees, saying "I also feel it is important to focus on the positives of returning to the office environment, we have seen that being able to meet and discuss ideas in person does seem to help ensure consistent, higher quality of work and to strengthen the culture across our organisation.



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Alicia Ariffin, Head of People and Culture at SteelEye



And the positive effects of returning to work don't stop there, the optimists out there see the potential that uncertainty provides, with an opportunity arising for us all to jointly innovate and co-create a new way of working. We are especially seeing this among the entrepreneurially minded companies in fast paced digital sectors where agility is a core competency. **Richard Crook**, founder of DASL has adopted this way of thinking by signing up for a company membership at The Birch Community, a modern country club that allows the team to meet all together with the use of workspace in a fresh environment. "This often means us working in a teepee surrounded by nature, giving the team a relaxing place to work and creative space to think", says Crook. With such a membership, the staff are then able to access other facilities at the venue that support their mental health, such as the pool and many community activities on offer from yoga to pottery, allowing us to give them extra benefits to working with us," Crook explains, "The pandemic gave many a radical shift in work patterns. The more we thought about it the more we saw an opportunity to experiment with new patterns rather than force our people back to old patterns."



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Helen Disney, Principal Consultant at The Realization Group also mentions the positive impact that the pandemic will have on worklife; "Now that we are coming back into offices, my hope is that more managers will continue to take this more nuanced approach recognising that perhaps for those living alone, returning to the office will be a huge boost to their mental health and a chance for more social interaction while for those juggling family life or other caring responsibilities, a more flexible approach may still work best. At The Realization Group we have supported a hybrid of working from home and the office to great success even before COVID hit, so we have a healthy approach to this as part of our working culture."



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Helen Disney, Principal Consultant at The Realization Group

Companies are noticing how employees are looking at the 'whole package', which in turn also leads to a questioning and re-evaluation of their relationship with their employer. The level of humanity, support and overall culture of wellbeing and concern for employee mental and physical health that was exhibited pre & during the pandemic will have a huge effect on talent retention and loyalty... "Is this the kind of company I want to work for?" will be on the minds of young, coveted and easily mobile talent.

Toby Babb, Founder and CEO of FinTech recruitment company, Harrington Starr, sees this change as "an encouraging legacy of the pandemic that will leave a far greater focus on employee experience, flexibility and wellness," he goes on to say that he has "seen companies begin to recognise that while a fair and competitive salary is important, the work done on ensuring the flexibility, balance and overall holistic package to get the best from every employee can have far greater return on both retention and attraction of the best talent in the sector."



Disney also acknowledges this shift in perception, mentioning how the pandemic has helped us all to recognise that having a job and being professional doesn't have to mean robotically pretending that nothing else in life matters except work; "For me, one of the positives to come from the pandemic has been increased awareness that personal and domestic life inevitably blends with – and influences – professional life. Before, it would have been unthinkable for people to mention they had to answer the door, bring children or pets into a work call or arrive on a video call from a holiday location. Everyday life has now been more widely accepted as part of professional life and a greater sense of kindness and understanding has come into play. As someone who has worked remotely for many years, precisely in order to balance that kind of juggling of family and professional life, I am really glad to see it being acknowledged. Positive mental health involves being honest about life's challenges."

Zanghi agrees, saying; "What is interesting to see is that employees are not only questioning the physicality of work, but there is an underlying deeper questioning around the "what I am doing" too. A questioning around whether their work is meaningful enough and if it provides them with the sense of purpose that is fulfilling and makes them happy. This will be much harder for employers to tackle, but for staff retention, it is an area that must be looked at."



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Toby Babb, Founder and CEO of Harrington Starr

Where this new responsibility will fall is yet to be seen, but many companies have proactively started to get those lines of support in place, both for the staff themselves and those who will be expected to pick up the new role. We asked **Celine Crawford**, Chief Communications Officer at Smarkets, who she thought would take responsibility for the mental health of staff; "Managers should be expected to support the mental health of their staff, after all it will positively affect the business. If managers want to get best from their staff, they will have to invest in supporting their teams overall wellbeing. At Smarkets we are proactively responding to this and have already started to train our managers in how to support their staff in this way, by offering Mental Health First Aid training to all our team leads. We are supporting our management teams so they feel equipped to deal with post pandemic issues that will, no doubt, arise. We also understand that some staff may need a little more support and have introduced a scheme that pays for 75% of any counselling employees may need at any time, for any reason."



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Celine Crawford, Chief Communications Officer at Smarkets

Zanghi points out that the task facing leaders going forward is recognizing they do not have all the answers and that they do not know clearly what the new normal is going to look like due to the complexity of hybrid work models and their ramifications on policies, practices, etc. "It is going to be experimenting and learning as they go and the best way to do it is in partnership with their employees – this will bridge the gap that exists between employers wanting to regain a semblance of normality and control while getting many staff back to the workplace v.s. the employees wanting the work experience to be very different to what it was, taking into account the changed reality."



Barrett feels that while managers should lead the way with this, these are people skills we all need to gain for post-pandemic life; “How we handle each other as people should not be specific just to managers but something each of us should return to the office aware of. We all have to understand that the pandemic has instilled highly charged emotions such as fear, grief and anger, which can in some cases cause us to act in ways that to others might seem irrational. This is where skills such as understanding, empathy and compassion come in to support each other, without judgement, and create an environment where we can better adjust to yet another new normal.”

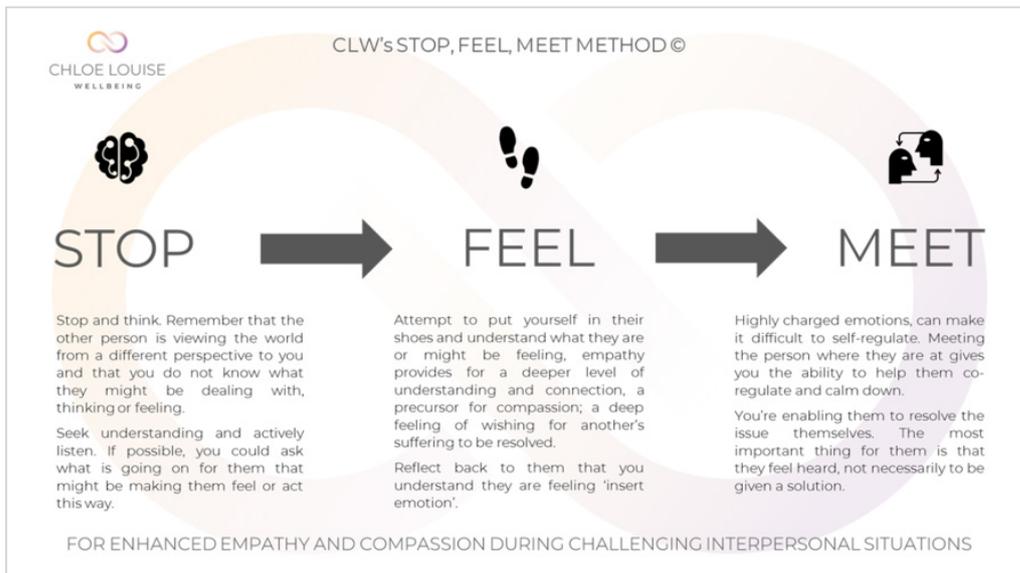
“We don’t necessarily have to agree with each other, but we do need to respect the viewpoint that another’s reality is being shaped by. It is important to bear in mind the different challenges we have all faced over the last year and a half and remember that you don’t always know what someone else is dealing with, or has been through, and therefore why they might be behaving in a certain way. Being mindful of this, and supporting employees, and each other, will not only benefit the work environment, but support key factors such as productivity and staff retention during a time where many are suffering.”



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Chloe Barrett, Health and Wellbeing Coach at CLW

CLW believes that there needs to be a clear procedure in place so everyone in the workplace knows how to handle challenging or highly emotionally charged situations that may occur and have created a 3 step plan for managers and employees alike:



Zanghi concludes; “This should not deter the entrepreneurs out there, nor should it be daunting for companies of any size. In the same way companies have been successful in listening to the needs and expectations of clients and delivering seamless digital services and experiences as a result – this new normal will simply mean listening to the needs and expectations of their employees and co-creating the best model for their specific organization going forward – one where mental health and wellbeing is designed into work and the overall employee experience.”



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