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Research Question

What do business leaders and HR professionals need to know and do to support employee well-being in a post-COVID world given the aftereffects on mental health?

Introduction

A 2020 study by Willis said that 92 percent of employees reported an increased level of anxiety due to the pandemic, often caused by challenges in balancing work and home obligations.[1] To support employees, a company should first understand what they need through creating a culture of open communication. Next, it should develop programs and interventions that meet employees' mental health needs. Third, the company should ensure that the structure of the workplace is accommodating to employees needs through increased flexibility. Last, a company must track its impact through effective measures of progress. This executive summary equips business leaders and HR professionals with the tools to support employees.

Creating a Culture of Mental Health Awareness

The biggest hurdle to overcome before implementing practical resources and tools to help employees care for their mental health is changing the collective mindset around the topic. Executive leaders, such as chief administrative officers, can act in breaking the stigma of mental health.[2] These leaders can openly communicate about the topic and, perhaps, even their own challenges as related to aftereffects of the pandemic. A government organization in Texas, TCMA, requires members to devote at least two hours on a bi-yearly basis with either a mental health counselor or doing mental health training.[2] This recommendation can be set off as an expectation early on by writing it in the employment contract for a company to efficiently care for its most important assets–its people.

Another aspect of cultivating a culture of mental health advocacy is emphasizing social connections. While this was of utmost importance when all employees were working remotely, this is still critical in hybrid models. Over half of organizations in a study (see infographic in Appendix 1) aimed to emphasize employee resource groups and encourage discussion on the topic of mental health.[3]

Interventions that Allow Employees to Overcome Pandemic-related Stressors

Organizational and individual interventions are two approaches to designing well-being initiatives at work. The former includes employee assistance programs, mental health first aid training, and expanding insurance benefits to include reimbursement or coverage of mental health issues.[4] The latter addresses individuals within a larger organizational context, geography, or business unit and focuses on enabling and empowering employees to meet their needs in a more holistic manner.

Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs): One higher education institution created a meditation app called the Healthy Minds Program (HMP), which was specifically designed by researchers to elevate employees' levels of individual awareness, reduce psychological distress, promote connection with others in the office, and attach meaning and purpose to work.[5] A 4-week intervention using the program's framework (see Appendix 2) was found to significantly improve well-being and reduce psychological distress in school system employees. Digital MBIs are now widely being adopted as a corporate strategy for addressing workforce mental health challenges[6] with some organizations even designating in-office meditation rooms to promote mindfulness at work.[7]

Employee Wellness Sessions: Research suggests that offering organization-wide wellness programs that cover topics such as stress/anxiety management, work life balance, working from home, nutrition and exercise, and grief and loss can empower employees to take ownership of pandemic-related stressors into their own hands.[8] A health system with 30,000 employees implemented a behavioral health consultant (BHC)-led program that offered sessions on these topics (see Appendix 3 for the most frequently attended topics) and found 92% of its 1300+ participants were satisfied and would attend future sessions. Furthermore, BHCs refined the topics based on employee feedback and tailored the sessions to specific audiences, which caused a boost in employee participation.[8]

Offering Flexibility

To improve their culture in relation to wellbeing, 73 percent of employers in the 2020 Willis' COVID-19 survey said that they offer flexible work schedules to take some burden off employees.[1] Additionally, to further address anxiety and loneliness, 85 percent of employers have increased their encouragement of video conferencing.[3] These companies are using technology and flexibility to ease the added burden on employees and to make their transition back to the office smoother. It gives employees the freedom to care for their personal well-being and make their work accommodate their personal lives.

A hot topic within this concept of flexibility is working remotely, or at least in a hybrid model. In a 2021 State of Remote Work survey, nearly all respondents indicate that they want to work remotely at least part of the time.[9] It is crucial for companies to empower teams to collaborate and discern what works best for their employees. This can mean flexing time, early Fridays, and long lunches, amongst other things.
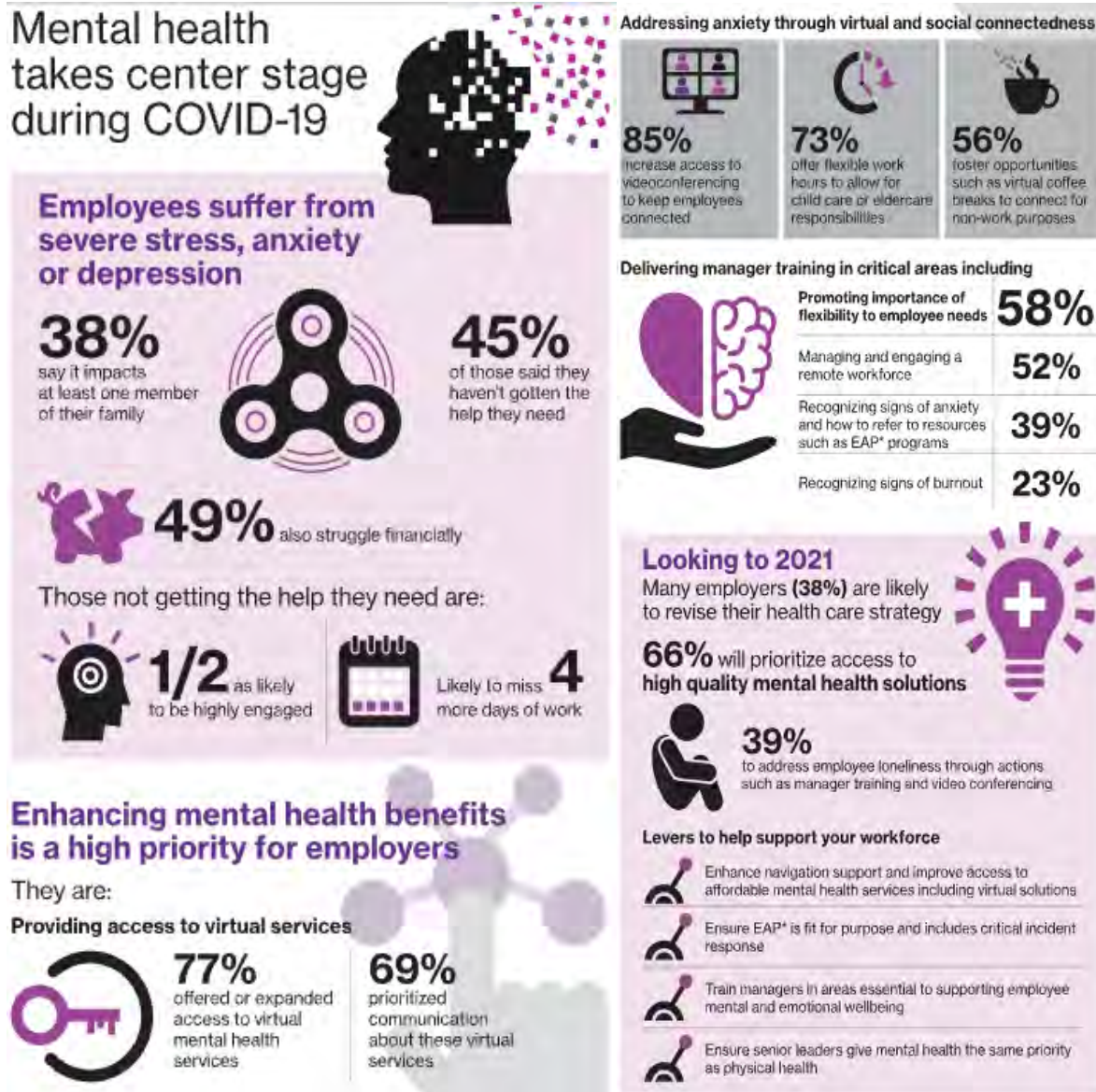
Measuring Progress

Though most well-being measurements have historically been subjective, "satisfaction"-based assessments, it is of critical importance that organizations design psychometric measures of employee well-being based on their values.10 Research suggests an exercise in which leaders agree on components they would like to track and measure. These may include competence, engagement, resilience, positive relationships, and so forth. Next, a set of items or questions will be designed that maximally measure these components. The final test is to check this assessment across cultures and business units before rolling it out globally. The result could be a composite measurement of well-being that captures qualitative data regarding efficacy and effectiveness of well-being interventions.[10]

Conclusion

Many countries addressed the COVID-19 outbreak by physically separating and isolating individuals, in some cases, from their closest family and friends. By reducing social interactions and ties, a proven requirement for well-being, recent studies have shown an increase anxiety, loneliness, and depression in populations around the globe.[4] While it's impossible to know exactly how the effects of these measures will manifest in employee productivity and performance, by advocating for mental health awareness, designing robust organizational and individual interventions, offering flexibility, and monitoring well-being, business leaders will be well-positioned to meaningfully address the present and future challenges.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: 2020 COVID-19 Benefits Survey [3]

Mental health takes center stage during COVID-19

Employees suffer from severe stress, anxiety or depression

38% say it impacts at least one member of their family

45% of those said they haven't gotten the help they need

49% also struggle financially

Those not getting the help they need are:

1/2 as likely to be highly engaged

Likely to miss **4** more days of work

Enhancing mental health benefits is a high priority for employers

They are:

Providing access to virtual services

77% offered or expanded access to virtual mental health services

69% prioritized communication about these virtual services

Addressing anxiety through virtual and social connectedness

85% increase access to videoconferencing to keep employees connected

73% offer flexible work hours to allow for child care or eldercare responsibilities

56% foster opportunities such as virtual coffee breaks to connect for non-work purposes

Delivering manager training in critical areas including

Promoting importance of flexibility to employee needs	58%
Managing and engaging a remote workforce	52%
Recognizing signs of anxiety and how to refer to resources such as EAP* programs	39%
Recognizing signs of burnout	23%

Looking to 2021

Many employers **(38%)** are likely to revise their health care strategy

66% will prioritize access to **high quality mental health solutions**

39% to address employee loneliness through actions such as manager training and video conferencing

Levers to help support your workforce

- Enhance navigation support and improve access to affordable mental health services including virtual solutions
- Ensure EAP* is fit for purpose and includes critical incident response
- Train managers in areas essential to supporting employee mental and emotional wellbeing
- Ensure senior leaders give mental health the same priority as physical health

Appendix 2: Framework for the Healthy Minds Program [5]

Appendix 3: Most Frequently Attended Topics in BHC-led Employee Wellness Sessions [8]

Top 10 Most Frequently Attended Topics

Topic	Total attendance
1. Yoga for All	179
2. Managing Anxiety: Mindful Coping	101
3. Gentle Chair Stretch to Reduce Tension	96
4. Finding a New Normal: Coping with Change	55
5. What I'm Feeling is Normal: Managing Grief, Loss, and Anxiety	48
6. Simple Yoga and Guided Meditation	46
7. Remotely: Adjusting, Managing Expectations & Staying Sane	46
8. Cognitive Reframing: Reducing Stress and Anxiety in Times of Uncertainty	40
9. Stress Management Tips	37
10. Working Remotely & Home Schooling: Staying Grounded—19	33

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