

WORKPLACE

WELLBEING



WINTER 2017/18 REPORT



From free healthy breakfasts to trendy office fit-outs, and even mental health first aiders, businesses are increasingly placing employee wellbeing at the heart of everything they do.

While large corporates are expected to develop detailed wellbeing strategies, for start-ups and SMEs the challenge can be finding the resources to implement wellbeing initiatives which have a demonstrable and measurable impact.

The government-commissioned Thriving at Work report, released in October, signalled there is still a lot to be done to address employee wellbeing and particularly mental health in the workplace: it revealed an annual cost to employers of between £33 billion and £42 billion due to associated issues of presenteeism, sickness-absence levels and staff turnover.

So, what does doing wellbeing right look like? What can we learn from the businesses and leaders that are doing it well? And, what do employees actually want from their employer's wellbeing strategies?

As part of our quest to paint a picture of the wellbeing outlook in the North West, we recently gathered some of the region's most successful businesses in a roundtable discussion and surveyed 156 employees in the region. These are the results.

[Martin O'Rourke](#)
Commercial Director, Birchwood Park

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



Chair

Wendy Bateman
Life Coach and Wellbeing Expert

In attendance

Amanda Callaghan, Healthcare Partner, Browne Jacobson

Karen Morris, Operations Director, Travel Counsellors

Rachel Whalley, HSSE, Wood Plc

Sarah Blyth, Lead Human Resources, Dr Schär

Why now? Why has health and wellbeing suddenly rocketed to the top of the business agenda?

AC: For us, it's about attracting and retaining the right people. There's a lot more movement than there used to be in the legal world; employees used to remain loyal to their law firm and enjoy greater benefits and trust as they grew with the firm. Now people will move around until they find somewhere which suits how they want to work. Businesses are expected to integrate wellbeing into the design of ways of working, staff benefits and the entire employee package from the beginning.

At Browne Jacobson, we're putting together workplace personas to better understand the mix of what people want from a career in the firm. Originally when HR drew them up, some personas were more about the need for wellbeing support and flexibility, while others were more careerist etc. But as we are developing these we're finding that it's actually **across all persona types that there is a desire for that better work/life balance.**

SB: From an education perspective, I'm not sure the university system does enough to ensure students have those all-important soft skills. Often, they're great on the academic side, but young people come into the world of work lacking emotional intelligence, self-awareness and social skills that are really needed. The responsibility then falls on the business to instil these.

RW: With the advances in technology it's also now easier for people to become more isolated in their home life. Often, work is the only place where there is someone who might identify that a person is struggling and might need some support.

“ For us, it's about attracting and retaining the right people. ”



WB: Would you say that wellbeing is something you are trying to introduce and sell from the start, in terms of hiring and recruiting new talent?

AC: We're definitely looking at each role and at the amount of flexibility we can build in. We are selling that offering to new and current people as a place to not only join, but stay.

KM: I really agree with that – the world has massively changed. In the early stages of my career it was about how many hours you could put in. If you left the office at 5 o'clock you were seen to be non-committed. It's been a really big learning curve for me because I've had to completely change my way of thinking.

At Travel Counsellors, we have just introduced a hiring committee. These are the first people that potential recruits are put in front of. It's a two-way thing – we want to make sure we're recruiting the right people and we want to make sure they understand the environment that they're coming into; our ethos and our culture. I truly believe if you get that right at the start you've got more chance of retaining those people.



WB: If you look at the top companies now, they're all battling to be the best company to work for. Would you say as a business, it's also the pressure of looking at what other people are doing well?



AC: Absolutely, it is a bit like any offering, you can't stand still. As soon as you're doing something, someone else is doing the next thing. And people are moving around, saying "I had this there, I had this there" and they're adding it to their list.

Are all businesses actually doing what they say though? You can really sell your ethos, but there is something about the authenticity when they then move into the actual team. It is difficult to get the same experience for everyone in a large business. We have five offices and each one feels very different, and within the offices each team feels different.

What are the key contributors to employee happiness and wellbeing? Where do businesses need to invest?

WB: We've talked a lot about the people; is it the amenities or is it the social and team-building that you think is most important?

KM: It's a combination– we moved offices two years ago having been in Bolton for 15 years. We actually decided on an office near the Trafford Centre and we did a lot around selling the proposition amongst our staff in terms of what that new office environment would look like.

We had a two-floor blank shell, and when we were looking at kitting it out, it was about identifying what kind of working space our staff would like in terms of breakout areas, open plan. We really went into a lot of detail about creating that welcoming and modern working environment. We lost less than 5 per cent of staff with the move. I'm a firm believer that the office and environment that you create is really important – it just seems to have lifted the spirits of everyone.

SB: That has been the same for us – because we involved everybody in the design and set-up of our new office, from desk arrangements to what was needed from meeting space, engagement has been fantastic. In practice, this meant creating working groups with representatives from each team.



We've also introduced a lunch allowance which means that everybody gets away from the desk and has a break at lunch, whether that's for half an hour or an hour.

AC: We introduced task spaces which meant we trialled eating only in the dining space and not at desks. This was really unpopular at first because people didn't want to have to break from the desk. But, we have a really nice kitchen with big benches and tables, and you go into the kitchen now at lunchtime and everyone's chatting away, eating together. We will be replicating that social space when we move into our new office next month.

We found that this opportunity to talk and socialise at lunchtime is really important for engagement and general happiness.

Ahead of our office move we have also had engagement meetings, with representatives from various roles in the firm. People did start to ask, "what tasks am I trying to do in the office space and what might make it easier to do it?" Trialling ideas and furniture has been really important – we've been able to get a real feel for what works and what doesn't, before committing to anything.



WB: The other question on this is community initiatives and activities – I know there’s a big community feel here on Birchwood Park, is that something you try to create and promote within your businesses?

SB: At Birchwood Park there is always something going on for people to get involved in. There’s movie nights, language lessons, yoga and even lunchtime walking groups. As a business, it is difficult to find the time to do social activities together as people are busy and live in different locations, so it is nice to know there are opportunities on the park for people to get together – and we see the difference that makes to staff happiness.

AC: We come together to do things for the local community, mainly through sponsorship and charity events. We’re also working with Manchester Metropolitan University to bring in students for work experience, which has been a real bonding tool for the people involved.

I do think it’s something that we will further develop as we move into our new office. All the businesses are going to be new in the building, so the opportunity is definitely there to build something more than an office block.

RW: We also work in the local community, and not just on a company basis but on an individual basis. We have a number of employees who are very involved with local projects, such as foodbanks, and they bring that into the workplace. It lifts people’s spirits and has a positive impact on emotional wellbeing as a result.

Many still view mental health as a taboo subject in business – is this the case?

RW: Interestingly, we’re having a big push on launching a new mental health programme within Wood’s nuclear business. We have an internal team called Clear Minds who are introducing Mental Health First-Aiders; someone who is identified locally as a go-to for support. Having received appropriate training, these are approachable individuals who can provide initial support to employees and assist them with getting the right help going forward. They’re trained to recognise signs such as changes in behaviour which may indicate a problem.

“ **SB:** Charity days definitely give people that feel good factor as they know they are helping to make a difference. ”

KM: At Travel Counsellors, our community is quite different in that most of our travel professionals are home based, and that is a challenge. We have to create a sense of belonging and community for all of our home workers – and we work really hard at that. For example, we have our own TV studio which is used as a communication tool to deliver our key messages. It’s about thinking outside the box and going that extra mile to ensure everyone feels engaged.

Regarding charity events, I think people are more likely to do something with a colleague. We give up to three days paid leave to do charity work or volunteering in the community, which has gone down really well with staff. You can tell the impact it has on wellbeing, because employees are so proud of the fact that we as a business have supported them going into the community.

I wouldn’t say it is a taboo subject for us, and actually there is a lot of empathy within the business from the top down, which is helping us to address the topic.

KM: Things have definitely changed, even in the last 12 months, with celebrities talking openly about mental health – it is getting out there. We started a programme last year, specifically aimed at changing mind-sets around mental health in the workplace.



At our most recent annual conference we held a workshop in conjunction with Mind, who came in and talked about the signs of someone who may be suffering or who may need support. I'm very passionate about mental health and think we need to ensure everything is in place to support and help people when they need it.

WB: The key thing is that it, in fact, shows strength of character and resilience to be open about your mental health, and it's great to see businesses encouraging this openness.

AC: I read that there is perhaps a lot less tolerance in business of mental health issues, because there's such a lack of understanding. It's often not so much that businesses don't want to help – but can they actually help and do they have the right skills to give to it, especially when they're small businesses. I think we could improve understanding across the business.

WB: I agree – it's about ensuring everyone feels safe talking about it, at every level; creating that open environment in the workplace. It's especially important that employees can see that people at the top are talking about it.

AC: It's interesting that at Deloitte, some of the senior people have taken to video to talk about their experience of mental health problems to staff. That's very brave.

SB: It shows great humility – people need to be able to relate to those at the top of businesses. Being the HR lead for a small company, people know they can always come and talk to me. Having that open-door transparency is vital. If I can help by spending 15 minutes to half an hour talking to them, and if they're performing their role; I'm doing my job.

WB: Talking and having that space to talk is a good point. Samaritans is a listening service, and when I first started there I found that very difficult – how can just listening help? But actually, when you listen to someone talking for 40 minutes and at the end they say “thanks – I know what I'm going to do now, I can sleep tonight” you realise how important and valuable listening is.

KM: We decided to employ a counsellor who does face to face counselling for our colleagues on a confidential basis, and also via Skype for our travel counsellors who work from home. We support up to six sessions face to face, funded by us, and that service has been really popular. The good thing about the service the counsellor offers is she really knows us as a business, and if she feels we can help an individual (with their permission) she suggests and advises what additional support we can be providing.

RW: At Wood, we have the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), and there is counselling available through that in a similar way. Having these support services in place is the first step, but there is also work for businesses to do in educating staff about the services and their benefits.

WB: Through providing services like this, you're empowering employees to have a voice. It's about giving the individual the ability to ask for things and to know they have control over their environment. A lot of the time when people do have time off work with illness it's because they don't think they have control.

“ **SB:** Having that open-door transparency is vital ”



What is the impact of prioritising health and wellbeing and can we measure it?

WB: One of the criticisms of wellbeing programmes is that it is difficult to measure the success, or directly link initiatives to increased productivity, retention or recruitment. Can we measure the impact of wellbeing initiatives?

KM: We do an internal staff survey twice a year to judge how people are feeling in the workplace, which is completely confidential. I agree it is difficult to attribute specific initiatives to that, but I think you can definitely gauge which things are working and actually contributing to things like productivity and retention.

SB: Depending on the size of the business, just talking to people can be the best way to measure impact. I've found talking to people face to face, or sending out anonymous forms for feedback both work well. If you can create that environment where people are happy to express their feelings, it can and does work.

RW: One thing we did recently in terms of measurement was a programme we ran with CIGNA where we had health kiosks for people to have health checks - they also filled out a questionnaire on wider workplace wellbeing. We initially ran this in 2015 and then again earlier this year - this has allowed us to directly compare across the two years.

The challenge is getting the level of engagement from employees to complete surveys like this. It's important to find new ways to present these programmes.

KM: One of the biggest things we did with the moving process was introduce an initiative where all head office staff could work up to two days a week at home, and that was a massive win for us in terms of feedback. Our Travel Counsellors have actively told us staff are more engaged and their spirits are lifted. We obviously monitored productivity to ensure that didn't drop, and it didn't fall at all. *If you're doing things right, the impact will be right there in front of you.*

AC: We have done lots of staff surveys to make sure people are happy. I've got the best of both worlds in a way - we have the benefits of being part of a large organisation, whilst also working in an office of around 40 staff where it is very easy to just ask people how things are.

Every couple of months the social committee arranges a Manchester office walk on a Saturday with friends and families, and we finish with lunch. It is also a great opportunity to chat to people you might not otherwise catch up with and get a broader view of the office feeling.

The top level in businesses are talking the talk – are they walking the walk? Is it important that wellbeing initiatives come from the top?

KM: Absolutely, you've got to lead by example. One of the biggest things for me is that we have a relaxed dress code – our policy is dress for the day. I actually find that difficult as I would always dress up rather than dress down, but I'm getting there.

Though I have my own office to allow for confidentiality, I force myself to go out and work from docking stations around the office throughout the week. You've got to get out there and feel what is happening in your business, and we've encouraged this across the board.

SB: It's important that senior figures aren't seen to be working 12 hour days, and also don't expect people to be in the office for ridiculous amounts of time. We're flexible – you might be in early on a Monday, but if you

need to leave a couple of hours early that's fine. We know that people put so many extra hours in – we just say if you need the time off, we can make it work.

AC: I feel things are changing but there are still those few who can't see that work life is about anything more than coming to the office to work, and to do so in a certain way. The impact of just a few managers or directors not buying in to initiatives which support wellbeing, can be really dramatic.

WB: The good thing is that it is changing, gradually over time. The more and more companies that prioritise wellbeing, and the more that we talk about it – it will get better.



If there is one thing you would like to see businesses implementing or considering with regards to wellbeing in the workplace, what would it be?

SB: For me, it would be **looking at the working week**. There have been trials in Sweden for the 6-hour working day and I think that would be very interesting. People would be more productive I'm sure and the impact on personal wellbeing great.

RW: For many businesses, developing a mental health and wellbeing programme is in its infancy or may not have even really started – so **taking that time to develop a programme that works for the business and its employees is really important**.

KM: I think it's just important to remember that **people should be at the heart of everything that you do**. Even with technology you're never going to be able to replace the human touch. Caring about each other and showing how much you care – we need to do more of that. I'm a firm believer of the more you give, the more you get back, and I think that's a message that businesses need to get behind.

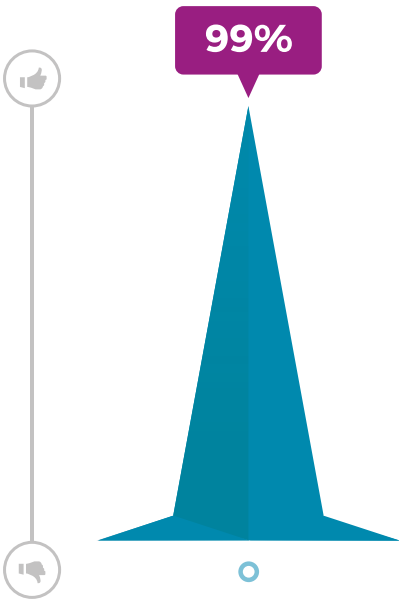
AC: I think **recognising that people want to work in different ways** and the positive effect allowing for that has on wellbeing. It also requires confidence from businesses that you can actually manage different working styles or preferences without having an impact on the business.

KM: We've recently completed a leadership course and, as a result, I'm a lot more aware of how my communication impacts the people around me, and I think that is definitely something businesses can look at: **the way we communicate and interact with colleagues**.

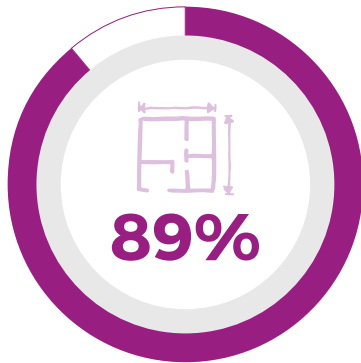
“ I think it's just important to remember that people should be at the heart of everything that you do. ”



SURVEY RESULTS



Agree that workplace wellbeing is important



139/156

Consider the office environment / fit-out as most important to workplace wellbeing



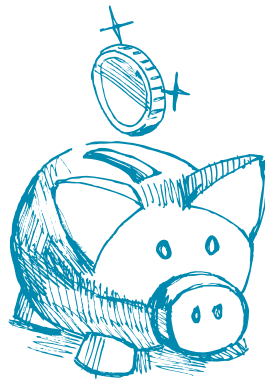
73%

Consider having amenities in close proximity as important to workplace wellbeing



91%

Consider staff happiness a key benefit of effective wellbeing initiatives



50%

Consider perception of cost the biggest barrier to workplace wellbeing

35%

Believe mental health in the workplace will be the biggest challenge for businesses over the next 10 years.



32%

Did not know whether their organisation had a wellbeing strategy in place



44%

Said their companies did have a wellbeing strategy in place



This survey conducted amongst North West businesses in October 2017 found;

Almost all respondents surveyed think that workplace wellbeing is important

Over half of respondents said their organisation has or is considering a company-wide wellbeing strategy, compared to a third of respondents who did not know whether their organisation had a wellbeing strategy in place

The office environment and fit-out was considered the most important to workplace wellbeing, closely followed by the proximity of amenities

Happiness of staff was considered the biggest benefit of effective wellbeing strategies, closely followed by employee retention and increased productivity

Perception of cost and lack of resources are considered the biggest barriers to workplace wellbeing

Mental health in the workplace and transport networks are considered to be the key wellbeing challenges over the next 10 years



IN SUMMARY

There are shining examples of businesses in the North West that are throwing everything they have behind creating effective, impactful and measurable wellbeing strategies; demonstrating that, irrelevant of sector, business size or location, there are steps that can be taken to create workplaces that cultivate staff happiness and wellbeing.

No two businesses are the same, but there is much to be learnt from the companies that are doing wellbeing well. Creating strategies that work for your business, listening to employees and actually giving them a say in the initiatives and policies is key.

The office environment and fit-out is considered to be of most importance to employee wellbeing, whether it is creating spaces that allow for flexible working in well-connected locations, or environments that nurture togetherness and a sense of community; ensuring the workplace is far more than the four walls of the office.

Also evident from the findings is a real need for transparency from and between employers and their employees; transparency in communicating wellbeing strategies and initiatives so that employees understand the steps being taken to implement and improve workplace wellbeing. Transparency, too, in creating an open and honest environment where employees feel empowered to share, feedback and challenge.

Looking ahead, mental health in the workplace has been highlighted as an area that will provide the biggest challenge for employers – a well thought out approach will be required which should include improving understanding across the board.

As touched on in the discussion, the workplace is constantly evolving. For employers, the challenge is to successfully integrate wellbeing initiatives which support and respond to the varying needs of their employees, and in doing that create an environment that generates a motivated, productive and happy workforce.

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