

# Corporate Wellness and the Neurology of Wellness

## How wellness at work is important for career success

Our bodies and our minds are impressive machines when they're at their best yet we tend to drive them to the ground, ignore the warning signs and generally treat them poorly. However, what if your body and mind could be at their best all of the time? What impact would this have on your life and career?

Further, on a group level, what if HR could tap into a whole workforce of finely tuned, healthy and active employees? What impact would this have on the business?

In truth, most of us do not fully understand the intricate design of our brain and bodies and, as a result, we operate at a fraction of our full capacity. Further, what you may not realise is how this may be holding you back in terms of your career and life success. Multiply this across an entire organisation and the gap between current performance and potential performance widens exponentially.

Neurological, biological and psychological data shows us that we have prioritised our workloads and our success far above our mental and physical wellness. As a result, we have become disconnected with the fundamentals of how the human body

functions. This is having an impact on our ability to solve complex problems, come up with new ideas and push the boundaries for our capability. It is not surprising that it is also inflating our levels of stress and anxiety.

While we all have access to a very

impressive machine in the form of the human brain and body, it's extremely fine-tuned. So, what happens to a finely tuned machine when we put it under sustained pressure? Performance suffers and it eventually breaks down. You'll see these



breakdown signs amongst your friends and family, your colleagues and staff and you'll also see the signs within yourself. While we see the signs, we don't have a different operating model so we keep doing the same things. We do our best and hope things will improve. However, taking time to understand the fundamentals about how we are designed has now become a critical sustainability issue. Making small adjustments to how we operate and working with, rather than against, our body will ultimately allow you to be at your best both in and out of the office.

Career Outcomes

Our review of the published research shows that individuals who make these small adjustments experience lower stress levels, greater mental alertness, more energy, higher self-esteem, better memory, greater work and life fulfilment, less workload pressure, greater concentration and higher levels of happiness. Not surprisingly, in the workplace this facilitates improved job output, more advanced problem solving, increased creativity and greater overall career success. On an organisational level, imagine a whole workforce of these individuals! This is organisational performance and capability redefined and adds a unique dimension to a company's market differentiation.

We observe early adopters already using wellness to build stronger businesses and mainstream organisations, large and small, looking at better ways to support their staff. It will be the laggards that will face significant human capital challenges in the form of absenteeism, work cover claims, burnout as well as cultural and behavioural challenges that come with a stressed workforce.

Performance and Arousal

While the Yerkes–Dodson law shows the correlation between ‘performance’ and ‘arousal’, we try not to use the word arousal too much in the workplace, so let's call this ‘pressure’ instead. This well-established research proves that a certain amount of pressure enhances performance to the point where we reach our sweet spot of optimal performance. However, when additional pressure is applied, this induces stress and our performance decreases. Unfortunately, this is the reality of the modern workplace with 73 percent of staff operating within this zone. Therefore, our first task is to identify the triggers that are creating this additional pressure and our next task is to have specific strategies on hand to manage them effectively. It's not always possible to remove them, but with a better understanding of our neurological and biological tool kit, we can get back to our sweet spot of optimal performance.

Wellness Toolkit

The good news is that the same research identifies the specific things that we can do to be at our best. This data points to three

key elements of wellness that all play a role in our work and life success:

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1. Cognitive wellness – our brain@work

Understanding our brain functionality, particularly the pre-frontal cortex (PFC), allows us to unlock the full potential of our cognition. Unfortunately, we currently tire our brain out with low level tasks and are left wanting when we need to switch into higher order analysis or creativity. In addition, the multi-tasking way in which we attempt to work creates unnecessary pressure for the poor old PFC and we fail to produce our best thinking. Doing complex tasks early in the day has proven to be an easy and effective shift. Also, working on one important task at a time without distractions [e.g. in a meeting room with the phone off] is another way to give your brain the clear air that it needs to operate at a high level.

2. Emotional wellness – our limbic system@work

While still in the brain, our limbic system is the centre for all of our emotional responses, even mild ones. So every time we're a little bit worried, frustrated or feeling under pressure, this powerful system gets quickly activated and absorbs all of the cognitive energy, decreasing the quality of our thinking and pushing us beyond our sweet spot. Understanding the threats that trigger our limbic system and practical ways to manage these is a valuable part of your wellness strategy. David Rock has done fantastic work in isolating five social threats that we all encounter in the workplace. Have a look at his SCARF model for a deeper dive into this topic.

3. Behavioural wellness - Six cylinders of wellness

In a 2009 review of our coaching clients, we observed two groups of people. While both had equivalent levels of intelligence, experience and capability, Group A would navigate change with confidence, resilience and focus while Group B struggled to adapt, took a lot longer to bounce back from setbacks and experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety. A closer investigation of the factors at play, cross checked with the research,

revealed that Group A were simply making better behavioural decisions in six key areas of their life. We call them the six cylinders of wellness and they are: Nutrition, Social Connections, Activity, Time Out, Sleep and Outlets. Our six-cylinder guide provides more detail on each, the research behind these and a personal scorecard for you and your staff. Visit <http://buff.ly/22qqQih> for the PDF. In 2014, we tested a workshop programme that educated staff on the wellness elements in this article, including the six cylinders. This enabled participants to identify the areas that require attention and the specific, practical actions that they can take to facilitate a stronger wellness profile. We found that by making small adjustments, staff were able to reduce their stress levels by eight percent and their workload pressure by 16 percent while also increasing their focus and concentration by five percent.

Business case

In HR, we support staff because it's the right thing to do and in an environment where workplace stress and anxiety are on the rise, a focus on wellness is a core element. Alongside the humanistic argument, the data shows that a well organisation will be more productive and creative with staff who are less stressed, more mentally alert, energetic, fulfilled, focused and successful. An Australian study in 2014 showed that while the cost to businesses of mental health conditions alone is \$11bn the ROI for promoting a mentally healthy workplace is \$2.30 for every \$1 invested. (PWC, Beyond Blue, National Mental Health Commission).

Take Action

Our observation of the individuals and firms that achieve the best wellness outcomes is that they build small changes into the DNA of their day and have fun with it, rather than make a big deal of it. On a personal level you will be more successful if you manage your own wellness. On an organisational level, your business will more successful if you can facilitate enhanced wellness profiles for your staff. The pressures that are currently holding you and your staff back are not likely to go away so inaction is not an option.HR



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