

The pursuit of app-iness: embracing tech for employee wellbeing

Jun 11, 2021 Bradley Gerrard



Technology has been the buoyancy aid that's stopped many firms from going under during the pandemic, but what's less clear is whether it's helped to keep their workers' spirits up too.

Companies were able to shift their operations online and stay connected during the Covid lockdowns thanks to various software applications, including the now ubiquitous Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

I wouldn't say there's one piece of tech that exclusively every business needs to support the wellbeing of their team

The fact that work has been possible during these periods of confinement has surely been a relief to many people. But using the home as a makeshift workplace has created its own stresses, especially when employees have felt under pressure to be always available – often in suboptimal working conditions – while sharing the space with partners who've been laid off, say, or children who need home-schooling.

Proponents of the tech will say that it's kept employees connected and supported their productivity, but businesses need to be aware of the stresses of remote working and the different ways in which these can affect people.

A deeper connection

A recent poll of UK workers by the Institute for Employment Studies found that 48% of respondents were working long and irregular hours during the lockdowns. The survey also revealed other health concerns: 36% of respondents said they felt they were under too much pressure from work, 32% reported feeling unhappy and 60% were concerned that they weren't getting enough physical exercise.

David Miller, CEO of London-based creative agency Red Brick Road, remembers his own apprehension about how he would balance the demands of keeping his business running alongside maintaining pastoral care for his employees as the UK entered its first lockdown in March 2020.

"Team bonding suffers when people are working remotely. Things such as virtual quizzes don't really generate that true connection," he says. "Only through human contact can you build generate that important team effervescence, unless the tech you're using is genuinely designed to provoke conversation and interaction."

A chance conversation with one of his neighbours led Miller to look at an app called The Wellbeing Games, which instantly grabbed his attention.

The brainchild of HR expert Bernadette Thomas, The Wellbeing Games encourages users to complete five daily "challenges" in the following areas – movement, connection, nutrition, sleep and mindfulness – over 10 days.

Technology can keep [a workplace culture] sustained but you can only build and develop that culture, and generate that important team effervescence, through human contact

Miller explains that the challenges are, crucially, not at all challenging, but they do provoke engagement and improve people's wellbeing. Scores are kept confidential, meaning that there's no undue pressure on people to participate fully every day, while the temporary nature of the programme helps to give it a higher engagement rate than those of its open-ended equivalents.

Miller was so impressed with its effect on his team that he became an equity partner in The Wellbeing Games and is now helping to plan the app's expansion.

Building cohesion

Integrating new arrivals into a team can be difficult for businesses in normal circumstances, never mind when they're having to do it remotely.

Joey Ceunen, chief technology officer at Carefree, a charity that provides short breaks for unpaid carers, joined the organisation only a few weeks before Covid-19 struck the UK and remote working became the order of the day. At that point, the only colleague he'd met in person was the CEO, Charlotte Newman.

"The team held regular online meetings and casual calls too, so we could get to know each other, but things weren't flowing," he recalls. "The louder people were getting louder and the quieter ones were getting quieter."

Ceunen naturally sought a digital solution to ensure that everyone would feel more included. One of these was Friday Pulse, which allows employers to gauge how their workers are feeling each week by asking one question: "How have you felt at work this week?" This generates a "happiness KPI" that can be tracked over time on an individual or group basis.

Carefree's employees have engaged extremely well with the app, which has other functionality that allows users to discuss things that have and haven't gone well during the week.

Pastoral solutions

The charity has also embraced Spill, an app that works within Slack, the popular messaging platform. This enables employees to book one-to-one therapy sessions online with qualified providers.

"One of our team members who was struggling with homeworking used Spill," Ceunen says. "They have since said that it was exactly what they needed. It means that employees can deal with problems early on, rather than letting them build up until the whole thing explodes and then having to wait months for treatment on the NHS."

Tony Stewart is head of digital at Scarlettabbott, a consultancy specialising in employee engagement. He believes that a business needs to have a clear purpose in mind for any tech-based solution it adopts in this area.

"I wouldn't say that there's a single piece of tech that every business requires to support the wellbeing of its team members," he says. "The right choice depends on the business goals and employment strategy of each company, along with the community it's supporting."

As the hybrid model – a mix of remote and office working – looks like becoming the new norm, business leaders must ensure they find technology-based solutions that genuinely support their employees' wellbeing.

While Miller believes there has been a push in the past decade to encourage people to bring their "whole selves" to work, any remaining division between home life and work life has "disappeared rapidly", as video calls beam colleagues into each other's homes.

"Employers that might not have felt a duty of care before the pandemic have probably reappraised that stance," he says. "Now they'll think not only about how to look after workers in the office, but about how to look after them as people more broadly."

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