

5 industry leaders share tips for promoting employee wellness

While mental health in the workplace is not often addressed, the impact of Covid-19 has brought it to the fore. The pandemic has resulted in a considerable increase in the number of agitated, anxious, or bereaved South Africans owing to the sense of isolation caused by remote work, job insecurity, and their healthcare.

For businesses, a healthy workplace is one in which employers and employees work together to protect each other's health, safety, and wellbeing. This requires fostering a supportive culture as well as policies that prioritise mental wellness.

Below, industry leaders share their employee wellness advice.



Matt Poladian, VP of people at Liferay

1. Begin with empathy

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Employees can easily conceal their troubles in the virtual world, either voluntarily or unwittingly. Supporting mental health should be motivated by empathy, which demonstrates a genuine concern for the ideas, feelings, and life experiences of others.

The best way to build empathy is to listen intently to your people and proactively ask questions to learn more about what is going on with them.

Empathy is essential for building an environment where all employees feel safe and comfortable. This is critical not just for the employees' well-being, but also for an organisation's creativity and productivity.

Research has shown that this "psychological safety" drives employees to bring their best self to work and, as a result, help a company prosper.

2. Be agile and innovative

Aisha Pandor, CEO at SweepSouth



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Businesses must remain agile and innovative and think about the world that we live in today. We aren't able to anticipate the future, and businesses need to be responsive to the unknown that this will bring.

Another important consideration is to think about the mental health hangover that is likely to result from months of ups and downs and the toll of a global economic and health crisis that has negatively impacted so many. At SweepSouth, we've made our employee psychosocial support officer (who was in place before the pandemic) available to anyone who needs support processing the mental health issues that may have arisen as a result of the tough year.

Businesses should also be mindful that many team members may not want to return to the office full-time, this could be due to changed family arrangements, concerns over exposure to the virus, or because they've simply found that they enjoy working from home. We've had to think about where it is possible to have flexible arrangements that allow for this while ensuring good business operations remain, and have even considered how to adjust our office working environment accordingly, whether it's to set it up for less

permanent working space and possibly more accommodation for in-office broader team meetings.

3. Prioritise a mental health resource

Reagen Kok, CEO, Hoorah Digital

Creativity is the currency that drives our business. It is very often what draws people to the advertising industry. But there's a dark side to working in advertising, and that is the emotional toll constantly having to perform at one's creative peak can take.

In recent months, we've come to realise that our teams are emotionally drained and exacerbated by the ongoing impact of the pandemic as well as the limited in-person interaction we have with colleagues.

But even without the additional pressures of the past 18 months, there's clearly a need to prioritise the mental health of our people. We identified a need to make the services of an independent counsellor freely available to all staff. We've been both pleased and surprised by the uptake – pleased by the fact that people are making use of the service and surprised by just how big the need is. Staff are guaranteed absolute confidentiality and assured that their use of the service will in no way be used against them.

It's essential that mental health is taken as seriously as physical health and that we normalise talking about it in an empathetic and constructive way. That starts with recognising that the mental wellbeing of our team has to be a priority.



Reagen Kok, CEO, Hoorah Digital

4. Take tangible steps



Hayley van der Woude, MD at Irvine Partners

Even before the pandemic, mental health was an issue that employers didn't sufficiently prioritise. As an agency, we see evidence of this during our recruitment processes - so many of the candidates we interview or hire have a story of work-related PTSD. They all come from employers who say they commit to taking care of their teams, but the reality is that they're not listening to what their teams need.

Admittedly, it is sometimes easier said than done to prioritise mental health, but we found that taking a few small steps made a big difference. For example, after a particularly tough and busy quarter earlier this year, we knew our team was taking strain and gave the entire company a free mental health leave day. We were anxious about how our clients would react, but we notified them beforehand and every single one was incredibly supportive. It was hugely valuable for our teams to know that not only their employers, but also their clients were invested in their mental health.

A further practical step we took was to increase leave allocations across the board to work towards a better work-life balance. With travel limited, we found that our teams weren't taking much time off, but it is important to still

encourage taking breaks even if you're not getting on a plane.

Maintaining morale is another challenge during remote work or when you have a team spread across regions. We've tried to address this by introducing virtual "water-cooler" sessions with small groups of team members chosen at random to mimic the small-talk that would usually take place around the kettle or the fridge for lunch. The sessions have been a great success and end up being 45 minutes of pure therapeutic laughter as we share jokes, offload, and tell stories.

5.Tackle unhealthy habits

Elna Velthuysen, HR business partner, sub-Saharan Africa, Radisson Hotel Group

Good mental health can be quite a task to get up there but if you do, it means you can cope well with everyday stress, feel and express a range of emotions, have confidence in yourself, and build and maintain good relationships.

Especially now, as more employees work from home, it's difficult for managers and colleagues to spot an employee who may be struggling.

So how do we spot when we may need to switch gears? Look for distractions, keep your eyes on the road. Tackle those unhealthy habits. Recognise the cause, change your routine and find a healthier alternative.

You need to look at these points to ensure mental wellbeing:

- Physical health – get enough sleep, eat right and stay active
- Look at your mind – be aware of your emotions, express your feelings and think before you act.

Make use of the kindness kit:

- Ask for help when you need it – don't struggle in silence.
- Build a healthy relationship with failure – set goals and have realistic standards.
- Surround yourself with positivity – forgive yourself if you make a mistake.
- Find balance in your life – focus your energy into different areas like family and work, rather than all in one place.

Finally, put people first

Historically, employee satisfaction has been overlooked, but more businesses are now recognising the value of a healthy work-life balance and the numerous benefits it provides to individuals and businesses alike. Workplace wellbeing minimises risk factors while also encouraging healthy behaviours and enhancing employee productivity.

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