

MORE EMPLOYEES FOCUS ON FITNESS AND WELLBEING

When it comes to health and wellness we all have a responsibility to look after ourselves, but what about the responsibility of our employers? It's been estimated that we spend up to 2,000 hours in the office on an annual basis and the working environment has proven to be a contributory factor in the growing rate of absenteeism and diminished productivity. Report by Lorraine Courtney.

Organisations wanting to retain staff are increasingly splashing cash on wellbeing initiatives in the workplace. Why? Because six out of 10 employees say they are more likely to stay long term with an employer who cares about them.

The research, conducted by Ibec to coincide with this year's National Workplace Wellbeing Day*, also showed that nearly half of the 1,000 employees surveyed would leave a job where an employer does not care about their wellbeing.

A total of €43 billion is spent globally on corporate health and wellbeing programmes, according to figures released by the Global Wellness Institute in 2017. And while Ireland is making good strides when it comes to corporate wellbeing, we are still behind the curve in many aspects. Irish health and wellness trends are typically led by the United States and the

respective multinationals that are based in the country.

"This can be seen with the fact that 52% of US employees have access to a health and wellness programme, while this figure is only 23% in Europe," according to Stephen Costello, managing director and co-founder of Spectrum Wellness. "While Ireland would be seen as a leader in Europe, we've a long way to go to catch up to the US."

The Government's 'Healthy Ireland' scheme is committed to improving the nation's health, he says. "The aim to encourage each sector of society to play a part in achieving a healthier country will certainly spur businesses to allocate greater resources to this area. However, in terms of day-to-day benefits for the country's workforce, we still have a lot to do."

Costello's company Spectrum Wellness is part of Spectrum Health, which delivers evidence-based health innovation to clients across Ireland, and now supports over 300 companies with their health and wellness programmes.

CARING ABOUT STAFF WELFARE

And it looks like Irish companies are increasingly getting on board. Aine Ryan, managing director of The Wellness Crew, has noticed a considerable growth in awareness of employee wellbeing which is driving investment and interest in the area.



"Only 23% of European employees have access to a health and wellness programme" – Stephen Costello, MD of Spectrum Wellness.



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And she says that a number of factors have contributed to this increased awareness.

“Many employers in Ireland now understand and have accepted the many benefits to their business in looking after employee wellbeing. It’s true that it’s good for business, but productivity aside lots of employers simply care about the welfare of their staff because they just care,” says Ryan, whose company offers HR advice on all aspects of corporate wellness provision and offers a one-stop shop for corporate wellness services.

“One key driver for this is that we see trends coming over from the US, often championed by the ‘Employer of Choice’ tech companies that have set up their headquarters here in Ireland.

“These companies use their wellbeing benefits to not only improve employee wellbeing but also to attract top talent. The competition for talent in Ireland is competitive and employee wellbeing provides another edge to employers in Ireland.”

Another driver of this growing awareness is employees, who really want to see and sometimes expect wellness programmes in their workplace. “This is tied to a growing awareness of individual wellbeing and motivation to actively look after ourselves and our health. Employees feel that their employers should support a healthy lifestyle more and more,” says Ryan.



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WELLNESS PROGRAMMES

Workplace wellness is viewed as a business imperative by Mercer, a global consulting leader in HR and health-related financial advice and services. With a network of more than 20,000 employees based in over 40 countries, Mercer has offices here in Cork and Dublin.

The company recently conducted research under the headings ‘Healthy, Wealthy and Work-Wise’ and found that employees’ personal health was the second most significant issue to cause employees stress about their financial security.

“In addition, our global talent trends survey suggests that

TOP TIPS ON EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAMMES

- Before putting in place a programme, think carefully about the objectives and how these can be measured.
- Analyse your employee base, understand their health needs and tailor a programme to address the issues.
- The best wellness programmes start from a robust data analysis and identification of health risks – such as cardiovascular risk or mental health concerns.
- Health screening data (at an aggregate, anonymous level) along with employee absence and sickness data will help to drive the objectives.
- Understand that it may take some time to see an impact so a wellbeing calendar should be adopted and clearly communicated. It can also be very helpful to have wellbeing champions to raise the profile of initiatives across the organisation.
- Ultimately, putting in place a great wellness programme will deliver engaged, healthier employees.



almost half the number of employees expect their workplaces to become more focused on employee health and wellbeing,” according to Aisling Kelly, Mercer Ireland’s senior healthcare consultant.

She says that employers need to make sure that the wellness programmes being put in place are personalised for their employees’ needs and that they will deliver clear outcomes in terms of improved health and engagement.

“Wellness programmes should also consider the full range of needs – not just physical and mental wellness but also incorporate elements such as financial and social wellness.”

Mercer’s philosophy is that a tailored wellness programme, based on a robust analysis of the underlying data, will deliver the best outcomes for both employees and employers.

They run a range of initiatives. Their flagship events are



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twice-yearly wellness programmes, which run for eight weeks at a time. “These incorporate a range of wellness activities, such as ‘couch-to-5k’ programmes and chi running courses, to develop strength (whether with weight training or yagalates) and mindfulness,” says Kelly.

TALKS TAILORED TO TOPICS

Mercer also runs a number of tailored talks on particular health and wellbeing topics. “Some of our most popular seminars include mental health for families. Crucially, these programmes have encouraged year-round activities, with employees continuing on the good habits via run clubs, ongoing pilates classes or group exercise sessions.”

In addition to these programmes, the company runs regular events throughout the year such as financial wellness seminars or health screening, marking days such as the ‘Workplace Wellbeing Day’ with fruit and organised walks.

“We also work with both the diversity and charity committees to encourage the social aspect of our wellbeing commitment. We know that employees who are highly energised and feel they can bring their authentic selves to work are twice as likely to be committed to an organisation’s agenda,” says Kelly.

And their employees have responded enthusiastically. “The wellness programmes have had great uptake, and we work hard to ensure that all groups of employees have something tailored to their needs.

“There truly is something for everyone and the eight-week programmes create a great buzz around the office. Another, perhaps unforeseen, advantage is that it has created informal networks throughout the office and has brought together employees who wouldn’t typically have worked with each other before.”

GOVERNMENT CAMPAIGNS TO MAKE GREAT STRIDES FOR A HEALTHY IRELAND

Based on international evidence ‘Healthy Ireland – A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing 2013-2025’ outlines a new commitment to public health with a considerable emphasis on prevention, while at the same time advocating for stronger health systems.



The scheme provides for new arrangements to ensure effective co-operation between the health sector and other areas of Government and public services. It also invites the private and voluntary sector to participate through well-supported and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Kate O’Flaherty, Head of Health and Wellbeing at the Department of Health, notes that their ‘Healthy Ireland’ campaign message is simple. “Small steps can make a big difference to your health – you just need to start. If you start with someone else, you’re more likely to make a lasting change.

“We’re encouraging everyone to get involved with neighbours, friends and family or through our Healthy Ireland partner organisations to join a group that can help you to take a step to a healthier lifestyle.

“Summer is here and it’s an ideal time to start a new healthy routine and plan to get outdoors more often, to go for a walk or a run or just take a mental break. These positive changes can help us all build a healthy Ireland.”

*National Workplace Wellbeing Day

Over 500 companies were involved in the fourth annual National Workplace Wellbeing Day on Friday 13 April 2018, to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of healthier lifestyles, and improve employee wellbeing by promoting better exercise and nutrition in the workplace.

According to the World Health Organisation, there are many benefits of workforce health promotion for employers and employees, including reduced absenteeism, increased productivity, reduced stress, improved sense of well-being and improved morale.