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WELLNESS COACHING

Big Business Finally Learns That Wellness is Good Business

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By: Arianna Huffington

2014 has been the year when the discussion of well-being has migrated from health and wellness magazines to business magazines.

Wellness, and how to integrate it into our work lives, has become the hottest topic in the business pages. And that should come as no surprise. Because, though it would be nice if this change were simply because of altruism, what's happening is that **big business is finally realizing that the health of their employees and the health of their bottom line are inseparable. In other words, big business has learned that wellness is good business.** As Dr. Rajiv Kumar, CEO of the wellness solutions company ShapeUp wrote in the Harvard Business Review, "a growing body of research suggests that **nurturing employee health and wellness has a significant impact on productivity -- which, as we all know, has a direct bearing on company profitability."** Kumar goes on to cite **a study out of Harvard that showed that for each dollar spent on wellness programs, large companies got back $3.27 in reduced health costs, and $2.73 in costs connected to absenteeism**. That's no small savings, since, according to a study by the Milken Institute, lost productivity due to chronic conditions like heart disease, hypertension, pulmonary conditions, and diabetes cost the U.S. $1.1 trillion.

And that's because of the very direct connection between our state of minds and bodies and the quality of our work. **High performance, whether in sports or in business, depends not just on training and hard work, but on making sure our resources are replenished.** As Co-Director of the Emotional Intelligence Consortium Dr. Daniel Goleman writes, just as in sports, "this work-rest-work-rest cycle also applies to helping our brain maintain maximal focus at work." Smart businesses are realizing that the resources employees need to do their jobs aren't just computers and desks. Making sure employees have the inner resources is just as important, if not more so. "Top performance requires full focus, and sustaining focused attention consumes energy -- more technically, your brain exhausts its fuel, glucose." writes Goleman. "Without rest, our brains grow more depleted. The signs of a brain running on empty include, for instance, distractedness, irritability, fatigue, and finding yourself checking Facebook when you should be doing your work." In other words: much of what happens when a tired brain, and body, is pushed into working 12 hour days and 60-plus hour work-weeks.

The good news is that more and more companies are putting this wisdom -- ancient but newly validated by science -- into action. Kumar cites **a 2013 RAND study that showed that 80 percent of employees working for businesses of 50 or more employees are offered some sort of wellness program at work.**

And the range of companies seeing the upside of giving their employees some downtime is growing every day. Enterprise software company **SAS** for instance, deliberately staffs the company so that people don't have to regularly work long hours. As HuffPost's Ann Brenoff wrote:

> ***You don't have to lie in order to go watch your kid in the school play: It's OK to just get up from your desk and go. Really. SAS trusts that you'll get the job done. So employees can skip the part where they have to get a worried look on their face and say the school nurse just called and they must split ASAP, so sorry. SAS believes its employees will be more relaxed and happier knowing they are also being good parents, and that they will get the job done.***

One result is that turnover at SAS runs about 4 percent, well below the industry average of 20 percent.

At **Intel,** they're expanding their 9-week mindfulness course "Awake@Intel" to make it available to their over 100,000 employees. Among those who have already taken part, on a 10-point scale there's been a 2 point decrease in experiencing stress, a 3 point increase in wellbeing and happiness and a 2 point increase in creativity and new ideas. "People get more authentically related to each other -- beyond competency levels and their roles," says Anakha Coman, who co-founded the program along with Lindsay Van Driel. "The corporate mask that people put on when they walk through the door comes down."

L.L. Bean, meanwhile, encourages employees to create their own wellness initiatives. If you end up getting 15 or more others to sign up, the company will fund the program.

At the San Francisco-based task management company **Asana**, in addition to being offered two organic meals a day, yoga, massages, and life coaching, employees can create their own customized workstations.

Likewise, workers at **Etsy** receive a stipend to use on their workstations, which are handmade, many in Etsy's woodshop. The company also has a "breathing room," which Vice President Matt Stinchcomb describes as "a digital device-free room with meditation cushions." There's also an "Etsy School," in which employees are encouraged to share their passions. Topics include juggling, meditation, screen printing and, yes, "therapeutic doodling." And another innovation Etsy is working to establish is a "gross happiness index of Etsy employees." I'm guessing it's going to be high.

Johnson & Johnson has a program called "Energy for Performance in Life," which teaches employees not just how to optimize their productivity at work, but also at home. Employee participation is up to 90 percent. The company also pays employees to create health profiles, which a wellness program can then be tailored to. Their return on investment for every dollar spent on wellness? $4.

A survey from Fidelity Investments shows that wellness participation is up nearly 60 percent from 2009, while almost 90 percent of employers provide some kind of incentives for wellness participation. At **Boston Consulting Group**, a management consulting firm that spent -- or, rather, invested -- $14 million in wellness programs last year, if you work more than 60 hours a week for 5 weeks, a "Red Zone Report" will be issued so that managers can make adjustments. At **General Mills**, the range of wellness programs is nearly as wide as that of their products. The company has a "Take 10 program," in which fitness experts offer on-site stretching, breathing, meditation and health activities. If that's not enough, there's also fly-fishing, birding and good ol' dodge ball. But in the wellness world, the company is most known for its mindful leadership program, begun by Janice Marturano, who has gone on to found the Institute for Mindful Leadership. "Mindfulness is about training our minds to be more focused, to see with clarity, to have spaciousness for creativity and to feel connected," she said. "That compassion to ourselves, to everyone around us -- our colleagues, customers -- that's what the training of mindfulness is really about. There is no work-life balance. We have one life. What's most important is that you be awake for it."

At **Aetna,** 13,000 employees have participated in one of their mindfulness-based wellness programs, which is one reason why Aetna's health costs actually decreased by 7 percent in 2012, even while the costs for most employers were going the other direction. A study -- published in the Journal of Occupational Psychology -- of one of the programs while it was being piloted found that participants saw their levels of stress go down 30 percent. And since the program has expanded, employees have realized gains of 69 minutes of productivity per week.

But one of the most noteworthy manifestations of this global shift is what's going on in the boiler room of burnout: the banking and finance world. This is the industry that practically invented burnout, and which has most stubbornly clung to the dangerous myth that equates overwork with dedication and productivity. That's why, because of the influence finance has on the workplace practices of the business world at large, any change in this sector is so important.

Many of the recent changes were prompted by a tragic spade of suicides in the finance world. In response, many of the large banks began a long overdue rethink of their workplace practices -- because of the effect both on their employees and on the decisions made. And so early this year, many of them began rolling out some first steps at reform.

At Bank of America, employees were advised to take four weekend days off each month and required to take their vacation days. Goldman Sachs convened a "junior banker task force" to deal with the issue. The company also banned employees from going into the office from 9 p.m. on Friday to 9 a.m. on Sunday,

said that workers should not simply transfer their work from office to home and "strongly encouraged" staff to take three weeks of vacation per year.

Barclays rolled out a policy for junior bankers of mandatory leaves of two non-consecutive weeks per year, and allowed no more than 12 consecutive days of work in the office. "The demands of the job are high," read the internal memo announcing the policy, "but our best work is when we work intelligently as a team; not just because we work the hardest or the longest." Of course, research has shown that we almost never do our best work when we work the longest, but it's a start.

JPMorgan Chase allowed analysts the choice to take one "protected weekend" per month. Though, according to the New York Times, one former staffer complained that the weekends had to be scheduled too far in advance and when he used one to see a Broadway show, he was expected to check his email and respond to anything urgent.

This is much like the policy at Credit Suisse, where an internal memo told staffers to stay out of the office on Saturdays, but added, "junior bankers are expected to reply to emails in a timely manner throughout the weekend."

And, as we know, if you're responding to emails, or even reading them, you're at work -- no matter where your body happens to be. Even if no urgent emails come through, just keeping yourself in a state of anticipation for them means you're not going to be fully present wherever you happen to be, and with whomever you happen to be with. And, just as important, it means you're not going to be getting much of the proven recharging benefits of having left the office.

Likewise, in a memo from January, Citigroup joined the other banks in saying analysts should be out of the office from Friday evening until Sunday morning, though also "they should continue to check their email." But proof of the progress we're making comes later in the memo, which states:

> ***Compliance with both the Mandatory Vacation Utilization and Protected Weekend Day guidelines will be tracked and reported to senior management on a regular basis. It has been made clear that exceptions should be rare and defensible. Any exceptions to the Protected Weekend Day guideline must be pre-approved by a Group Head.***

So approval is now needed to come into the office, and Citi staff need to come up with a defense to not take a vacation. Up until now, in most companies, that was the exact opposite.

So, yes, while there's still a lot of progress to be made -- especially in untethering workers from their phones when they're finally allowed out of the office -- the mere fact that Wall Street and the financial world are speaking in these terms is a sign of how deeply these ideas have penetrated our culture.

Of course, this might be a sign of enlightenment, but it's also a sign of simply reading the market -- which is what the heads of the banks are trained to do. As Quartz's Mark DeCambre writes, the new policies aren't just a reaction to the recent suicides, they're also "a reflection of the fact that top graduates now appear to be less inclined to view Wall Street -- and the long hours of financial services-as an ideal career path." According to a Harvard Business School study he cites, in 2006, 42 percent of HBS grads went into finance -- the number now is 27 percent.

But no matter the reason for the changes, it's clear that the way we've been working -- by working ourselves into the ground, if not the grave -- is not sustainable. Not even for Wall Street. And as more and more of the corporate world realizes this, the benefits will ripple through our entire society. "Thanks to their reach and influence on employees, workplaces have a unique power to reframe the mindset around health itself -- from one of sickness to wellness," write Cortney Rowan and Karuna Harishanker, design strategists at the innovation firm Altitude.

And that, in turn, will help bring about the larger change from a model of success based on money, power, and overwork to one based on well-being, wise decisions and good ideas. As we can see from the examples above, the change is happening -- and happening more quickly than I could have dreamed when I began writing Thrive just a year and a half ago. There's still a lot of work to do -- as entire sectors of our economy, especially those that employ our most vulnerable and struggling workers, remain untouched by this progress. But here's hoping that in another year's time, examples of companies that have seen the light will be too numerous to list.

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