

LEADERSHIP AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

HEALTHY PEOPLE,
HEALTHY
COMPANIES

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In this article, Prof. Steven Poelmans discusses his new book, *Workplace Psychological Health*, and implications of workplace wellness issues for companies.

This issue of the *IESE Alumni Magazine*, which highlights the school's new home in New York City, is a fitting place to tackle the subject of wellbeing in the workplace. New York is often singled out for its unparalleled work environment, rapid pace and energy.

But what is a healthy work environment and how can it be created? Both companies and researchers are becoming increasingly concerned with this question. A recently released report by the American Heart Association (AHA) noted that cardiovascular disease (CVD) kills 864,000 Americans each year, making it the leading cause of death in the United States. CVD is strongly linked to workplace stress and, according to the AHA report, 25 percent of women and 18 percent of men around the world suffer from high levels of job stress. In addition, the report states that “the societal benefits of a healthy employed population extend well beyond the workplace.”

By analyzing the causes of workplace stress and taking steps to implement workplace wellness programs, firms can boost the health

levels of their employees and therefore society at large.

In the chapters I authored for the recently released book *Workplace Psychological Health* published by Edward Elgar (2009), I discuss some of the warning signs of work-related stress and address a new approach toward leadership – one that is focused on at IESE Business School.

WELL-BEING AND LIFE SATISFACTION

Over the last five to 10 years, researchers have come to the realization that modern diseases are no longer primarily caused by viruses and bacteria. The causes of death in the population today are more often related to work and lifestyle habits, i.e., the way we actually do things. Coronary heart disease, for example, has been clearly linked to certain behavioral patterns. And the primary reasons for absenteeism in the workplace are back pain and stress, which are related to the pressures of the workplace and everyday work habits.

It may seem counterintuitive, but a larger income does not ensure fewer stress-related health problems. By having more money, you can afford better insurance and better doctors. You can also eat better-quality food. Yet the correlation between health levels and income is surprisingly low.

What researchers have discovered is that health levels are inextricably linked to the way people work and the way they see the world in general.

There are several factors that have a direct impact on happiness and well-being in general. The first factor is a pleasant life. In this regard, having an interesting job or a satisfying relationship can be helpful, but these factors can be temporary. As soon as conflict arises or the positive situation comes to an end, satisfaction can disappear.

Researchers have observed that stable levels of wellbeing are more often created by having an “engaged” and “meaningful” life. This means having either work or some kind of activity outside of work that you enjoy thoroughly and that is linked in some way to the strengths and talents you have.

A meaningful life requires having a job that is not just interesting, but contributes directly toward something you consider important. One of the key rewards of having a meaningful life is that you are better equipped to tolerate obstacles in life, particularly those that affect your personal equilibrium.

Advances in science have clearly demonstrated the link between physical and psychological wellbeing. One of the best cases for demonstrating this is coronary heart disease, which is the number-two cause of death in the world.

One of the risk factors of coronary heart disease and heart attacks is type-A behavioral patterns. Specific kinds of type-A behavior are feelings of hostility and impatience toward the environment. This includes being easily upset and getting

angry quickly when you perceive incompetence or slowness in the people around you. This kind of hostility has been identified as a separate risk factor for coronary heart disease.

**WORKAHOLISM:
THE WARNING SIGNS**

● Some researchers use the number of hours spent working as a criterion for identifying workaholism. In our research, however, we have found that this criterion is not the only key. We have found examples of professionals who work very long hours and still have a very satisfying life and feel very well. So what’s going on there?

The key is the way you

HEALTH LEVELS ARE INEXTRICABLY LINKED TO THE WAY PEOPLE WORK.



TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING WELLNESS PROGRAMS

In its report, the American Heart Association (AHA) provides specific recommendations for establishing workplace wellness programs. The recommendations include creating a social and physical environment that is conducive to healthy behavior, creating incentives for people to modify their lifestyles, and taking into account the characteristics of today's highly diverse workforce.

Moreover, companies are urged to implement worksite wellness programs that "help working families balance work and family commitments and incorporate policies around childcare, elder/dependent care, telecommuting and flexible work schedules."

work. What seems to characterize work addiction is a lack of control or an obsessive inability to not work. Another indicator is a lack of pleasure derived from work. Work is regarded as something unavoidable and, although you feel guilty about working so many hours, you can't seem to stop it.

Very often you can identify an addiction through abstinence symptoms, i.e., the behavior you exhibit when you cannot do a certain thing or take a certain substance. In the case of workplace addiction, if you become nervous or agitated when you cannot work, this may be a sign of workplace addiction. People may also criticize you for working too much. The ultimate proof of work addiction is when working hard begins to damage the quality of your decisions and relationships, and you are either unaware of this situation or don't care.

THE RELUCTANT HARD WORKER

- The reluctant hard worker is a person who is under pressure to work very hard, but does not enjoy the work and/or would prefer not to work so hard. This often happens when people are moved within an organization like pieces on a chessboard, without being consulted, or when they are required to do a job they are not prepared for. In these cases, the person has to accept the situation, although it may cause great anxiety and suffering.

In the current economic environment, such cases may become more prevalent as people stick with jobs they do not like because they feel they don't have other options.

THE REMEDY: A NEW LEADERSHIP STYLE

- An important step towards improving wellbeing in the workplace is viewing professionals as people in the fullest sense, rather than merely employees. This is what we

teach at IESE Business School. This means seeing them as individuals who also have families, unique goals and ambitions.

Following this thinking, leaders should focus on helping members of the organization develop as people. This means going beyond simply establishing objectives, checking to see whether they have been met, and then rewarding or demoting people based on results.

It means leaving behind an autocratic style of leadership that disregards the human aspects of people. It's about asking how to help people develop the competencies they need, not only to reach their objectives, but also to be more efficient and satisfied individuals in the workplace.

The development of a workplace wellness program can be a critical component of the process. Since they require resources and time, workplace wellness programs are particularly challenging for small companies to create. Yet wellness programs have a proven track record for reducing CVD and are an ideal opportunity to help improve the world's health at large.

A key trend we are seeing now is the personalization of management education. At IESE, this idea is incorporated in the classroom, so that we not only talk about accounting, marketing, finance, operations and logistics. We also actually talk about questions such as: what's your purpose in life? Where do you want to go? To what extent have you been taking care of yourself, which is a condition for taking care of other people? We talk about time management, life-work balance and stress management.

All of these issues are ultimately related to the health of people, and therefore, companies today. As stated in Latin, *mens sano in corpore sano*.

In the same way, we can say: healthy people mean a healthy organization.

MORE INFORMATION:

www.circ.ahajournals.org/cgi/content/full/120/17/1725.