



Workplace wellbeing

How we got here
and where we went wrong.



WELLWISE

WORKPLACE WELLBEING OPTIMIZED



1. WHERE WE ARE TODAY ▶

2. A BRIEF HISTORY ▶

3. THE LOST DECADE ▶

4. AN INVISIBLE EPIDEMIC ▶

5. THE NEW WORLD ▶

6. A RADICALLY DIFFERENT APPROACH ▶

7. NEXT STEPS ▶



“


Almost all of the executives cite workplace wellbeing as one of their main concerns. Many even call it their top priority.

Morneau Shepell, 2019

Chapter 1.

Where we are today.

[Read chapter >](#)



There can hardly be a business leader alive who is not aware of the rapidly increasing level of noise (and expectation) around the topic of workplace wellbeing.

However, despite decades of activity in this area, surprisingly few organizations have moved beyond simplistic ‘yogurt and yoga’ wellbeing programs to develop and implement a properly resourced and integrated wellbeing strategy at the highest level. Given this, we should not be surprised to learn that levels of employee wellbeing remain stubbornly low, and many workplace wellbeing programs are failing to deliver the gains that were promised.

The reasons for this failure are many and varied, and some are unique to the culture and operating environment of individual organizations. However, others are a product of our history and so we believe it is helpful to understand a little about how this failure has come about.

Whether you are a member of a ‘wellbeing team’ exhibiting heroic levels of enthusiasm, energy, and commitment for limited return, or you’re a C-suite leader wrestling with how to prioritize spending into what feels like a bottomless pit, we feel your pain and we’re here to help.

If you can’t wait to get started then we’d suggest heading straight to our free workplace wellbeing toolkit where you can assess your current approach and design an international best-practise strategy using our audit, checklist, calculator and more.

[Free toolkit >](#)

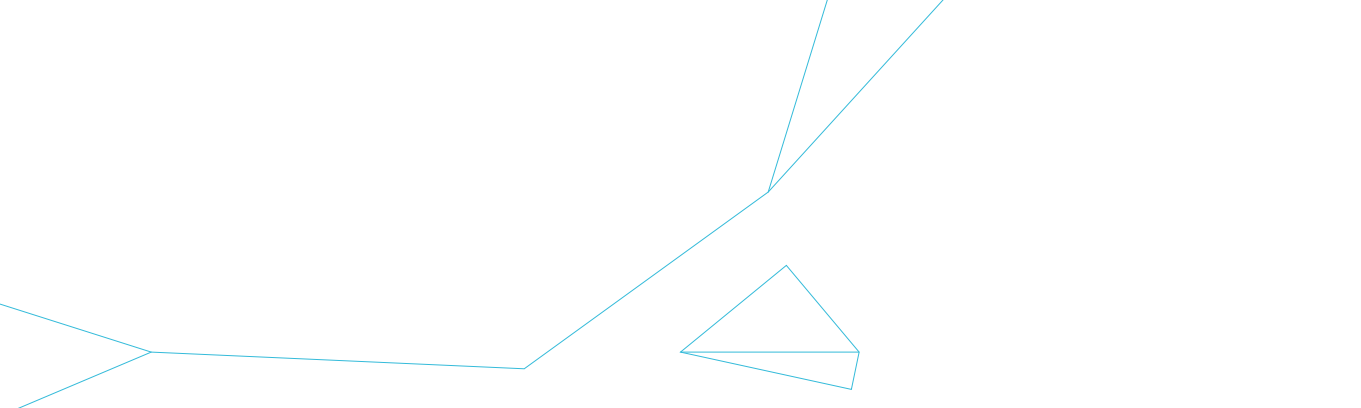
If you have a little more time, you are new to the topic, or you simply want to understand workplace wellbeing better, then this e-book will give you a brief introduction to the topic – how we got here, and where we went wrong.

[Continue: A brief history >](#)

Chapter 2.

A brief history.

[Read chapter ▶](#)




Although its origins can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, the field of workplace wellbeing is still relatively immature.

This is evidenced by a lack of agreement around even simple definitions, for example the conflation of 'wellbeing' with other terms such as wellness, engagement, satisfaction, resilience or happiness, as well as inconsistencies in the research methodologies that underpin our knowledge in this area. The rapidly changing nature of work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has also presented new challenges around workplace wellbeing. Understanding these issues is useful in gaining an appreciation of why so many wellbeing strategies are falling short of expectations.

Modern workplace wellbeing has its roots in occupational health and safety (OH&S), which traces back to the Industrial Revolution and the 150 years following it. This was

a period of profound social change, as dissatisfied workers lobbied for improved working conditions and reduced hours. This resulted in a series of legislative changes aimed at increasing worker protections and occupational health and safety. This movement culminated in the first iterations of occupational health and safety legislation being passed in the UK and the USA in the early 1970s.

Even before these early attempts to improve working conditions there were some early predecessors of today's workplace wellbeing programs in the form of occupational social work and occupational alcohol programs implemented in the USA in the early 1900s. In the UK, the first Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) were established in the late 1970s, followed by a range of workplace health promotion and return to work programs in the 1980s.



One important and common feature of these early programs is worth noting; they primarily focussed on the individual, and on physical health or workplace rehabilitation rather than proactively trying to prevent illness or improve wellbeing and business outputs more broadly.

A key turning point for workplace wellbeing was Professor Dame Carol Black's review of the health of the working-age population 2008. Her report, 'Working for a Healthier Tomorrow', promoted the importance of a more holistic, preventative approach to health and wellbeing in the workplace. This began a considerable shift in how wellbeing was approached and addressed.

[Read the report >](#)

WELLBEING VS WELLNESS

While 'wellness' generally refers to an individual's physical health (including diet and exercise), 'wellbeing' has a much broader and deeper meaning incorporating things like motivation, accomplishment and life satisfaction in addition to physical and mental health.

While there are many different types of activity carried out under the banner of 'workplace wellbeing', most of these tend to focus on physical wellness rather than deeper and broader wellbeing. Although wellness is important for employees, the only way to genuinely improve outcomes for both employees and organizations is to adopt an integrated approach that addresses all the dimensions of wellbeing and considers employees in the context of their organization.

[Learn more >](#)

[Continue: The lost decade >](#)

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines workplace wellbeing as:

Related to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization.

Chapter 3.

The lost decade.

[Read chapter >](#)

Significant progress in employer attitudes has been made over the last decade, with increasing numbers of organizations in the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, and parts of Europe in particular, attempting to prioritize workplace wellbeing.

An increase in reporting of mental health issues and levels of absenteeism and presenteeism have been key drivers of efforts during this period, while at the same time, organizations have begun to recognize the value of improving employee wellbeing to the organization as a whole.

Our experience suggests that this increased focus on workplace wellbeing has been driven partly by the rapid expansion of the personal wellbeing / wellness sector, valued at \$4.5 trillion in 2018.

TERMINOLOGY

Absenteeism.

The habit or routine of staying away from work associated without a valid reason and is often associated with low motivation or work-related anxieties.

Presenteeism.

The act of regularly showing up for work unfit to properly fulfil the job role, often because physical or mental ill-health prevents it.

Leaveism (or leavism).

When employees do not take proper breaks or vacations and instead use the time to catch up or 'get ahead' on their work.



Employees are now more aware of the importance of looking after their own wellbeing and have greater expectations of their employers in not only supporting this but actively contributing to it too.

Today, workplace wellbeing initiatives look well beyond traditional health, safety, and rehabilitation programs, with offerings commonly including fitness promotion; healthy eating; weight management; stress management; health screening; smoking cessation; free fruit; subsidized gym memberships and cycle to work schemes. However, initiatives continue to focus heavily on health promotion and on individual wellness rather than integrated workplace wellbeing. Sadly, as a result, wellbeing is too often perceived as a cost center and not a key investment or driver of overall organizational performance.

Many of the individual wellbeing interventions described above have been studied, trialed, and independently piloted as part of academic efforts to better understand workplace wellbeing. We frequently see the results of these studies used to 'sell' similar individual interventions to organizations. For example, a study on the impact of smoking may lead a company to evolve a smoking cessation intervention. Whilst this should not be discouraged, the approach is piecemealed and reactive which will limit the possible impact it can have across a whole organization.

Research into workplace wellbeing has not been limited to academics. Some leading organizations such as Unilever and SAP have invested heavily in wellbeing research, as they seek to understand the issues faced by their workforce and the effectiveness of their workplace wellbeing strategies.

While the body of research into workplace wellbeing has provided some insight into the effectiveness and returns of certain types of interventions, it has not provided a holistic understanding of how the components of wellbeing fit together. This decade of apparently strong progress could be said to have delivered more heat than light, and in some ways the misdirection of focus and spending has increased skepticism that real and sustainable returns on wellbeing investment are achievable. However, as our Whitepaper shows, a focus on strategies that reflect the truly integrated nature of wellbeing in the workplace and align with wider strategic goals (including financial performance) have been shown to deliver extraordinary results.

[Read the whitepaper](#) ▶

That is why a more integrated approach will be the focus for WellWise and other leading workplace wellbeing practitioners and researchers over the next decade.

[Continue: An invisible epidemic](#) ▶



Chapter 4.

An invisible epidemic.

[Read chapter ▶](#)

Despite the growing understanding of, and focus on, workplace wellbeing, current practice built on the legacy of occupational health and individual wellness is simply not delivering results.

Employee participation in workplace wellbeing initiatives is low, and key indicators of how employees are faring at work are alarming. The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD), for example, published research showing that approximately:

10%

OF WORKERS SAY
THEY ARE MISERABLE.

20%

SAY THEY ALWAYS
OR OFTEN FEEL 'EXHAUSTED'
OR UNDER 'EXCESSIVE
PRESSURE' AT WORK.

25%

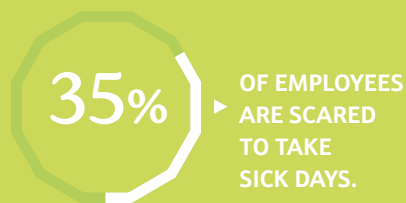
OF WORKERS REPORT THAT
THEIR JOB HAS A NEGATIVE
IMPACT ON THEIR MENTAL
OR PHYSICAL HEALTH.



Organizations work tirelessly and invest substantially in ensuring their technology and machinery works to optimal efficiency. Yet they so often overlook or fail to apply the same strategic focus on the wellbeing of their employees.



**DAYS OF PRESENTEEISM
PER EMPLOYEE.**



**21% OF EMPLOYEES ARE TERRIFIED
TO ARRIVE LATE, EVEN WHEN THEY
HAVE A LEGITIMATE REASON.**

Such figures are highly concerning, not just for those individuals but also for the organizations they work for. As a consequence, these organizations are likely to be performing significantly below their full potential.

At WellWise we have spoken to many leaders who are experiencing 'wellbeing paralysis'. They are overwhelmed by the wealth of information and guidance available, and despite years of investment are not seeing the results they expected. They are rooted to their current position and are not clear on how to navigate forward.

While absenteeism rates in the UK almost halved between 1993 and 2008, there has been little change in absenteeism rates over the last decade. Rates of presenteeism are climbing steadily, jumping from 20.3 days per employee in 2014 to 35 days per employee in 2019. Several experts believe that lower reported absenteeism rates may actually be a result of the increase in presenteeism rather than a genuine decline in illness and disengagement, and the associated costs in the workplace.

Moreover, presenteeism is a much more serious issue facing employers. It is estimated by Unilever to account for three times as much lost productivity as absenteeism. Some of the reasons for presenteeism are explored in a Chartered Accountants' Benevolent Association (CABA) report into wellbeing in the accounting profession. It states that 35% of employees admitted they are scared to take sick days and 21% terrified to arrive late even when they have a legitimate reason.

A control and fear-driven culture of this nature is highly damaging to organizations and yet, often an unseen threat.

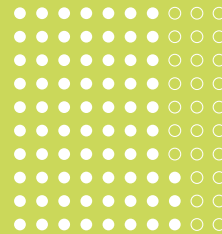
A further indication that the increased focus on workplace wellbeing is failing to achieve genuine change is found in the soaring rates of 'leaveism'. This is sometimes referred to as the 'always on' culture made possible by the rise of digital technology. A survey by the insurance company Aviva, found that leaveism can result in as much as 2 hours 29 minutes additional out-of-hours work each day for some employees. Unfortunately, leaveism is now becoming entrenched at epidemic levels. Seventy-three percent of respondents to a CIPD survey reported that they had observed leaveism in their workplace over the previous 12 months. More concerning still is the finding from the same survey, that only 32% of organizations who had observed leaveism had taken any action to address it.

Employers may feel they are getting more 'bang' for their salary buck, however, like presenteeism, leaveism presents a significant hidden risk to overall organizational performance. Those who regularly participate in leaveism or presenteeism are more likely to suffer 'burnout' and pose a significant financial burden. Burnt-out employees are less productive and engaged, and make more mistakes. As a result, they are estimated to cost their employers 34% of their annual salary.

[Continue: The new world](#) ▶

UP TO **2:29**

**ADDITIONAL OUT-OF-HOURS
WORK EACH DAY.**



73%

**OBSERVED LEAVEISM
IN THEIR WORKPLACE
OVER THE PREVIOUS
12 MONTHS.**



**BURNT-OUT
EMPLOYEES ARE
LESS PRODUCTIVE,
LESS ENGAGED
AND MAKE
MORE MISTAKES.**

**AS A RESULT, THEY ARE ESTIMATED
TO COST THEIR EMPLOYER
AN ADDITIONAL 34% OF THEIR
ANNUAL SALARY.**

A large, light green quotation mark icon consisting of two curved shapes facing each other.

Both presenteeism and leaveism, if left unaddressed, risk becoming cultural norms that spread throughout an organization.

Chapter 5.

The new world.

[Read chapter ▶](#)



The rise in technology over the past decade has facilitated growth in the ‘gig economy’ where individuals forsake the stability of traditional work arrangements, choosing nomadic professional lifestyles.

They work on a consultancy, freelance or temporary basis on a series of ‘gigs’ or projects. It is important to recognize that those who make this choice are not always doing so for economic reasons and there is evidence that, despite their potentially unreliable and unsteady income, gig economy workers are more satisfied with this life choice than their peers as it affords them greater flexibility and autonomy. These are two critical wellbeing factors that are often overlooked in traditional workplace wellbeing strategies.

However, participants in the gig economy are also more prone to anxiety and depression and can experience greater levels of financial instability. While our understanding of the wellbeing challenges presented by the gig economy is in its infancy, the increasing dependence on this sector raises two key questions around wellbeing. Firstly, what does the rise of the gig economy tell us about how our employees experience today’s workplaces, and what can we do to attract



and retain top talent who might otherwise prefer the flexibility that 'gigs' offer? Secondly, as more organizations engage with workers from the gig economy, how can we build workplace environments that support the wellbeing of all? This must include those who are not permanent employees but whose optimal performance we depend on? These questions are likely to become even more pressing as highlighted by Gartner research which found that:



32%

OF ORGANIZATIONS
ARE REPLACING
FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES
WITH CONTINGENT
WORKERS AS A COST-
SAVING MEASURE
POST-COVID-19.



COVID-19 has changed almost everything about the way in which we work, how we think about our workplaces and our wellbeing. During the pandemic, many previously held beliefs about barriers to remote work were dismantled as workers worldwide were suddenly forced to work from home, and trends towards digitalization were accelerated. Teams were forced to find new ways to connect and collaborate as the established command and control management structures struggled to meet the need for increased speed and agility.

Technology became key to meeting many of the challenges presented by our new way of working. Whilst technology has the potential to level out some of the inequities in the workplace, it may also lead to others feeling left behind and / or isolated. In addition, as teams were separated from their managers and physical workplaces, it became clear that more reliable data was required to better understand which employees may be more vulnerable to poor wellbeing, and could in turn identify how to support this 'invisible' workforce.

[Continue: A radically different approach >](#)

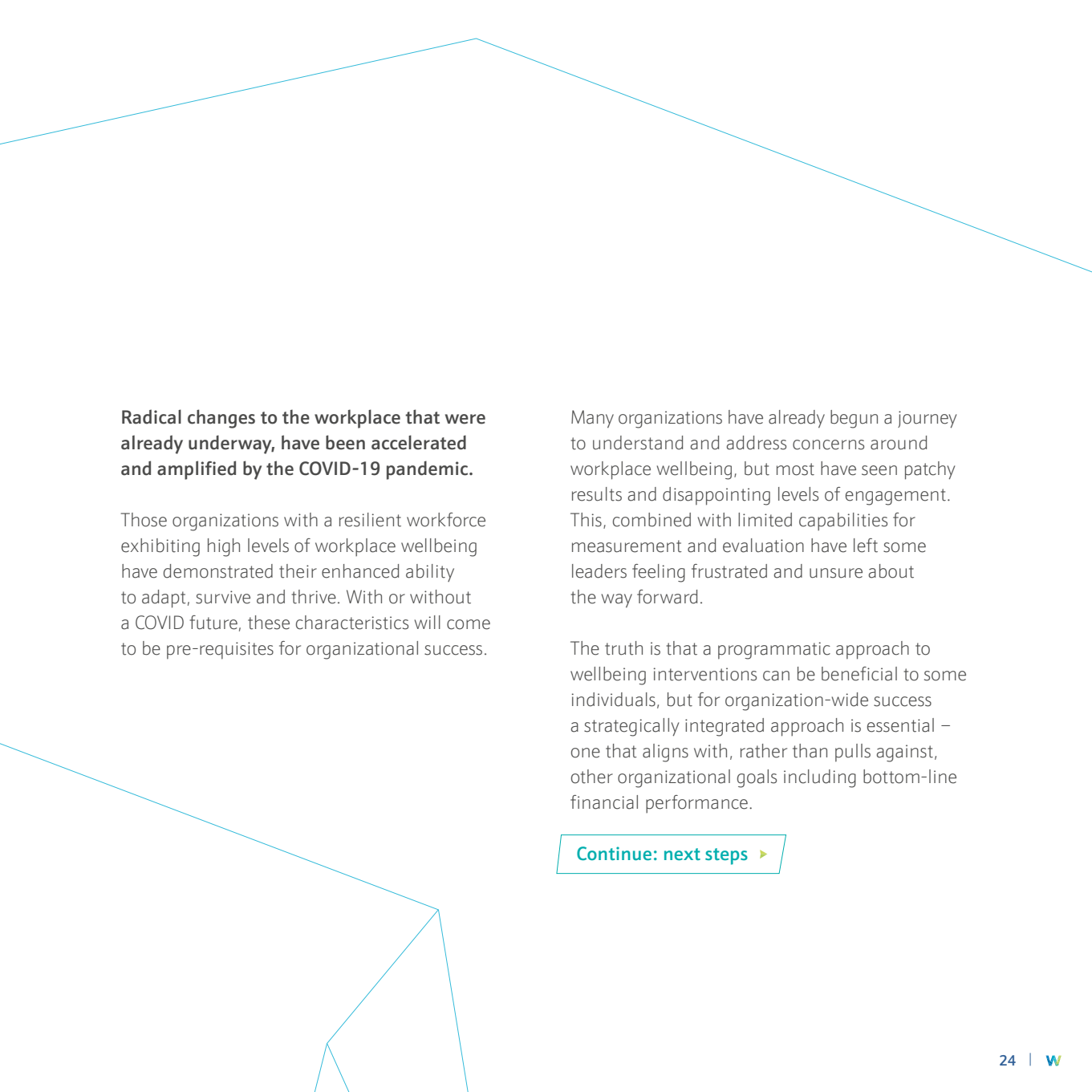


“During the COVID-19 pandemic, for many, the traditional 9-5 office workday disappeared.”

Chapter 6.

A radically different approach.

[Read chapter](#) ▶



Radical changes to the workplace that were already underway, have been accelerated and amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those organizations with a resilient workforce exhibiting high levels of workplace wellbeing have demonstrated their enhanced ability to adapt, survive and thrive. With or without a COVID future, these characteristics will come to be pre-requisites for organizational success.

Many organizations have already begun a journey to understand and address concerns around workplace wellbeing, but most have seen patchy results and disappointing levels of engagement. This, combined with limited capabilities for measurement and evaluation have left some leaders feeling frustrated and unsure about the way forward.

The truth is that a programmatic approach to wellbeing interventions can be beneficial to some individuals, but for organization-wide success a strategically integrated approach is essential – one that aligns with, rather than pulls against, other organizational goals including bottom-line financial performance.

Continue: next steps ►



“

Workplace wellbeing requires the same organization-wide commitment and focus as any other major strategic change. The result should be a quadruple-win; individuals, organizations, customers, and wider society will all reap the rewards.

Chapter 7.

Next steps.

[Read chapter ▶](#)

NEXT STEPS

If your organization is committed to improving workplace wellbeing but disappointed in, or unsure of, the returns you are currently achieving from your investment, WellWise is the solution you've been looking for. Our proprietary diagnostics system uncovers the hidden personal, cultural, and structural factors that undermine the effectiveness of workplace wellbeing programs and initiatives in your organization. It has been developed and refined through decades of academic research and real-world experience. Evidence based, strategically framed and focused on bottom-line results.

- ◆ **Learn more by downloading our whitepaper.**

Why your workplace wellbeing strategy is failing, and how to rescue it.

[Read the whitepaper >](#)

- ◆ **Free workplace wellbeing toolkit.**

Use our audit, ROI Calculator, strategy checklist, and other tools to design a best-practise strategy.

[Free toolkit >](#)

- ◆ **Follow us on LinkedIn or visit our website.**

For the latest news and insights.

[Visit our LinkedIn >](#)

[bewellwise.com >](https://www.bewellwise.com)

- ◆ **Ready to talk?**

Give us a call or drop us an email.

[hello@bewellwise.com >](mailto:hello@bewellwise.com)

[+44 \(0\)203 442 0360](tel:+442034420360)