

Wellbeing in Higher Education

By Professor Sir Cary Cooper, Lead Champion for Wellbeing at the University of Manchester
8 November, 2017



Wellbeing at work is now top of the agenda for many private and public sector bodies. It has moved from a 'nice to have' to a 'must have' as the costs associated with poor mental wellbeing at work (e.g. sickness absence, presenteeism and poor productivity) has reached around £26b in the UK workforce, which doesn't count the enormous cost of the NHS treating people with the common mental disorders of depression, anxiety and stress. Indeed, lack of mental wellbeing in the workplace now represents over 45% of all lost working days, with 24 working days lost per employee (11.7m in total). The productivity costs are difficult to calculate but with the UK 7th in the G7 and 17th in the G20 on productivity per capita, it is a worrying problem, particularly as we enter the Brexit era.

In the public sector, the costs are even higher for a variety of reasons, most prominent of which is the lack of a trained managerial cadre. This is particularly relevant to higher education, where from department heads upwards there is a paucity of effective 'people managers', who have the training and social skills needed in this ever changing landscape. We know from extensive research what depletes and enhances the wellbeing of employees; manageable workloads, realistic deadlines, flexible working, being managed by praise/reward and not fault-finding, having control and autonomy over their job and feeling valued, trusted and supported. The challenge for universities in this context is to ensure that people in managerial roles, from department heads and upwards, are selected for their social and interpersonal skills, are properly trained and rewarded for the role and have some tenure in it.

But the psychological contract between employer and employee demands the employees also look after themselves as well; that employees look after their physical and psychological health, and take the opportunities the employer provides to do this. Wellbeing programmes abound in many workplaces, from employee assistance programmes (e.g. counselling services), to physical health facilities to corporate social responsibility activities (e.g. Community or student -based) to personal development training (eg resilience training). All of these can help the individual cope better with the pressures of his or her working life, as more is demanded of all us in a less job secure, under-resourced and overloaded work environment in most of the public sector.

The employer has an obligation as well, indeed, a duty of care to ensure that the working environment doesn't create ill health, that people with problems outside of work are supported and that the wellbeing of all is a major 'people objective'. As John Ruskin, the British social reformer, wrote in 1851 "In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed; they must be fit for it, they must not do too much of it, and they must have a sense of success in it." That is the challenge for the organisation and the individual, as we both strive to create a healthy and productive workplace.

And this is the challenge we have at the University of Manchester over the coming years to create the right kind of 'people culture', to provide opportunities for individuals to grow and develop and to minimise as much as we can the uncertainties in an ever changing higher education landscape. As Studs Terkel wrote in his acclaimed book *WORKING*: "Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying".

Let's work together to make this happen.