

The rise of chief well-being officers: Fad or the future?

Workplace mental well-being is a C-suite responsibility. There's no running away from that.

Anthea Ong

It was World Mental Health Day in 2018 when I was introduced to a chief mental health officer for the very first time.

This was about five months after I started WorkWell Leaders, an informal leaders work group to champion workplace mental health as a strategic priority.

He was visiting from New York and reported directly to the group chief executive, who was driving a vision of creating "the world's healthiest workforce".

Since then, many employers have stepped up support for employee health and well-being.

Now, some leading-edge organisations – Deloitte, Aon, BP, Schroders, EY and even the US Central Intelligence Agency – are taking this commitment one step further by appointing chief well-being officers or chief mental well-being officers (CWOs or CMWOs), in addition to chief human resource officers (CHROs).

MENTAL WELL-BEING IMPACTS ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Such efforts prioritising workplace mental health ought to be welcomed, in the light of new research findings. Forty-three per cent of employees in Singapore reported that their mental health has affected work productivity while one in three found it hard to concentrate at work, according to the latest Asia Mental Health Index.

Lost productivity due to anxiety and depression costs the Singapore economy \$15.7 billion each year, or 2.9 per cent of our gross domestic product. Stress-related illnesses cost us \$3.1 billion a year as a nation.

These troubling developments have implications for employers. A member of WorkWell Leaders last week shared his grave concern with a growing and likely permanent trend that employees are leaving not for more pay but for more well-being.

But how much well-being support is enough? Where should mental well-being sit in the corporate and board agendas? And how do we measure employee well-being as a business outcome?

Are well-being programmes and policies adequate? Do we need to transform the way we work to address the root cause of the mental health challenge?



Positive mental health has been found to be associated with creativity and innovation. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Hiring a CWO would be a shot in the arm for organisations grappling with mental health, particularly after the isolation and upheaval wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

MODELS WORTH EMULATING

Can the CWO concept be applied in Singapore? It already is. Dr Andrew Tay leads the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Health & Wellbeing team, established in November 2020 under the Office of the President.

With dedicated investment and an organisation-wide mental health strategy, NUS saw marked improvements in mental resilience as an organisation.

Year-on-year findings in their annual well-being survey indicated stigma reduction, improved empathy and acceptance of people with mental health conditions, increased utilisation of in-house counselling services and a reduction in the prevalence of people with high risk of depression among employees.

To be clear, the CWO is a different role from the CHRO, who is largely responsible for furthering business objectives via recruitment, succession planning, training and remuneration. These are important outcomes that intersect with well-being, but do not always directly address

them.

A designated CWO is charged with cultivating a culture of workplace well-being by setting cross-functional agendas aligned with psychological safety. This might take the form of education programmes, capacity-building, internal advocacy and partnerships with service providers.

In many ways, CWOs serve as a catalyst to their C-suite peers by embedding workplace well-being into corporate strategy that trickles down to employee experience.

Another CWO-equivalent is Ms Maninderjit Kaur, deputy director of engagement and culture with the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), whose role is to build a safe and thriving workplace culture. Mental well-being is especially critical to AIC's 1,000 employees, whose work with vulnerable communities is emotionally complex and difficult.

Since she assumed her role in May 2019, she has overseen the roll-out of wellness programmes including the implementation of flexible work arrangements, a robust peer support system and manager training to address burnout.

As a result, AIC has seen measurable outcomes including the lowest attrition rate in its history and consistently high staff engagement rates.

A NATIONAL CHRO AS A SHARED SERVICE FOR SMES

The recently announced National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy recognises employee well-being as a core pillar, with plans to strengthen well-being support systems and provide more avenues for individuals with mental health conditions to receive aid and employment.

There are about 200,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Singapore hiring 70 per cent of our total employment. I am one of them as the founder of a social enterprise, Hush TeaBar, which hires deaf people and people with lived experience in mental health.

Understandably, most SMEs do not have a full-time human resources (HR) manager, much less a CWO. HR is sometimes conflated with finance, personnel and payroll administration such that the mental well-being of staff is left to chance and episodic interventions, not as a strategic consideration. Well-being support programmes are also costly, with no economies of scale and critical mass.

Like Hush TeaBar, a few SMEs I know like social enterprise The Social Space provide for counselling services to full-time employees by working with community mental health providers, fellow social

enterprises and of course public hospitals. The cost is much lower than private providers, but the wait is unfortunately much longer.

As part of our smart nation push and digitalisation efforts, we started a Chief Technology Officer-as-a-Service under the Infocomm Media Development Authority in 2020 to give SMEs the confidence and convenience to go digital.

In the same token, can we also start a Chief Human Resource Officer-as-a-Service under the Ministry of Manpower or Institute of HR Professionals to give SMEs the confidence and capability to take care of their employees' mental well-being and other human development needs as a business strategy?

WELL-BEING IS A C-SUITE RESPONSIBILITY

Many well-meaning attempts to appoint a CWO or equivalent may relegate well-being into yet another checkbox exercise. Yoga classes and art therapy lessons are no substitutes for a missing workplace mental health strategy.

The primary objective of a CWO is to build a healthy workplace culture and implement concrete programmes that reduce stigma, promote psychological safety and mitigate burnout.

These outcomes require genuine buy-in from the C-suite, without which companies will be vulnerable to well-being washing.

One could argue that if a CEO's No. 1 job is to be the steward of a corporation's growth, then their No. 2 job must surely be as chief mental health officer caring for the mental engines of that growth.

After all, a mentally healthy workforce is more creative, innovative and resilient. This is a crucial advantage in an increasingly complex and competitive business environment. Positive mental health has been found to be associated with creativity and innovation. In a 2021 study, those "not struggling at all" with mental health spent 23 per cent less effort executing creative work.

Most fellow CEOs I speak to about human-centred leadership share an earnest desire to do more. These leaders are in good company, as 84 per cent of employers plan to enhance employee mental health in the next year, according to a Modern Health survey. However, there remains a disconnect in employee reception as only around half (53 per cent) of their employees feel their employer cares about mental health.

Whether companies need to hire a CWO is an open question, though I'm curious to see how this role evolves. It's clear that what is needed to make employee well-being and satisfaction a strategic and urgent priority as a business outcome would clearly require everyone, from CEO to the CHRO or CWO and down to direct managers, to get on board.

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