Burning up and burning out.

Human Sustainability in a Time of Emotional Climate Change

Bahia El Oddi
Founder, Human Sustainability Inside Out
MBA at Harvard Business School (Honors)

Carin-Isabel Knoop
Executive Director at Harvard Business School
Case Research & Writing Group – Harvard University, USA

Abstract

The world is focused on countering climate change to guarantee our survival. But as our planet burns up, we are burning out. The costs of mental health disorders dwarf those of climate change and yet do not get commensurate attention from global leaders. Health care providers and organizations have acted first but need support of the financial markets and public decision-makers. In this paper, we argue that the economic and social toll of mental health and wellbeing issues deserve equal attention from business and public leaders because Human Sustainability is as important as Environmental Sustainability for our ability to endure and thrive as a species in harmony with others.

Keywords: emotional climate; mental health; compassionate management; corporate responsibility; personal responsibility; health policy; normative accounting; inflection points.

Introduction

Much as our climate has changed, so has the reported level of employee wellbeing. As our planet seems to be burning up, we are burning out. To promote human sustainability, public and private players must focus on and attempt to quantify the "human pollution" imposed by companies on their employees and, by extension, their families and communities.[1]

---

[1] For our purposes, "human pollution" is the emanation of harmful emotions and behaviors (e.g., pressure, humiliation, poor management) by individuals into their environment - in this case, workers in the workplace. "Emotional climate" indicates the emotional state and relationships among the community members and hence quantifies the quality of the environment within a particular context – in this paper, the workplace. "Human capital footprint" (or "emotional footprint") alludes to the psychological contribution and impact of organizations on their employees, as well as individuals on others.

This paper aims to describe contributing factors to worsening reported employee mental health[2] and wellbeing in the workplace and provide guidance, tools, and concrete frameworks to manage and measure human capital sustainability. Our goal is to help organizations consider how they would account for their "human capital footprint" – as more and more are for their environmental footprint – and how investors and the financial markets would evaluate their performance and reward best performers.

Mental health has been an issue for many decades. Depression and anxiety cost the global economy about $1 trillion a year in lost productivity, according to the World Health Organization. In the U.S., a study estimated major depressive disorder costs to reach $210 billion, about half of it attributable to absenteeism and presenteeism (present at work but not fully performing).[3] Over the past five years, U.S. employers' behavioral health expenses rose more than 10% annually, compared to 5% for other medical costs.[4]

In contrast, the cost of climate change reached $210 billion in 2020[5], or the $95 billion in damages[6] caused by climate change disasters (e.g., tropical storms, severe storms, wildfires) in the U.S. in 2020 –more than double the 41-year average of $45.7 billion.

Yet mental health remains a minor topic in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). Environmental impact prevails as the critical focus of ESG negotiations and actions among global private and public leaders. Even if the latest U.N. Climate Change Conference (COP) event might have disappointed, progress has been made since the first World Climate Conference in 1979; countries and corporations made strides and promises towards a net-zero emissions future with ambitious new commitments.

The economic and social toll of mental health and wellbeing issues deserve equal attention from business and public leaders. It is time to consider Human Sustainability

---

[2] According to the World Health Organization, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." In this context, "mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." The definition implies that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities. Mental health is an integral and essential component of health. World Health Organization, "Mental health in the workplace," https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/promotion-prevention/mental-health-in-the-workplace, accessed November 2021.

[3] Paul E. Greenberg, MS, MA; Andree-Anne Fournier, MA; Tammy Sisitsky, MA; Crystal T. Pike, MBA; and Ronald C. Kessler, PhD, "The Economic Burden of Adults With Major Depressive Disorder in the United States," J Clin Psychiatry 2015;76(2):155-162, https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.14m09298, accessed November 2021.

[4] Angela La Vito, "Anxiety is expensive: Employee mental health costs rise twice as fast as all other medical expenses", CNBC Health and Sciences, September 28, 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/26/employers-are-starting-to-think-about-healthy-differently.html, accessed November 2021.

[5] Muiche Re, Record hurricane season and major wildfires – The natural disaster figures for 2020", January 7, 2021, accessed November 2021, https://www.munichre.com/en/company/media-relations/media-information-and-corporate-news/media-information/2021/2020-natural-disasters-balance.html, accessed November 2021.

[6] Adam B. Smith, "2020 U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in historical context," Climate Gov, January 2018, https://www.climate.gov/disasters2020, accessed November 2021.

as important as Environmental Sustainability for our ability to endure and thrive as a species in harmony with others.

Prior efforts at promoting wellbeing at work have not been sufficient

Occupational social work emerged in the late 1800s with U.S. companies such as H.J. Heinz, which started to hire and deploy "social welfare secretaries" to assist workers with personal issues such as insurance, loans, and housing. By the 20th century, Macy's Department of Social Services provided monetary support and address employees' psychiatric wellbeing.[7]

In the 1940s, companies launched occupational programs to manage productivity losses and poor work quality due to alcoholism[8]. Voluntary and confidential employee assistance programs (EAPs), were created soon after to help employees and managers deal with personal challenges impacting job performance, health, and wellbeing in order to optimize an organization's success."[9]

In the 1950s, after U.S. EAPs started to include resources for mental health in the 1950s, the Hughes Act required all U.S. federal agencies to offer EAPs by the 1970s.[10] By the late 1980s, many EAP services, including counseling, were extended to employee families.[11] Private EAP companies began to serve private sector organizations and their employees.[12]

However, in 2015, only 3% of eligible employees took advantage these offerings,[13] provided by nearly 80% of U.S. employers,[14] including most *Fortune* 500 companies.[15] EAPs had a positive employees' mental wellbeing: employee absences related to mental or emotional wellbeing decreased by an average of 6.8 hours when employees engaged an EAP; for employees who had been missing significant time (20 hours of work or more), the average decrease was 34.4 hours.[16] Depression symptoms became

[7] *Compassionate Management of Mental Health in the Modern Workplace*, Carin-Isabel Knoop and John A. Quelch, Springer 2018, p. 24.

[8] United States Office of Personnel Management, "Work-Life: Employee Assistance Programs," https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/worklife/employee-assistance-programs/#url=Overview, accessed February 2017.

[9] United States Office of Personnel Management, "Work-Life: Employee Assistance Programs."

[10] United States Office of Personnel Management, "Work-Life: Employee Assistance Programs."

[11] Mark Attridge et al., "History and Growth of the EAP Field," EASNA Research Notes 1, no. 1 (August 2009): 2, https://www.easna.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/EASNAResearchNotesNo1HistoryAUG2009081109_000.pdf, accessed February 2017.

[12] United States Office of Personnel Management, "Work-Life: Employee Assistance Programs."

[13] Matt Dunning, "Employee Assistance Programs Underutilized by Employees," Business Insurance, January 5, 2014, http://www.businessinsurance.com/article/20140105/NEWS03/301059979, accessed February 2017.

[14] Society for Human Resource Management, "2015 Employee Benefits," March 2015, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2015-Employee-Benefits.pdf, accessed February 2017.

[15] Sharlyn Lauby, "Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) Can Improve Well-Being," WorkWell, January 25, 2016, http://workwell.unum.com/2016/01/employee-assistance-program-eap-can-improve-well-being/, accessed February 2017.

[16] Sean Fogarty, "C-Suite Increasingly Focused on Mental Health," *Benefits News*, February 24, 2017, https://www.benefitnews.com/opinion/c-suite-increasingly-focused-on-mental-health, accessed March 2017.

less severe for 85% of EAP participants who received care for depression.[17] Alcohol use decreased dramatically.[18] While only 52% of employees reported high productivity before EAP assistance, about 81% did after.[19]

More recently, companies invested in employee stress-reduction programs. Some corporate leaders embraced mindfulness, a Buddhist practice of cultivating non-judgmental awareness of the mind's thought patterns, which research has found to reduce stress and improve focus.[20]

Efforts researchers, managers, and regulators to improve employees' working conditions resulted in the legal protection of most workers in Westernized countries against excessive overtime, discrimination, and sexual harassment. Today, employees benefit from shorter work schedules, improved workplace conditions, and more paid time off for illness and health. Despite such efforts, only 30% of U.S. employees are engaged at work.[21] Even worse, this has barely changed since 2006,[22] meaning that the vast majority of employees worldwide are failing to thrive at work.

From corporation to individuals

Management's mental health footprint

Despite the $15 billion U.S. companies spend annually on managerial and leadership development,[23] in addition to the nearly 200,000 MBAs awarded each year from American Institutions, most workers find their managers inadequate.

Even though most business schools, executive courses, and leadership programs promote a model of "servant leadership,"[24] which has been around since the 1970s, very few bosses apply it in practice, and very few organizations seem to reward it. Most leaders and managers lack the incentives and the skills to support their employees—to "serve them" in Robert Greenleaf's model.

---

[17] Sean Fogarty, "C-Suite Increasingly Focused on Mental Health."

[18] Sean Fogarty, "C-Suite Increasingly Focused on Mental Health."

[19] Sean Fogarty, "C-Suite Increasingly Focused on Mental Health."

[20] Daphne Davis and Jeffrey Hayes, "What Are the Benefits of Mindfulness," American Psychological Association, April 19, 2010, http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/pst-48-2-198.pdf, accessed March 2017.

[21] "State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders", Gallup Report, December 2017, https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx, accessed October 2021.

[22] Susan Sorenson and Keri Garman, "How to Tackle U.S Employees' Stagnating Engagement," *Gallup Business Journal*, June 11, 2013, https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/162953/tackle-employees-stagnating-engagement.aspx, accessed October 2021.

[23] Dori Meinert, "Leadership Development Spending is Up," *SHRM*, July 22, 2014, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0814-execbrief.aspx, accessed November 2021.

[24] Center for Servant Leadership," What is Servant Leadership?", https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/, accessed November 2021.

Over 50% of American workers claim their boss is mildly or highly toxic[25], and about the same fraction of employees have left a job "to get away from their manager at some point in their career," found a Gallup study[26]. According to a Korn Ferry survey,[27] 35% of employees mention their boss as the most significant source of stress at work, and 80% say a change in leadership, such as a new direct manager or someone higher up the organizational chart, impacts their stress levels.

The stress experienced by employees due to toxic or incompetent managers hurts company culture and its bottom line. Managers have a significant impact on employee productivity and business profitability: according to Gallup[28], they account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement.

Selection and promotion processes largely contribute to poor management practices. Most companies promote successful or loyal individual contributors into management. But being a successful programmer or salesperson doesn't necessarily correlate with good management skills[29]. Gallup believes that only 18% of current managers have the required managerial talent.[30] Only 30% focus on employee wellbeing.[31]

It can, therefore, be challenging for managers to care about team wellbeing, especially if more authoritative styles get rewarded. Lack of leadership models, hiring practices, and performance evaluations tend to nurture this dynamic, enabling a toxic culture that can lead to serious performance and health issues—and even death. It can contribute to manager burnout and to that of those around them.

When burnout and stress lead to more mental health leaves, already one of the most expensive health expenses in the U.S., it has a ricochet effect on individuals who remain. They worry about their colleagues and resent having to pick up the work. Even if they are willing to pitch, this increases their mental and emotional load. The same dynamics apply in voluntary and involuntary turnover.

---

[25] Talking Talent, https://www.talking-talent.com/en-us/, accessed November 2021.

[26] "State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders," Gallup Report, December 2017, https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx, accessed October 2021.

[27] Korn Ferry, "Workplace Stress continues to mount," https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/workplace-stress-motivation#:~:text=The%2520largest%2520source%2520of%2520current,chart%252C%2520impacts%2520their%2520stress%2520levels., accessed November 2021.

[28] "State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders," Gallup Report, December 2017, https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx, accessed October 2021.

[29] Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, "Why the Most Productive People Don't Always Make the Best Managers," *Harvard Business Review*, April 17, 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/04/why-the-most-productive-people-dont-always-make-the-best-managers, accessed November 2021.

[30] "State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders," Gallup Report, December 2017, https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx, accessed October 2021.

[31] Tera Allas and Bill Schaninger, "The boss factor: Making the world a better place through workplace relationships," McKinsey, September 22, 2020, mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-boss-factor-making-the-world-a-better-place-through-workplace-relationships, accessed October 2021.

Individual impact on emotional climate change at work

While there is a lot of research on the negative impact of bosses, there is less about the negative impact of individual employees. However, even if unconsciously, each individual contributes to the creation (or reduction) of its workplace emotional pollution. The impact of individual behaviors on the workplace culture can be very disruptive for managers and peers. Moreover, toxic behaviors can be contagious. The problem may start with one person. Those who work around or with or for disruptive individuals may begin to act differently and believe the organization has a high tolerance for such misbehavior.

In a 2016 survey conducted by Weber Shandwick, *Civility in America VII:*

> The State of Civility[32], 25% of employees said they had quit a job due to an uncivil workplace, and 87% indicated that workplace incivility has an impact on work performance. The effect is also considerable: while 55% of respondents said their morale suffered from colleagues' disruptive behaviors, 23% called in sick.

> A supportive work environment is key to younger workers. In 2020, mental health reasons were cited by 68% of Millennials (50% in 2019) and 81% of Gen Zers (75% in 2019) as reasons to leave a workplace.[33]

"Emotional polluters" do financial damage. According to the Center for Creative Leadership, they can cost up to $8,000 a day[34] by eroding their work group's performance, motivation, and cohesion. This data highlights how individual actions can have a ripple effect and accentuate our wellbeing footprint on others. As for the collective environmental footprint, it starts with each action and impacts broader communities.

A wide range of behaviors exhibited by employees can create risks for other individuals and the organization. These behaviors often result from employees' own professional and personal mental health challenges, which a stressful workplace environment accentuates. Showing insubordination can manifest as "revenge" to the supervisor's mistreatment or even fear of being even more overworked. Displaying general insolence can involve rude and disrespectful speech, physical intimidation, demeaning statements, shouting, or slamming doors when displeased.

---

[32] Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate, KRC Research, "Civility in America VII: The State of Civility", June 13, 2017, https://www.webershandwick.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Civility_in_America_the_State_of_Civility.pdf, accessed November 2021.

[33] Kelly Greenwood and Julia Anas, "It's a New Era for Mental Health at Work," *Harvard Business Review*, October 4, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/10/its-a-new-era-for-mental-health-at-work, accessed October 2021.

[34] Stephen Young, Jessica Glazer, and Sydney Siver, "Problem Employees Identify and Manage Them Before They Impact Your Business and Career," Center for Creative Leadership, 2018, http://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/problem-employees-ccl-white-paper.pdf?webSyncID=ed8a513d-3a6a-6419-3097-61a340459ec0&sessionGUID=d12381c8-8bba-c79c-97cb-dbc11aa38721, accessed November 2021.

The 4 M's of Mental Health: Monitor, Mind, Manage, Measure

In the 1970s, to cut down on pollution and waste in the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) coined the three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle[35]. Unfortunately, most individuals focus on recycling because it makes them feel as if they were doing something. It is easier than resisting or foregoing consumption and easier than re-using. We propose below a similar model – around four Ms – to combat emotional climate change at work.

Mind: Understanding our emotional footprint

The trauma and consequences of Covid put the spotlight on the issue of mental health at work. Companies have invested in self-care seminars, mindfulness programs, and mental health apps (the "recycling" part of the environmental model described earlier). More productive would be to go upstream and reduce the emotional pollution in the first place. Executives, managers, and employees can start by examining their workplace psyche and becoming aware of contributions. Humans are rife with emotions and deeply held views of the world and themselves, which they carry into the workplace, along with the survival mechanisms developed to deal with the uncertainty of the world and the angst of existence. Workers in any position need to reflect on their values and confirmation biases when assessing themselves and others.

Reacting to behaviors

Workplace interactions have been increasingly shifting online, becoming, as a consequence, less visible, and even encouraging people to be more abusive as they don't have to interact face-to-face with their interlocutors. Harassments and discriminating behaviors are also becoming more subtle, such as 'intellectual bullying,' in which individuals undermine others who do not share their intellectual abilities.[36] Setting rules and reminding workers of workplace conduct can help to address such behaviors. Workers' misconducts can't be ignored, rationalized or justified, but must be confronted. Managers and coworkers must step up and have frank one-on-one conversations, always maintaining individual privacy and confidentiality. Workers must also be careful to understand the broader context to advise if it is a team versus an individual issue.

---

[35] United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle", https://www.epa.gov/recycle, accessed November 2021.

[36] Leon F. Selzter, "Intellectual Bullies: What You Need to Know About Them," *Evolution of the Self* (blog), *Psychology Today*, February 27, 2017, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201702/intellectual-bullies-what-you-need-know-about-them, accessed June 2017.

Managing emotions

Emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, and fear may lead to undesirable behaviors and decision-making at work. Observing emotions can help build empathy and work with diverse and global teams.

The idea of emotional agility versus emotional rigidity was explored by the psychologist and executive coach Susan David. While emotional rigidity keeps people fixed on unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (often linked to anxiety and depression), emotional agility enables people to respond to situations surrounding them by being in their thoughts and feelings.[37] This not mean banishing negative emotions but recognizing one's emotions and acting according to one's values and intentions. It has four stages:[38]

- "Showing up": Notice your thoughts and emotions while treating yourself with compassion to not dwell on those that are destructive.
- "Stepping out": Recognize they are "just thoughts, just emotions" to move on from those that cause you distress. In doing so, we "keep our transient mental experiences from controlling us."
- "Walking Your Why": Keep your decisions and responses to your thoughts and emotions rooted in your fundamental values and goals. Your actions should reflect your values.
- "Moving On": Do not try to overhaul your entire self; instead, using your core values as your guide, make a multitude of small, purposeful changes to your daily life (the "tiny tweaks principle"). To stay motivated, you must balance "challenge and competence;" take risks and push yourself, but not to the point that it is unmanageable.

Setting boundaries

The impact of managers' behavior can have a broader than expected impact on others. Individual small and simple behaviors can significantly improve workplace mental health, such as limiting after-hours emails or phone calls. Avoiding "facetiming" at work and sharing travel plans may help normalize good habits. Being truly on vacation will also help others to follow and fully reenergize during their time off.

Monitor: Inflection points and early indicators

Many companies consider their human capital to be key to innovation and performance. Productivity lost due to poor employee mental health is becoming a priority issue for organizations.

---

[37] Susan David, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life* (New York: Avery, 2016), p. 5.

[38] Susan David, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*, pp. 13-14.

Micro-signals can be the start of massive employees' burnout, resignation, or even suicides. There can present as changes in behavior patterns (such as increasing caffeine consumption, receiving more private mail or phone calls, or arriving late) or appearance (significant weight gain or loss, change in grooming). Working remote makes some of these harder to notice, especially substance use, but faces are easier to read, and individuals have been more forthcoming.

Individuals are often reluctant to approach an employee or peer about whom they are worried. Knowing that reaching out, being willing to check in, and eventually support a change in trajectory have a higher chance of succeeding when done earlier rather than later.

In addition, knowing when individuals may be particularly vulnerable is important—during personal and professional inflection points.

Individuals and companies remain exposed to inflection points which can considerably strain employees' emotional wellness. These include changes in personal lives (getting divorced, having a baby) and in technologies and business models that alter the way we work (freelance, on demand) or even put many workers out of work (automation).

Organizations committed to promoting workplace emotional wellbeing must monitor and provide specific accommodations to employees enduring major life events to ensure that the individual can perform at the same standards as their colleagues without being discriminated against.

Parenting The transition to parenthood can bring a change in identity, disruption in family's situation, and often, distress.[39] Financial and health issues may arise. In particular, the *post partum* phase can be particularly difficult for women, who often struggle with sleep and eating, and may feel anxious, overwhelmed, sad, and irritable. Post-partum depression affects around 10% of men[40] and about 11% to 20% of women.[41] Even though fathers' presence time may alleviate some parental stress during this time, the U.S. doesn't grant any national paid paternity leave.[42] Facing this gap in legislation, organizations can support employees, providing paid leaves or special accommodation for parents such as working from home or flexible work schedules, and considering leaves for miscarriages.

[39] Camilla W. Nonterah, Rachel C. Garthe, Chelsea A. Reid, Everett L. Worthington Jr, Don E. Davis, Joshua N. Hook, Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Brandon J. Griffin, "The impact of stress on fluctuations in relational humility as couples transition to parenthood," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 101 (October 2016) pp. 276-281, http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886916307577, accessed May 2017.

[40] Jonathan R. Scarff, "Postpartum Depression in Men," May 1, 2019, Innovations in Clinical Neurosciences, US National Library of Medicine, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6659987/, accessed October 2021.

[41] "Facts About Postpartum Depression," Illinois Department of Women's Health, http://www.idph.state.il.us/about/womenshealth/factsheets/pdpress.htm, accessed October 2021.

[42] World Policy Analysis Center, University of California, Los Angeles, by *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/25/upshot/paid-leave-democrats.html, accessed October 2021.

Divorcing/Separating Divorce and separations often impact emotional wellbeing, routines, and finances. According to researchers, divorce is one of life's most stressful events.[43] Those separating may have feelings of guilt, anger, anxiety, restlessness or fatigue, experience disruption in sleeping or eating, and even be at risk of using more drugs or alcohol. Divorce also has a huge impact on a team's work performance: while employees' productivity can drop from 50% to 75%[44], managers and co-workers may become less productive due to increased responsibility while covering for an affected colleague.[45] Nearly 10% of employees lost their job as a result.[46]

Grieving Grief is often a time of major stress for employees, who can be more vulnerable, curt or easily rattled. Anger can come with grief, challenging key relationships at work and at home. Often, family and friends become impatient with the pace of recovery, just when the aggrieved feel most sad and reflective. Managers and co-workers should give the grieving person time to recover and be considerate when acknowledging the loss. The interaction should focus on the bereaved, not on shared emotions and desire to calm pain. It is better to avoid encouraging optimism, or suggesting that death might provide a sort of relief. Despite the importance of time to heal after a loss, most employers offer only four days for the death of a spouse or child, three days for the death of other close family members (e.g., siblings, parents), one day for an extended family member (e.g., cousins, uncles), and zero days for a friend or colleague.[47]

Caregiving Employees can also face stress related to their responsibilities as caregivers, from raising children with developmental needs to looking for sick, elderly, or disabled relatives. While beneficial to families and society, caregiving can significantly impact an individual's mental health, with 2 in 5 caregivers considering it emotionally stressful.[48] Balancing caregiving responsibilities with workplace demands has forced a majority of caregivers to seek adjustments to their working hours or to take a leave from their jobs.[49] Caregivers may also decide to drop out of their employee-employer relationship and to opt to be self-employed to gain more work flexibility.[50] Research

---

[43] Thomas H. Holmes, Richard H. Rahe, "The social readjustment rating scale," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Volume 11, Issue 2 (August 1967): pp. 213-218, ISSN 0022-3999, https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999(67)90010-4, accessed May 2017.

[44] Deborah Moskovitch, "Downgrading Divorce from Crisis to Process in the Workplace," *The Huffington Post*, May 1, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deborah-moskovitch/downgrading-divorce-from-_b_1248497.html, accessed March 2017

[45] Deborah Moskovitch, "Downgrading Divorce from Crisis to Process in the Workplace."

[46] Owen Bowcott, "Relationship Breakdowns Have Negative Impact on Business Productivity," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/26/relationship-breakdowns-business-productivity-employees-divorce-separation, accessed March 2017.

[47] SHRM Survey Findings: Paid Leave in the Workplace, October 6, 2016, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/pages/2016-paid-leave-in-the-workplace.aspx, accessed October 2021.

[48] "Caregiving in the U.S. 2015," AARP Public Policy Institute and the National Alliance for Caregiving, June 2015, pp. 9-10, http://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2015_CaregivingintheUS_Final-Report-June-4_WEB.pdf, accessed March 2017.

[49] "Caregiving in the U.S. 2015."

[50] "Caregiving in the U.S. 2015."

suggests that providing counseling options and connecting caregivers to resources for the whole family can considerably help to reduce the burden of caregiving. [51] Providing counseling support to the spouse of a dementia patient can help reduce depression.[52]

Modulate: Building a supportive emotional ecosystem

Job design and employee fit are central to mental wellness and stress reduction in the workplace. Besides recruiting workers only based on past experiences, success, or skills, it is critical emotional fit and ability with the organization, position, and superiors. A manager used the analogy of a car to explain how to look for a balanced candidate: "you need a strong front wheel-steering, which is your vision, your values, and emotional stability. You can think of the back wheel as your drive, motivation, and horsepower. If you have a lot of horsepower but drive in the wrong direction, you can do a great deal of damage."[53]

Think about how and where employees work

Full-time employees spend 33% of their weekly waking hours at work. When Covid sent employees home, management had to reflect how and where individuals were working. Both at home and work, how we work physically affects how we function emotionally. Workers increasingly demand more flexible work arrangements, fewer constraints, and more autonomy. Less facetime puts more emphasis on deliverables, however. Recognizing multiple modalities towards productivity is essential—as well as the particular stressors they pose, as has become clear in COVID.

Build Teams for Mental Wellness: Most organizations focus on tasks when making hiring or staffing decisions. In addition to ascertaining fit to perform a task, recruiters can use behavioral interviewing to assess the emotional ability to cope with the task. The focus is shifted towards employee wellbeing.[54] According to Harvard professor Amy C. Edmondson's, organizations need to build "psychological safety" so "an environment in which individuals can safely speak up and disagree with each other."[55] Encouraging employee participation and individual accountability can help to nurture a safe workplace environment.

---

[51] "Caregiving in the U.S. 2015."

[52] "Caregiving in the U.S. 2015."

[53] *Compassionate Management of Mental Health in the Modern Workplace*, p 70.

[54] *Compassionate Management of Mental Health in the Modern Workplace*, p 80.

[55] Amy C. Edmondson, "Teamwork on the Fly," *Harvard Business Review* 90 (April 2012): 72-80, via EBSCOhost, accessed January 2017.

Provide constructive and positive feedback: According to McKinsey,[56] validating feelings, withholding judgment, and offering support can bolster motivation and foster authenticity in the workplace. One study compared athletes who received unconditional positive comments from their coaches with those who received criticism. The former group experienced increased confidence, greater love for the sport, and more persistence through challenges. The latter group felt less secure, less motivated, and tended to wear out more quickly.[57] The same pattern has been found valid for teachers and students, and it applies to bosses and the people they "coach" in the workplace[58]. Positive regard contributes to developing an individual's sense of autonomy and self-competence, directly linked to greater satisfaction and wellbeing at work.[59]

Provide space for communication: One-on-one meetings can be helpful in proactively identifying workplace stressors before becoming unmanageable. It is critical to provide time and personalized support to employees, making them feel valued. Beginning the sessions by checking in with employees with the essential "how are you doing?" "demonstrate awareness about the demands they face. While 80% of Millennials reported their preference for regular feedback, 85% would like to meet with superiors more often.[60] Employers who have adopted this new framework say it has boosted morale and reduced burnout.[61]

Promote social interactions and ties to the community While improving a firm's reputation,[62] initiatives encouraging employee involvement in the community can be a powerful way to enhance employees' ties to the company while making them happier and healthier[63]. According to Professor Ashley Whillans from Harvard Business School, prosocial spending and giving has proven to be effective in improving individuals'

[56] "Being a good boss isn't easy – here's how to get better," Tera Allas and Bill Schaninger, McKinsey, October 18, 2021, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/being-a-good-boss-isnt-easy-heres-how-to-get-better, accessed October 2021.

[57] Lauren Kelly McHenry, "A qualitative exploration of unconditional positive regard and its opposite constructs in coach-athlete relationships," University of Tennessee, May 2018, available on trace.tennessee.edu, accessed October 2021.

[58] "The boss factor: Making the world a better place through workplace relationships," Tera Allas and Bill Schaninger, McKinsey, September 22, 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-boss-factor-making-the-world-a-better-place-through-workplace-relationships, accessed October 2021.

[59] "The boss factor: Making the world a better place through workplace relationships, Tera Allas and Bill Schaninger, McKinsey article, September 22, 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-boss-factor-making-the-world-a-better-place-through-workplace-relationships, accessed October 2021.

[60] Rob Hernandez, "Here's What Millennials Want from their Performance Reviews," *Fast Company*, November 3, 2015, https://www.fastcompany.com/3052988/the-future-of-work/heres-what-millennials-want-from-their-performance-reviews, accessed March 2017.

[61] Rob Hernandez, "Here's What Millennials Want from their Performance Reviews."

[62] John Boitnott, "4 Ways Your Company Benefits From Giving Back," *Entrepreneur*, January 27, 2015, https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/241983, accessed February 2017.

[63] Joseph D'Urso, "Giving to Charity Makes You Happy, Middle Age is Miserable: Experts," *Reuters*, September 4, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-charities-health-happiness-idUSKCN0R40L620150904, accessed February 2017.

wellbeing[64]. While her research suggests growing evidence that helping can promote hapiness, her work also provides some of the strongest evidence to date that prosocial behavior can lead to clinically relevant benefits for physical health[65]. Other research has shown that workers who volunteer have lower turnover rates and exhibit stronger attachments to their employers.[66]

Increase flexibility around paid time off: Organizations have been increasingly taking various measures aiming to prevent employees' burnout, such as increased vacation time, unlimited vacation banks, or assigning workers to shift rotations to reduce repetitive tasks[67]. Some firms implemented 40 max hours workweek and encouraged employees abstain from work responsibilities outside set work schedules[68]. Large companies such as Deloitte and Intel have offered work sabbaticals to give employees a break[69]

Measure: Tracking and evaluating emotional climate change

Any organization choosing to make workplace mental health a priority and promote it actively should first monitor and track early indicators of mental unwellness to measure the effectiveness of new initiatives. Once early indicators are recognized, they must be followed and periodically reevaluated to measure the effectiveness of new initiatives affecting employees' mental health. Organizations must ask themselves: are signs of depression increasing among employees? If so, why? How can we best mitigate work stressors and support people at work? Are there generational or gender differences to take into account? How do we best measure workplace mental wellbeing? What is important to measure? What we measure and how we measure it informs what we pursue and where we need to focus. When getting it wrong, companies find themselves missing essential insights to tell where to act[70].

---

[64] Aknin, Lara B., and Ashley V. Whillans. "Helping and Happiness: A Review and Guide for Public Policy." *Social Issues and Policy Review* 15 (2021): 3–34, DOI: 10.1111/sipr.12069.

[65] Whillans AV, Dunn EW, Sandstrom GM, Dickerson SS, Madden KM. Is spending money on others good for your heart? Health Psychol. 2016 Jun;35(6):574-83. doi: 10.1037/hea0000332. Epub 2016 Feb 11. PMID: 26867038

[66] Adam M. Grant, "Giving Time, Time After Time: Work Design and Sustained Employee Participation Incorporate Volunteering," *Academy of Management Review*, 2012, https://faculty.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Grant_AMR2012.pdf, accessed February 2017.

[67] Yuki Noguchi, "Preventing Worker Burnout Can Boost the Bottom Line," NPR, September 30, 2014, http://www.npr.org/2014/09/30/352751249/preventing-worker-burnout-can-boost-the-bottom-line, accessed March 2017.

[68] Rachel Feintzeig, "What Worker Burnout Feels Like," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-worker-burnout-feels-like-1488286802?tesla=y, accessed March 2017.

[69] Rachel Feintzeig, "Cure for Office Burnout: Mini Sabbaticals," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 2014, https://www.wsj.com/articles/cure-for-office-burnout-mini-sabbaticals-usually-with-full-pay-1414540995, accessed March 2017

[70] Raffaele Carpi, John Douglas, Frederic Gascon, "Performance Management: Why keeping score is so important, and so hard," McKinsey, October 4, 2017, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/performance-management-why-keeping-score-is-so-important-and-so-hard, accessed October 2021.

How do we create trust, instill ownership and build accountability to reduce organizational footprint and impact emotional climate change? The section "Accounting for Human Sustainability: Helping and rewarding companies for measuring and reducing their human impact and employee burnout" provides a detailed description of the Human Sustainability Index, a suggested set of outcome-based metrics helping to assess the firm performance according to its goals for workplace mental health/ emotional footprint.

New imperatives for the future of sustainable work

Companies that focus more on "building in" mental health – much as the total quality movement showed us how to do decades ago—can hope to reduce negative impacts on their staff. This requires top-level commitment, elevating mental health to the C-suite, and enrolling workers into co-creating benefits.

First, managers need explicit training and guidance. Managers need to recognize signs of distress among their people, both directly through conversations and indirectly through observation. H.R. should advise managers on how best to broach sensitive subjects arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, including alternative work models[71], job security and prospects, staffing impact, and workplace tension. This guidance can include discussion guides, training, or email reminders with the latest updates on the situation and general principles for dealing with it. Training should also include understanding the Americans with Disabilities Act and rules around accommodations and mental health leaves.

Managers must also break down stigmas related to mental health, making it a topic that can be openly and honestly discussed in a safe and supportive environment rather than a taboo subject to avoid. Using statistics and facts showing that mental health issues affect millions in the U.S. and worldwide may help employees understand the landscape and feel less alone. Sharing one's vulnerabilities, experiences and challenges will encourage others to follow and help to build trust and a safe environment.

Second, the promotion process needs to reflect stated company values. Managers are often promoted and rewarded for high performance but not for the mental wellness they encourage among their reports. If you value our employees and their emotional health, incentives should be better aligned to reflect that. Some companies ask staff explicitly if they feel that their manager cares and has taken steps to cultivate mental wellness among staff members. If you are considering someone for a promotion, ask them about their point of view and perceived track record on this topic. Do they view people as investments or as costs?

---

[71] Jackie Wiles, "With Coronavirus in Mind, Is Your Organization Ready for Remote Work?", July 23, 2020, Gartner insights, https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/with-coronavirus-in-mind-are-you-ready-for-remote-work, accessed November 2021.

Third, employees need to be allowed to co-create benefits and share a sense of purpose. Encourage employees to share their ideas and needs to improve their wellbeing at work, providing a sense of agency among employees, reducing stress levels. It also allows organizing to move away from inefficient one-size-fits-all solutions to provide more effective and personalized mental health care.

For example, creating a "company benefits fund," where employees could select a range of wellbeing offerings to accommodate their needs better. Companies have "green teams" that promote sustainability – they could have "mind teams." In addition, a direct link between individual performance and the achievement of business goals can boost employee confidence in the importance of their job even in a challenging business environment. Human resources leaders can help managers reassert the link between employees' work and organizational success by providing visibility into the organizational goals and translating the organization's vision into their employees' context.

One of the top engagement drivers for employees is indeed seeing their work contribute to company goals. Employees who feel confident about the importance of their job to the organization's success feel less anxious about their job security[72]. However, it is critical for organizations not to make superficial makeovers or unfulfilled promises that may backlash and weaken trust. Leaders and managers must indeed "walk their talk" and stand as role models for the rest of the organization.[73]

Finally, nominate a Chief Mental Health Officer and Wellness Committee. If mental health is to be strategic, it needs to be treated as such. Organizations can think about assigning a Chief Mental Health Officer in charge of manager training, work and workplace design, and mental wellness such as overseeing programs, estimating risks, dealing with liability implications, training management, or providing a different lens to strategic decisions. Companies can also invite employees to create Wellness Committees responsible for promoting ESG goals and championing Human Sustainability at work (see proposal below).

Accounting for Human Sustainability: Helping and rewarding companies for measuring and reducing their human impact and employee burnout

The global pandemic made mental health an imperative for organizations. Increased isolation, uncertainty, and stress due to lockdowns, large-scale remote working, and

---

[72] Mary Baker, "9 Tips for Managing Remote Employees," Gartner, January 4, 2021, https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/9-tips-for-managing-remote-employees, accessed October 2021.

[73] Robert E. Quinn and Ajan V. Thakor, "Creating Purpose-Driven Organizations," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2019, https://hbr.org/2018/07/creating-a-purpose-driven-organization, accessed October 2021.

blurred work-life boundaries have pressured employee stability[74]. This challenge has pushed companies to understand better, measure and, protect the mental wellbeing of employees. In an increasingly knowledge-based and remote workplace, employee wellbeing is more important than ever for business performance and economic productivity.

Most ESG-focused investments and corporate social responsibility initiatives have focused on the firm's impact on the environment and society. Rarely do they focus narrowly on individual employees. The SEC is currently taking a closer look at disclosures[75]. While regulators punish environmental polluters, no sanctions exist for a poorly-run organization's pollution of their employees. Even in the best of times, society bears the brunt of the externalities of bad management through rising inequality and mental health disorders. In a pandemic that has rendered employees increasingly psychologically and economically vulnerable, poor management and policies are a recipe for deep distress, poor productivity, and loss of life.

It is becoming imperative for companies to assess their impact on human lives, starting with employees. To that end, businesses must define monetizable outcome-based metrics and incorporate new frameworks to manage and comparably measure their impact on the humans they touch.

We have devised the Human Sustainability Index (HSI) to bring a new lens to the business world. One that believes that century-old financial metrics no longer reflect the real source of corporate value and performance in an intangible economy: Human Capital. HSI focuses on three dimensions:

- Outcome-based, measurable, and monetizable metrics help companies assess employees' mental health equity and performance, workplace satisfaction, and related cost savings.
- A new accounting methodology and certification enables investors and consumers to reward companies according to how they impact the creation or destruction of Human Capital.
- Actionable insights show corporate decision-makers how they impact the humans they touch and how they would develop such a process of evaluation and "certification."

The HSI is a set of outcome-based metrics to assess the firm's performance according to its workplace emotional footprint. Metrics should be defined by working closely with executives, H.R., and staff. Before this process, the firm's leadership must reflect on

---

[74] "How to measure mental health at work", People Matter, https://www.peoplematter.tech/measure-mental-wellbeing-at-work, accessed November 2021.

[75] Commissioner Allison Herren Lee, "Regulation S-K and ESG Disclosures: An Unsustainable Silence", U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, August 26, 2020, https://www.sec.gov/news/public-statement/lee-regulation-s-k-2020-08-26 accessed November 2021.

its purpose, principles, and willingness (or rather courage) to commit and implement concrete actions. These metrics can be tracked and reported as part of ESG programs. They can become more explicitly part of how investors think about a company's impact on the emotional pollution – and reward those whose actions offset it.

If we know how to account for costs, we can also measure positive benefits (be they engagement, well-being, productivity, creativity, cohesive culture, etc.). We know that the ROI can be enormous: a meta-analysis of the literature on the impact of workplace wellness programs on organizational expenses and savings found that medical and absenteeism costs fall respectively by about $3.27 and $2.73 for every $1 spent on wellness programs[76] The possibilities are as great as the human spirit we could unleash.

Bibliography

1. Paul E. Greenberg, MS, MA; Andree-Anne Fournier, MA; Tammy Sisitsky, MA; Crystal T. Pike, MBA; and Ronald C. Kessler, PhD, "The Economic Burden of Adults With Major Depressive Disorder in the United States", J Clin Psychiatry 2015;76(2):155-162, https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.14m09298,

2. Carin-Isabel Knoop and John Q Quelch, *Compassionate Management of Mental Health in the Modern Workplace*, Springer 2018.

3. United States Office of Personnel Management, "Work-Life: Employee Assistance Programs," https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/worklife/employee-assistance-programs/#url=Overview.

4. Mark Attridge et al., "History and Growth of the EAP Field," EASNA Research Notes 1, no. 1 (August 2009): 2, https://www.easna.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/EASNAResearchNotesNo1HistoryAUG2009081109_000.pdf.

5. Society for Human Resource Management, "2015 Employee Benefits," March 2015, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2015-Employee-Benefits.pdf.

6. Sean Fogarty, "C-Suite Increasingly Focused on Mental Health," *Benefits News*, February 24, 2017, https://www.benefitnews.com/opinion/c-suite-increasingly-focused-on-mental-health.

7. Daphne Davis and Jeffrey Hayes, "What Are the Benefits of Mindfulness," American Psychological Association, April 19, 2010, http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/pst-48-2-198.pdf.

8. "State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders", Gallup Report, December 2017, https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx.

---

[76] Baicker K, Cutler D, Song Z. "Workplace wellness programs can generate savings," Health Aff, National Library of Medicine, January 14, 2010, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20075081/, accessed October 2021.

9.   Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, "Why the Most Productive People Don't Always Make the Best Managers," Harvard Business Review, April 17, 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/04/why-the-most-productive-people-dont-always-make-the-best-managers, accessed November 2021.

10. Kelly Greenwood and Julia Anas, "It's a New Era for Mental Health at Work," *Harvard Business Review*, October 4, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/10/its-a-new-era-for-mental-health-at-work.

11. Stephen Young, Jessica Glazer, and Sydney Siver, "Problem Employees Identify and Manage Them Before They Impact Your Business and Career," Center for Creative Leadership, 2018, http://cclinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/problem-employees-ccl-white-paper.pdf?webSyncID=ed8a513d-3a6a-6419-3097-61a340459ec0&sessionGUID=d12381c8-8bba-c79c-97cb-dbc11aa38721.

12. Leon F. Selzter, "Intellectual Bullies: What You Need to Know About Them," *Evolution of the Self* (blog), *Psychology Today*, February 27, 2017, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolution-the-self/201702/intellectual-bullies-what-you-need-know-about-them.

13. Susan David, *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life* (New York: Avery, 2016), p. 5.

14. Camilla W. Nonterah, Rachel C. Garthe, Chelsea A. Reid, Everett L. Worthington Jr, Don E. Davis, Joshua N. Hook, Daryl R. Van Tongeren, Brandon J. Griffin, "The impact of stress on fluctuations in relational humility as couples transition to parenthood," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 101 (October 2016) pp. 276-281, http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886916307577.

15. Jonathan R. Scarff, "Postpartum Depression in Men," May 1, 2019, Innovations in Clinical Neurosciences, US National Library of Medicine, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6659987/.

16. Thomas H. Holmes, Richard H. Rahe, "The social readjustment rating scale," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Volume 11, Issue 2 (August 1967): pp. 213-218, ISSN 0022-3999, https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-3999(67)90010-4.

17. SHRM Survey Findings: Paid Leave in the Workplace, October 6, 2016, https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/pages/2016-paid-leave-in-the-workplace.aspx.

18. "Caregiving in the U.S. 2015," AARP Public Policy Institute and the National Alliance for Caregiving, June 2015, pp. 9-10, http://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2015_CaregivingintheUS_Final-Report-June-4_WEB.pdf.

19. Amy C. Edmondson, "Teamwork on the Fly," *Harvard Business Review* 90 (April 2012): 72-80.

20. "The boss factor: Making the world a better place through workplace relationships," Tera Allas and Bill Schaninger, McKinsey, September 22, 2020, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-boss-factor-making-the-world-a-better-place-through-workplace-relationships.

21. Lara B. Aknin and Ashley V. Whillans. "Helping and Happiness: A Review and Guide for Public Policy." *Social Issues and Policy Review* 15 (2021): 3–34, DOI: 10.1111/sipr.12069.

22. Ashley V Whillans et al. "Is spending money on others good for your heart?" *Health Psychol*. 2016 Jun;35(6):574-83. doi: 10.1037/hea0000332. Epub 2016 Feb 11. PMID: 26867038.

23. Adam M. Grant, "Giving Time, Time After Time: Work Design and Sustained Employee Participation Incorporate Volunteering," *Academy of Management Review*, 2012, https://faculty.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Grant_AMR2012.pdf.

24. Raffaele Carpi, John Douglas, Frederic Gascon, "Performance Management: Why keeping score is so important, and so hard," McKinsey, October 4, 2017, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/performance-management-why-keeping-score-is-so-important-and-so-hard.

25. Robert E. Quinn and Ajan V. Thakor, "Creating Purpose-Driven Organizations," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2019, https://hbr.org/2018/07/creating-a-purpose-driven-organization.

26. Commissioner Allison Herren Lee, "Regulation S-K and ESG Disclosures: An Unsustainable Silence," U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, August 26, 2020, https://www.sec.gov/news/public-statement/lee-regulation-s-k-2020-08-26.

27. K. Baicker K, D. Cutler, Z. Song. "Workplace wellness programs can generate savings," *Health Aff*, National Library of Medicine, January 14, 2010, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20075081/.