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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Australians are among the most disengaged employees in the world. Benjamin Nice explains why corporate wellbeing strategies keep people happy, healthy and productive at work

In March, *HR Leader* reported on a survey that found that 82 per cent of Australian employees felt disengaged at work. The Gallup Consulting survey, *The State of the Global Workplace*, which analysed the engagement levels of 45,000 employees worldwide, focused on the consequent impact of these results on areas such as productivity and personal wellbeing. While the figures were dismal for most countries, Australian employees fared particularly badly, with disengagement figures almost 10 per cent higher than the international average of 73 per cent.

Back to basics

Firmly placing health and happiness at the top of the engagement agenda, Teya Skae, the founder of Empowered Living, says it is important to get back to basics and focus on what she describes as the "four pillars of corporate wellness": the physical, emotional, mental and values/purpose elements of health.

"There is a greater need for corporate wellbeing than ever before. I see a lot of people who might be very successful, but who are also lost and disconnected and have no purpose in what they are doing," says Skae, a corporate health coach.

"It's hard, because there is information overload in terms of advice in this area. What people have to understand is that change doesn't have to encompass everything in one day – start by just getting your breakfast right!"

Skae says problems such as stress often spiral out of control because individuals ignore or override them. "People at stage-three stress are unproductive, so the challenge is to target the problem early, before it gets to that point," she says.

"The trouble is that by overriding their emotional issues or learning difficulties, they take up a lot of energy and then end up getting chronic fatigue – or corporate burnout, as I call it."

To combat corporate burnout, Skae delves into her clients' minds and, after identifying potential drains in the person's life, she then teaches them how to manage their energy, organise priorities and train the brain to become clearer and feel more "in the now" – all strategies that help to increase engagement and productivity at work.

While responsibility lies with the individual wanting to initiate change, Skae says, factors such as a good company culture and engaging and fun programs outside of the office also play a vital role. "It all stems from the directors and senior staff; they set the tone and the company culture

and the policies, so it's good to see companies involving their employees in brainstorming sessions and going out and having fun on the job," she says.

"It's very important to add those elements because it really helps engagement. If companies are very structured and very strict, people don't feel creative or safe to participate or contribute."

A holistic approach

Linda Cooper, human resources manager of mortgage and financial services group Firstfolio says the growing company worked hard to initiate positive staff engagement and encourage a good work/life balance. By acquiring one or two new businesses a year, the company experiences constant growth, explains Cooper, which in turn directly affects management's approach to employee engagement. "Part of our engagement program is also a significant part of our change management program and integration process."

Cooper says the company's program centres around three areas: employees' connection with their inner selves, with each other and with their community, with various initiatives and activities focusing on each aspect.

As well as providing health-related perks such as personal trainers, daily fresh fruit and health seminars, the ASX-listed company also gives employees the opportunity to fulfil their personal ambitions through the "Firstfolio Dreams" initiative.

"To help connect employees with the community, the dream program is an opportunity to allow our staff to go anywhere in the world for a period of time," says Cooper. "Three were selected in the last round; one lady is working with the breast cancer foundation here in Australia, and another is in Romania working with an NGO on child labour issues. We're also sending someone else to South Africa on child welfare issues this month. We provide the cost of the trip and their wage, for a four- to six-week period."

Although you would expect to find this kind of initiative in larger organisations, Firstfolio employs only 140 people, and given that three people are chosen each year for the program, Cooper says employees have a realistic chance of realising their ambitions.

"It's just one of the things that we do to drive, connect and share with our employees. The principle is, if we get that right, we all thrive. It's a holistic approach," she says.

Cooper believes that such an approach is essential to attracting and retaining the top talent in the country, and that organisations



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"WHEN PEOPLE ARE FULLY ENGAGED IN BUSINESS AND LIFE, THEY ARE AT THEIR MOST PRODUCTIVE, THEY ARE FOCUSED ... AND MORE AWARE OF HOW THEY SQUANDER THEIR PRECIOUS ADRENALINE, WHICH IS FUEL IN OUR BODY... WITHOUT THIS AVAILABLE ENERGY WE JUST DON'T GET THINGS DONE."

Teya Skae, founder of Empowered Living

have started to become more aware of the importance of staff engagement. "Businesses are starting to actually understand the bottom-line impact of staff leaving ... it's the total cost, and everything involved," she says.

"Workforces are also becoming smaller. There's a lot of talk around this underemployment rate, so I guess you're probably doing more with less people and the focus will be on rewarding those people and trying to retain your high-performance staff."

The challenge, Cooper maintains, is to direct engagement programs so that they drive the desired behaviour and link back to the company's overall strategy.

"What you don't want to do is to just pick concepts and throw them at people. There needs to be an overall strategy tied back to the objectives of the business. They need to be

linked to that, so that everyone in the business can draw those links," she says.

The next generation

Fringe benefits and additional perks are also becoming increasingly important to staff who expect to be rewarded for their efforts at work.

Glenn Elliott, the managing director of Asperity Employee Benefits, says that while companies often invested a lot of money in employee discount and benefits programs in the past, they were not always relevant or appealing to staff.

"The key thing about the traditional employee discount programs is that they weren't really that well used – they didn't have good genuine offers, they were difficult to use and they took up too much time. That's not what anyone wants these days," says Elliott.

With many employers often confused or

frustrated in their attempts to lure and retain younger talent – particularly generations X and Y - Elliott believes providing up-to-date, simple, useful and exciting benefits can help to keep them happy and engaged at work.

"In terms of attracting your gen Yers, when you look at the benefits that organisations often put in place like health care, insurance or parental leave, they're all great. But when you're 21, you're not really that interested in those things," he says. "You want benefits today, and you want them to be immediate and attractive to everybody."

Four pillars of corporate wellness

A full-engagement approach manages energy on four levels:

1. Physical
2. Emotional
3. Mental
4. Values/purpose/unique talents

Source: **Empowered Living**