

Why HR should build fences to enhance workplace well-being

HR Magazine speaks with Pauline Williams, Director, Atrium HR Consulting (Asia) Limited to get her take on the current state of mental health in the workplace and why fences are more critical than ambulances in HR.



Many employees are treading along a dangerous cliff edge right now—with unprecedented stresses on them arising from once-in-a-lifetime events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid this backdrop, employers need to be more mindful than ever of their duty of care to continue to nurture, engage, develop and look after the mental health of their talent teams. Nevertheless, traditional employee assistance programmes (EAPs) are simply not cutting muster anymore. Pauline Williams, Director, Atrium HR Consulting (Asia) Limited gave an interesting analogy. She cautioned, “EAPs are merely the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, but what employers really need to do is build a fence at the top of that cliff—to help protect their staff. Prevention is always much better than cure.”

Preventing employees going over the edge

Only 24% of companies in Hong Kong currently have an EAP in place, but this is only half the battle. Williams noted, “There is also increasing data to indicate that other wellness services are also required to enhance existing EAP programmes. EAP is a great foundation, but it’s rarely enough.” So, what exactly can HR do to help prevent their employees from going over the edge? Williams shares the concept of global wellness and provides an HR battleplan with some great tips on what they can do to foster better employee well-being.



Pauline Williams
Director, Atrium HR Consulting (Asia)

At the end of the day, it's all about prevention. Do not wait until the horse has bolted



HR battleplan to ring-fence employee well-being

1. Consider communication. Promote EAP awareness with the HR teams and then replay this message to staff. HR often needs help in delivering this message as many questions crop up. Prepare answers to the following (and any other questions that might be asked): What exactly is an EAP? What is wellness support? What is the primary purpose of an EAP? Why is it there? What does our organisation hope to achieve from our EAP?

2. Consider what, who and when. Consider exactly what your EAP offers your staff and which elements are to be offered. Also, decide who exactly can assess each of them. It is also important to let staff know who they will be talking to. For EAPs to work, staff need to feel comfortable enough to build rapport with the person helping them—it is highly preferable, if not essential, that they should be able to access the same counsellor throughout the process. Depending on the nature of the intervention, this can last from several weeks to several months.

3. Consider the type of interaction that your EAP will provide. An EAP should be a lot more than just a hotline. Will the interaction provide be face-to-face or online or via telephone? Flexibility, localisation and accessibility are all critical considerations to ensure it is as easy as possible for staff to use the service.

4. Consider the efficiency and effectiveness of the EAP. It takes time for staff to build up a rapport with their counsellor. Williams advised, “If you can provide an on-ground meeting or at least face-to-face intervention via video link—this allows both parties to see and read each other’s body language, which is not only much more personal but also facilitates a faster healing process.”

5. Considered structured support for the team. Workplace stress is not something that just affects individuals; it is viral and has the potential to spread across entire teams and families. Counselling can be offered from a variety of perspectives including, but not limited to marriage counselling, child counselling, career counselling and family counselling. Williams added, “Tragically, in the light of COVI-19, grief counselling is likely to be something that sees a dramatic increase in uptake in the near future.”





Help for HR

So, while HR is busy putting together their EAPs, who is helping HR? Williams advised those in HR to look for what she termed, ‘a global wellness offering’, encompassing a holistic approach to enhancing the mental well-being of both HR teams and the talent they were leading. This HR offering should comprise several vital elements which can be utilised for different needs depending on the person involved and the circumstances they are currently going through, as outlined below.

1. EAPs—most appropriate for when staff are going through something specific and need help getting back on the right track. Atrium’s help is provided via remote multi-lingual counselling services. Services are arranged through an online booking system which is easily accessible by enrolled staff, who simply need to send an email to the Atrium wellness team. After completing basic details on line, the staff member receives a direct response from a fully-qualified counsellor with the relevant expertise that aligns with the nature of support required.

Therapists—support comes from interventions provided by fully qualified professionals to help staff with a wide range of mental health issues. This is available on a one-to-one basis via telephone or video conference and provides unlimited and ongoing therapy to ensure they can receive not only temporary relief but also work towards permanent mental health well-being.

2. Wellness Support—that aims to generate an overall sense of well-being. Atrium gives an extra level of support and ensures the company can maintain productivity and performance through a confident and focused workforce.

3. Global Wellness Coaching—Atrium provides access to performance coaches that staff can call for information and advice to help them overcome obstacles and get through challenging events in their professional and personal life. Whether it is preparing for a big meeting, dealing with a conflict, maintaining relationships or even general coaching for any part of their life, the coaches have a proven track record in enhancing performance.

4. Tele-physiotherapy—gives staff support in overcoming pain injuries and pain. Atrium is a pioneer in this area being the only benefits provider to include this on a global basis, with companies saying they have seen a difference in productivity for their staff who use it.

Tele-physiotherapy allows staff to be assessed, receive advice and treatment programs, without the need to visit the clinic and gets them back to work quickly and pain free.

The fact that these services are available remotely via video conference is proving a timely solution for many in HR right now, dealing with remote teams and work-from-home teams during COVID-19 isolation and social distancing.

Williams concluded, “At the end of the day, it’s all about prevention. So, HR needs to be proactive in setting up on-going dialogues and support systems for their talent and themselves. Do not wait until the horse has bolted, instead be proactive, not reactive.”