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Wellness Trend Report: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Workplace Wellness

Prepared by the Lawley Corporate Wellness Team

The Future of the Workplace

Companies have started prioritizing and embracing diversity in the workplace. An inclusive work environment can enhance your employees' experience and productivity. Diversity in the workplace can help your company foster ideas and innovation that transcend all boundaries. However, a company that promotes diversity must also account for inclusivity in workplace wellness programs ¹.

The future of the workplace is Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). Employees deserve safety and need to know that their employers have their backs. It is unrealistic to expect employees to bring their whole selves to work if workplaces are not treating the whole person.

Workplace wellness strategies help fight burnout and increase employee satisfaction only if they address deeper health concerns and ensure that everyone in the company can engage equally. It is a well-known fact that diverse workforces have proven to be more successful and effective. According to Deloitte, diverse companies enjoy 2.3 times higher cash flow per employee. In addition to improving a company's bottom line, diversity and inclusion have also been shown to boost different aspects of wellbeing, including physical health, coping, happiness, and feeling valued. All of this draws a direct correlation between diversity and healthier workplaces ².

Organizations that are able to implement an employee wellbeing program with diversity and inclusion will see positive benefits with happier and healthier employees. Their happiness leads to ³:

- Improved work performance and higher productivity
- Better retention and lower hiring costs
- Reduced absenteeism and sick days
- Lower healthcare costs

DEI and wellbeing are key business strategies. While the business community has made great progress toward both, they can no longer be treated as separate and distinct. To create a workplace that does right by its employees, leaders must understand and address their unique experiences and needs holistically ⁴. To enact meaningful change in the lives of employees, it's critical for business leaders to address employees' total wellbeing, including their physical, mental, emotional, and financial health; work-life balance; and social equity. Simply put, wellbeing is a central strategy to ensure that employees are able to contribute their best while navigating the myriad challenges that impact how they live, work, and relate to others. Failing to address the intersectionality of DEI and wellbeing does a substantial disservice to employees ⁴.

Challenges Underrepresented Employees Face

We need to be proactive in creating a culture on employee wellbeing and we need to weave DEI and wellness into the very fabric of our organizations. DEI and wellbeing are inextricably linked.

To provide some context, research shows⁴:

- Police killings contribute to 1.7 additional poor mental health days for Black Americans.
- Compared to their white counterparts, American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) people are more than twice as likely to be uninsured, leaving many without access to health care. Consequently, AIAN people have a higher prevalence of many chronic health conditions than those from any other racial or ethnic group.
- LGBTQ folks are 2.5 times more likely to experience depression, anxiety and substance misuse than non-LGBTQ individuals, yet they face significant discrimination in health care that leads them to avoid care, putting their health at risk.

Underrepresented populations are more likely to face physical and mental challenges. People from underrepresented populations face a lack of widely available doctors, specialists, and health care infrastructure and coverage. These and other social determinants of health (SDOH) have a powerful influence on health outcomes.

It is crucial for employers to understand the differences in access to health and wellbeing resources, experiences with the healthcare system and relevant experiences in daily life.

Understanding Access to Health and Wellbeing Resources:

It is tempting to think that simply providing benefits such as health insurance or an employee assistance program (EAP) is enough to ensure equal, fair access for all employees. In reality, offering benefits is not the same as ensuring equal access.

- Gallup⁵ finds that 13% of White employees are currently dissatisfied with the availability of quality healthcare in the area where they live; among Black and Hispanic employees, about 1 in 5 are dissatisfied (21% and 22% respectively).
- Factors related to transportation and community planning can contribute to vastly different experiences in trying to get to available resources. While nearly half of White employees (46%) say it is very easy to access high-quality healthcare, only about a third of Black (34%) and Hispanic (36%) employees say the same⁵.

Understanding Experiences with the Healthcare System:

Once employees have accessed health or wellbeing resources, their experiences with providers differ significantly. These differences can affect important health and wellbeing outcomes and behaviors,

such as whether and where employees choose to seek care, the quality of care they receive and to what extent their health and wellbeing needs are ultimately met.

- Black and Hispanic employees tend to be less satisfied with basic elements of the patient experience. For example, Gallup finds that while 65% of White employees agree or strongly agree that they are satisfied with the amount of time healthcare providers spend with them, that figure slips to 60% among Black employees and to 52% among Hispanic employees⁵.
- Even more strikingly, Black and Hispanic employees are far more likely to perceive discrimination based on race or ethnicity in the healthcare system: 65% of Black employees say it occurs very or fairly often, as do 51% of Hispanic employees. Only 44% of White employees report the same degree of frequency⁵.
- This perception of discrimination manifests in a range of specific experiences in which Black and Hispanic employees report generally more negative experiences⁵.

Understanding Relevant Experiences in Daily Life:

Health and wellbeing go far beyond the doctor's office. Employees' experiences in their daily life have important implications for health and wellbeing and follow them to work each day.

- Black and Hispanic employees are far more likely than White employees to report experiencing discrimination, harassment and microaggressions in their day-to-day life. Some of these microaggressions occur at work. One in four Black and Hispanic workers have experienced discrimination at work in

the past 12 months⁵. These experiences are associated with lower levels of employee engagement and wellbeing⁵.

- Even when discrimination, harassment and microaggressions occur outside of work, those experiences still affect overall wellbeing⁵. The "whole person" comes to work. Employees' experiences outside the office inevitably affect not only their wellbeing but also their performance on the job⁵.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to health, benefits and employee wellbeing. Not every employee will be inspired by a young, fresh face with a six-pack. Similarly, not everyone will have the same abilities to engage in wellness initiatives. In order for your programming to be inclusive, it needs to reflect the diversity of your workforce. Solutions that provide a wide representation of age, race, ability, and wellbeing categories, will improve employee engagement and allow every employee the opportunity to continue their wellbeing journey in their own way³.



Why Effective DEI Programs are Good for People and Good for Business

Studies show that exposure to diversity can lead to increased cognitive skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving. Organizations are complex and are constantly evolving to become more efficient and effective, which requires problem-solving and creative solutions. A diverse and inclusive workforce is better equipped to combat some of the new major stressors in our country, such as discrimination, violence towards minorities, and the uncertain future of the country. The diverse and inclusive workforce of the future can also lead to initiatives and cultures that break down the barriers that minorities feel they have to put up while at work.

Understanding and valuing DEI can contribute to growth in many ways. It's not just one dimensional, but can encourage growth on a much bigger scale. A company that encourages and promotes an environment of DEI can move forward in many different ways. Instead of just thinking strategically about growth, different people can contribute to the growth by giving an analytical perspective or providing an interpersonal view.

DEI doesn't just encourage a healthy competitive environment for people of different ideas and thoughts to share. It opens up room for discussion within the company and offers a safe space for people to voice their thoughts with confidence. While profit and productivity are priorities, DEI efforts allow people to be people.

Benefits of Diversity in the Workplace

Diversity in the Workplaces allows you to:

- Access more candidates and attract a wider talent pool
- Gain fresh perspectives, tap into new ideas, and improve decision-making
- Identify creative solutions and innovate more
- Improve employee performance and productivity
- Represent a wider customer base and build customer trust
- Increase your profits and financial performance

Lack of Diversity in the Workplace Attributes to:

- A lack of diversity training programs can make it difficult for diverse employees to integrate into a new workplace
- Resistance to change by some individuals can have negative outcomes like stereotyping, racism, offensive behaviors and harm in the workplace

Integrating DEI and Wellbeing

In the Gallup article ⁵, *It's Time to Synchronize Your DEI and Wellbeing Strategies*, by Elyn Maese and Camille Lloyd, they share a practical, three-step guide to integrating DEI and Wellbeing.

Step 1: Gather Input

No two workforces are alike. It is crucial for leaders to discover where their employees are struggling and thriving when it comes to wellbeing and experiences with DEI. Ask your employees to provide feedback in team meetings, town halls or anonymous pulse surveys. Talk to employee resource groups. By taking the time to understand your employees' experiences and needs, you can tailor the resources you provide and signal to workers that you care.

It is important to give leaders the full picture of employees' experiences. Leaders need to be conscious of employees' daily experiences including: where employees get health-related information, where and how often they seek healthcare, what kind of healthcare they receive and how effective it is, what kind of support they have in their wellbeing and overall wellness and the challenges these employees face.

Step 2: Reflect

- Addressing diverse needs may seem overwhelming, but solutions can be quite simple. For example, offering health plans with a wide breadth of coverage for providers and services allows employees to choose the care that is right for them. Some solutions, like flextime, can also be readily adapted

by employees to meet their own needs. In order for leaders to act on their discoveries from gathering input, they should think critically about possible solutions in these areas:

- Benefits Package and EAP
- Workplace wellbeing and wellness programs
- Policies on workplace flexibility and work-life balance
- Workplace culture
- Conversations between managers and employees

Step 3: Plan

Ensure that the organization has the right foundations in place. Consider structural changes to facilitate the integration of health, wellbeing and DEI into the organization. For instance, leaders should encourage cross-functional relationships and collaboration between wellbeing leaders and teams that champion DEI initiatives. Employees at all levels should be equipped with the tools they need to provide equal and fair access to support resources.

Upskill managers, leaders and human resources professionals in cultural competence and prepare them for having conversations with employees that address the whole person. Spread the word about DEI and wellbeing efforts. Ensure everyone knows about the resources available.

How Employers Can Support Underrepresented Employees' Wellbeing

Health and wellness programs can play a vital role in keeping people well, and efforts to support them are to be lauded. However, these programs alone fail to address an important link between wellbeing, and DEI. Research has time and time again documented the importance of DEI for business. We know that organizations with diverse workforces enjoy increased financial performance, innovation, creativity, and decreased attrition and related costs. Unfortunately, efforts to address DEI in the workplace are typically disconnected from those aimed at supporting employee health and wellness.

It is imperative that companies implement programs and policies that holistically address employee wellbeing and DEI. There is not a single solution for this, but a series of actions employers should take to ensure every part of their population has the resources and information they need to address the needs of marginalized employee populations.

Below are some recommendations by Chris Michalak and Marlette Jackson that they outlined in the Harvard Business Review article ⁴, *Supporting the Well-Being of Your Underrepresented Employees*.

Bring in – and Compensate – Subject Matter Experts

Facilitated group discussions for Black-identifying employees addressing topics such as racial battle fatigue, microaggressions, emotional labor, self-preservation, stamina for systemic change, and Black joy are extremely impactful. These group discussions

should be facilitated by a licensed psychologist and DEI expert. They do not only provide space for employees to have a greater understanding of their emotional trauma, but it also provides them with the tools to navigate the trauma in the workplace. These sessions should be designed to be a healing experience and support regarding the daily impact of racial trauma and injustice.

Upskill Your Managers

Many managers express feeling ill-equipped to address the mental toll social unrest takes on their team. It is critical to help managers develop the necessary skills and behaviors to ensure employee experiences are inclusive. Consider providing training for leaders on how to manage during times of unrest. Key takeaways from this training could include just-in-time tools to communicate solidarity as well as language to support underrepresented employees. Managers also could be taught to reframe how they offer support. Rather than asking open-ended questions like, “How can I help?”, which can create an emotional burden on the recipient, they could learn how to reframe their proposition. Offering specific, tangible support, such as, “I would like to support you and am happy to take point on our Thursday meeting if that would help?”, can demonstrate care and help relieve stress and anxiety.

Embed Mindful DEI Practices into your Talent Strategy

Small changes can help encourage employees to take a more active role in their wellbeing. For example, begin a department meeting with a centering activity such as a guided meditation or a simple “temperature check”. At the same time, find ways to weave DEI and wellbeing into the broader talent strategy. For instance, try including more inclusive language in job descriptions, such as, “No candidate will meet every single desired qualification. If your experience looks a little different from what we’ve identified and you think you can bring value to the role, we’d love to learn more about you!”.

Showcase Employee Stories

Sharing stories about people’s personal journeys in spaces at work can create opportunities for people to learn about perspectives different than theirs and how to be better and more inclusive colleagues. To do this, try creating an employee storytelling series chronicling stories of resilience, wellbeing, and triumph. Make sure to name the series something inspiring. Hopefully employees will feel comfortable opening up about their experiences. They could also be asked to provide insight into what simple workplace actions can help them feel more like themselves.

Create a Wellbeing Centered Employee Resource Group

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) can help foster a diverse, inclusive workplace that is aligned with the organization’s mission, values, and goals. Some examples of ERG’s that could fall under the umbrella of the DEI team and partner with other ERG’s on events and initiatives are groups focused on mental health and

ones focused on caregivers.

DEI and wellbeing are key business strategies. The business community has made great strides toward both, but they can no longer be treated as separate and distinct.



How Human Resources Can Focus on Employee DEI in Wellbeing Programs

Employees who feel seen, represented, and truly supported by leadership with the comprehensive benefits package are more likely to stay in their role. Recruitment costs are reduced when more employees stay, and when organizations offer diverse and inclusive wellbeing programs, they become more attractive to a diverse pool of candidates who are looking for employers that provide attractive benefits. Below are some tips for how Human Resources can focus on DEI in wellbeing programs:

Tips for DEI in Wellbeing Programs from the Human Resources Perspective

- Choose an accessible platform where employees can access their benefits, wellbeing solution, and programming
- Ensure anonymity with surveys and searches for benefits to reduce the stigma of getting help or that might surround a chronic condition
- Look for programming that includes adaptive class offerings as part of the main solution so that your employees can have a common point of reference (and compete in challenges together)
- Consider programming that works with diverse and relatable instructors
- Offer a broad range of programming to meet every ability or level
- If you can, go a step further and include access to employees' families so they can all pursue health together
- Provide inclusive employee challenges (not just steps that preclude those in assistive devices)
- Especially for multilingual workforces, make sure the program and/or solution supports multiple languages
- Look for employee wellbeing apps that offer various time commitment options to work for parents, beginners, etc.
- Provide wellbeing programs that support your employees – no matter what stage of life they are in, and that reinforce your overall commitment to their wellbeing
- Support DEI Mission-Driven Brands through partnering with a black-founded brand or a corporate wellness company that compliments your DEI efforts
- Encourage staff to create diversity and inclusion moments during meetings by encouraging teams to share one of their favorite brands, companies, or products that are either minority-owned, or pushing DEI efforts forward in an impactful way
- Set milestone check-ins with your employees to gauge the effectiveness of DEI exercises and overall employee satisfaction levels with the DEI initiatives

Conclusion

There is no finish line to DEI. There is always room to grow and improve. Companies can continue to learn and grow from their experiences, successes, and failures as they seek to make their workplaces more inclusive and equitable for all. In today's multicultural society, building a diverse and inclusive workforce is paramount to a business's success, not to mention our nation's success. Don't be alarmed if you are overwhelmed trying to incorporate DEI into your workplace. Shifting culture in any direction, and in this case, a more diverse direction, takes time. Fortunately, every step will bring you closer to your end goal and provide plenty of opportunities to adjust along the way.

Take steps to incorporate training and coaching on DEI topics such as unconscious and implicit bias, stereotyping, prejudice, and microaggressions. If you have a wellness champion network or wellness committee, recruit and encourage diverse team

members to join to make sure their needs are met. A group of diverse decision-makers can not only inspire confidence in new employees regarding potential growth, but they can also take actions that resonate with a more significant portion of both the employee population and the market of potential new hires. Creating change applies to everyone and one of the most significant ways to spark change is by diversifying your personal experiences. The books you read, the movies you watch and the people you talk to will all impact your perspective on the world.

Remember that change does not happen overnight. With transparency and meaningful dialogue, your organization will be well on its way to creating lasting change.

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