Well-being intelligence: A skillset for the new world of work

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The rise in sick days is becoming a concern in many developed countries. In the US, the absenteeism rate is the highest it has been in a decade. In France, the number of sick days has also been rising steadily, with 42% of French employees taking sick days in 2022, up from 38% in 2021. In Sweden, the number of sick days per employee increased by 1 full day a year from 2021 to 2022. In December 2022 alone, an estimated 1.5 million Americans [missed work](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/29/covid-absence-workforce-health-long-covid).

While ongoing waves of COVID infections have played a role in absenteeism, there is also evidence of a rise in mental health issues, which were responsible for 20% of sick days in France in 2022—an increase from 17% in 2021 and 15% in 2020. In the National Health Service in the UK, the cost of sick days caused by mental health has doubled since the pandemic, totalling nearly half a billion a year.

There are many overlapping explanations for such an apparent decrease in well-being at work. Most obviously, we are emerging from a global pandemic that has required both organizations and employees to be resilient in the face of stressful work conditions on top of health and family concerns. Add a cost-of-living crisis, and it's clear that anxiety is beginning to dominate our experience of work. Further, when colleagues go missing due to illness or poor mental health, it can create a domino effect, as those left behind have to take on additional responsibilities in the short term.

Many organizations such as Vitality, Salesforce, and Infosys have designed what we call organizational strategies for well-being, from reshaping their culture to providing direct well-being benefits. These shifts may involve training leaders on well-being, offering benefits such as meditation or well-being apps, or providing access to counselling.

The increasing trend of sick days and mental health issues in the workplace calls for a focus on such well-being initiatives. We propose the concept of well-being intelligence (WBQ) for managers as a skillset and tool to understand and improve their own and employees' well-being. As workplace challenges increase, well-being intelligence is becoming an essential leadership skill. Effective managers must be able to detect when others are struggling with well-being and know when and how to offer support.

Many are familiar with the concept of emotional intelligence familiarised by Dan Goleman: how people understand their own emotions, regulate them, and approach the emotions of others. Although emotions and well-being are interconnected, they differ in definition and

their impact work. Emotions are more diffuse and their effect on work is less direct than that of mental health, and the rippling effect of mental health on physical health. We can experience a great range of emotions over a short period of time, moods shifting depending on the context, people around us, or our own thoughts. Well-being, however, is a longer-term state that influences behavior and interactions in the workplace and beyond.

The Circles of Well-being intelligence

When leaders acknowledge the prevalence of mental health challenges in the workplace, they can shift the culture and raise awareness of this pressing concern. Leaders at all levels can be depressed, anxious, and stressed at work, but by recognizing and addressing the root causes, they can demonstrate commitment to supporting the well-being of themselves and others.

The model below summarizes the core skillsets of WBQ: identifying core mental health challenges such as stress and anxiety, acknowledging their root causes, and designing approaches to address them at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Building self-awareness of one's well-being is the first step. Self-awareness allows individuals to understand their, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and adjust individual work practices accordingly for self-care.

Understanding our own well-being helps us to understand and explain how others' well-being can also be affected, detect the challenges they face, and act upon those issues and our own (which may be the same). In turn, observing and acting on well-being will enable learning from experience, ultimately helping managers to implement changes at the team level. This in turn will broaden the support for well-being and encourage the development of positive well-norms throughout the organisation.

Well-being Intelligence in practice

Applying well-being intelligence in practice requires a dedicated effort and a shift in practices on three different levels.

Prioritizing individual well-being: The first step to becoming a well-being intelligent manager is to look inward, by recognizing mental health challenges at work and pinpointing their sources. Without the ability to comprehend what affects our own mental health and what challenges we ourselves experience, our potential to address others' issues is limited. Striving to be attentive, thoughtful, resilient, and collaborative managers means focusing on one's own well-being.

- Continually self-assessing our mental health: In this first step, we reflect on our experiences at work and identify how they impact our well-being positively or negatively. For example, one might reflect on what is driving current stress? Is it specific interactions at work or specific periods, such as budget deadlines? Or on the contrary, is it the experience of a lingering sense of dread, typical of anxiety, when going to work? Remember that well-being intelligence requires self-reflection to be an ongoing process, rather than dismissing one's needs until they grow too severe to ignore.

- Making concrete changes in our own approach to work: Self-analysis enables leaders to make changes to work practices or structures that address challenges. For example, we found that in the context of hybrid work, when an abundance of meetings were causing increased stress levels, senior executives' well-being benefitted most from [focus hours](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-shifts-in-remote-behavior-affect-employee-well-being/). In the wake of stress, managers can revisit their time management at work and reallocate tasks to protect their own focus time. Managers who are well-being intelligent are also likely to protect their time off, which is known to prevent burnout.

Improving team well-being. While self-assessment is essential for well-being intelligence, issues faced by one individual are likely to be experienced by others on the team. Therefore, a personal knowledge and understanding of these issues can help in addressing them collectively.

- Assessing others' well-being: Managers can assess the well-being of their team members and collaborators in many different ways. For a big picture or large groups, using pulse surveys (short surveys assessing mental health in a few questions) is a good way to get anonymized data and enable employees to report issues discretely. At a more personal level, and when trust is established, annual review meetings or even informal chats can be useful tools to assess well-being challenges of employees. The information gathered from these efforts can be assessed and addressed by well-being intelligent managers who have built an understanding of how and why similar challenges might affect employees. If they

observe well-being challenges that differ from theirs among their colleagues, learning and addressing their own issues have also helped them develop a systematic approach disentangling well-being issues from their root causes.

- Improving work practices within the team: The information gathered from assessments can provide evidence and momentum to change organizational practices, but the process itself creates awareness and acceptance of mental health issues more generally. At the managerial level, small changes matter; enforcing strict working hours, encouraging a healthy work-life balance, or setting up dedicated breaks and meeting free days can make a significant difference. Inviting struggling employees to ask for support within their team or from their managers will improve well-being both directly and indirectly by reducing the shame and stigma often associated with mental health challenges.

Systemic change: Understanding and prioritizing individual and team well-being can trigger broader change and inspire new approaches in organizations.

- Broadening the support for organizational well-being: Some issues of well-being will require higher-level support than an individual manager can accommodate. Organizational policies regarding flexible work arrangements or time off are crucial to ensure employees can preserve strong boundaries between their professional and personal selves. If workload is a main issue, improving job design by redistributing tasks or considering ways to increase staff or support in dedicated areas of the organization can help.
- Changing the organizational norms: Some organizational norms, can trigger well-being issues. For example, a strong norm of presenteeism even when employees are sick, the way feedback is provided, or more generally how managers communicate (and whether they communicate after work hours in particular) can generate well-being issues. Addressing these at the individual and team level can help identify those issues and shift those well anchored practices. Highlighting the consequences of such negative norms, incentivising good practices around feedback, communication and workplace interactions can trigger long lasting change.

Developing Well-being Intelligence

Well-being intelligence is not an innate skill and requires conscious effort to learn, explore, and evaluate potential solutions for addressing issues. Evaluating whether those shifts successfully improve well-being can help identify whether the initial diagnosis of the issue was accurate, or whether an alternative approach would be more effective. This approach relies on collecting constant feedback from employees, through formal and anonymous surveys or more informal one on one conversations. More tangible variable such as turnover or sick days are also obvious markers.

But well-being issues may take time to emerge and time to solve as managers finetune changes. If issues persist after implementing solutions, it is likely the root problem remains unresolved. Well-being Intelligence requires finding out how changes at work affect well-being and modifying those approaches to ensure their efficacy. Moreover, raising awareness of those issues and building a coalition within the organization is crucial for spearheading change.

Firms may also consider providing adapted training to employees on detecting mental health issues on topics, for example, of recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress, anxiety or depression. Stress and anxiety are often confused (usually because typically both appear concurrently)– but anxiety is seen as persistent apprehension and overwhelming worry, whereas stress is a short-term state usually caused by an external factor such as a tight deadline or a meeting with a particularly intimidating colleague. Burnout is often the result of prolonged and unaddressed stress; identifying issues as they arise can help detect burnout and address the issue before it becomes critical.

One ongoing challenge to learning and developing Well-being Intelligence is the shift to hybrid work. Detecting well-being issues through screen- or audio-mediated interactions is more challenging. Signs of stress or anxiety that are visible in face-to-face interactions may be much harder to discern in a remote context. Managers may have to rely on tone of voice, moments of silences in conversations, or speech rate, rather than typical non-verbal cues to detect stress or anxiety among colleagues. Behavioural cues such as struggling to maintain workload, isolating from team members in meetings, or arriving or finishing work late can also indicate poor well-being.

Well-being intelligence will thus also require ability to lead tactful discussions on mental health in the context of online communication. Building trust during in-person interactions can facilitate open-hearted online exchanges. For fully remote organizations, integrating well-being discussions in annual reviews and starting remote team meetings with a quick round of well-being reports can be a simple way to demonstrate that employees' well-being matters.

The pandemic has made it clear that investing in Well-being Intelligence is no longer optional, but essential for both the well-being of employees and the success of organizations. It's not far-fetched to imagine a future where managers are routinely asked about their own mental health practices and the measures they have taken to promote the well-being of their team. Organizations that promote well-being intelligence not only create a healthier and more productive workforce, they build a competitive advantage for the future.

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