



Help at hand

The big accountancy firms are not only recognising the importance of dealing with wellbeing at work, they are devising innovative ways to promote good mental health, finds Danny McCance

ILLUSTRATION BY ZARA PICKEN

Employees are no longer satisfied with workplaces being “wellbeing neutral”. In other words, people are no longer just happy as long as their work is not negatively affecting them. This, says the Chartered Accountants Benevolent Association (CABA), which provides free independent support for ACA students and past and present ICAEW members and their families, is going to become “more significant as millennials and those in generation Z, who are not prepared to sacrifice their physical or mental health on the altar of work, make up more of the workforce.”

As Steve Saville, UK HR director at Mazars explains, mental health accounts for more than 50% of sickness absence in the UK. He says this points to the need to change how we address this problem. And there are other considerations too. “When we think about the diversity and inclusion agenda, it’s all about being your whole self and not having to hide parts of you at work as it’s just exhausting,” Saville says.

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It’s therefore unsurprising that wellbeing is one of the strategic priorities in financial services. For BDO, wellbeing is a leadership priority. The three pillars to its approach - mental, physical and financial

wellbeing - all underpin the firm’s focus on individuals being their best self at work. “Unless you’re mentally and physically well, then you can’t do that, as they enable you to be the best you can be,” says Wendy Walton, head of global private client services at the firm.

BDO has a variety of ways in which it engages with staff on wellbeing. These include mentoring, flexible work, workplace champions and, most recently, a plan to roll out resilience training, tagged as performance under pressure, to all of its staff. Support is also at the heart of Grant Thornton’s wellness community. Perry Burton, head of London audit and tax at the firm, describes it as a group of people who’ve volunteered to provide support to others should they need it. It offers resources such as tips on wellbeing, yoga sessions, workshops and drop-ins. The firm has also introduced e-learning tools on mental health to ensure its managers are appropriately equipped. “We’ve really spent a lot of time normalising and encouraging discussion around mental health,” Burton says. The firm is set to train its first cohort of 64 mental health first aiders throughout autumn and spring.

At EY, 700 mental health first aiders across the organisation have been trained,

PERFORMANCE OR WELLBEING?

In a white paper published in September last year, CABA said that as many as 42% of respondents agreed with the statement that they felt that their employer values output more than wellbeing. Perhaps more worryingly, 70% said they felt stressed at work more than once a month, while 40% have taken time off due to stress or an unmanageable workload. However, the organisation notes that it is not stress in itself that is the issue, as this can actually be motivating. Rather, a culture of fear or blame lead to people responding negatively to stress.

The research found that 73% of employees said that when wellbeing is poor, they find it hard to concentrate, while 63% are less productive, 54% have more conflicts with colleagues and 42% said they take more sick days. Women felt less able to talk about this at work too, with only 15% saying they felt able to talk to their manager about mental health issues, compared to 20% of men.