

Why wearable tech matters to organisational wellbeing

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Wearable technology has been used in healthcare for decades. But it is the mass adoption of the tech by consumers that is making a real difference to its potential. For HR, the everyday use of wearable devices by large numbers of employees is an opportunity in terms of taking wellbeing strategies to a new level of engagement – but it is also a potential hazard.

Apple has its Watch, and Microsoft, Samsung, LG and many other tech manufacturers are planning to release devices which can be worn or attached to clothing so they become more an extension of ourselves than a gadget that can be left at home or at the back of a drawer. One in 5 people in the USA already uses wearable tech, and the numbers are expected to rise exponentially.

In the context of the problems with modern lifestyle diseases, the numbers of people affected by heart disease, diabetes and cancers, there are many positives from this. Specialist wearable tech has been used by medical professionals for many years for monitoring patient blood pressure and heart rates, for examples, over extended periods of time. But that depends on an individual's willingness to see health professionals and on a particular diagnosis. Now anyone can get data

about themselves and their health, each day, tracking levels of exercise and basic health readings.

At a simple level, that will mean an easier role for HR in encouraging more physical activity – which is increasingly important when “sitting” has been identified, perhaps a little dramatically, as the “new smoking”. It is going to be easier to tap into a *zeitgeist* – where more people are using the tech and constantly reminded by its presence – to encourage and support people to become more active, improve diet and keep an eye on their health more generally. There are also going to be all kinds of useful innovations, like the contact lenses that can measure glucose levels for people with diabetes, which are already available.

Strategically, there is the more exciting potential for access to (anonymised) data on employee wellbeing. Buy-in for employee wellbeing initiatives has always been hampered by a lack of hard data on its value. Making a case for investment into health benefits has meant looking for any potential signs of impact on absence rates, before focusing on the value of wellbeing schemes for engagement, for employer branding and in the end, just the importance of doing the “right thing”. The combination of individual staff with personal data and more employers offering

low-cost health screenings for larger groups of employees has the potential to transform this situation. There will come a wealth of data on staff wellbeing, both physical and mental, and the ability to track trends and the effect of both organisational change and the Return on Investment on specific wellbeing initiatives to justify ongoing investment.

This kind of data means HR will be able to tailor initiatives based on particular health needs or concerns, not just within the staff population as a whole but by geographical location or division, and measure the impact. While organisations have become more conscious of meeting the needs of diverse workforces in many areas of HR and management, healthcare benefits often continue to be generic and based on assumptions about what is wanted by staff and needed in terms of actual improved health. Health and wellbeing is a powerful engagement tool, a win-win for employers. But the investment is a waste if it is not tailored and targeted to the staff demographic, and if there is no data and evidence for the positive health outcomes that will result.

Wearable tech has other wellbeing potential. With more mobile staff working remotely and in isolation, from home or from satellite offices, there are pitfalls in terms of health and safety responsibilities. New devices are able to track heart rate, breathing, temperature, steps and even body position in case a person has fallen, allowing an emergency message to be sent to a central office in the event of health problems. Wearable environmental monitors will be able to help assess air quality and its impact on health. Monitoring brain wave activity (not so much for stress itself, but sleep patterns, looking at the balance between REM and non-REM sleep) will provide a more accurate indicator of psychological problems and risk of depression and anxiety.

The downside is what the new physical attachment to technology, the ratcheting up of the “always on” culture, will mean for the nature of working and mental health. There is an argument that the sheer pace of development in technologies at work over the past 20 years has outpaced our ability to cope. There has always been change and the introduction of new technologies in the workplace, but until now these have tended to be one at a time,

with the opportunity for the full effects of the change to happen slowly and in line with training and development. New tech is now said to be doubling in functionality and halving in price every two years, leading to multiple innovations happening at any one time, greater complexity and pressure on time and attention and everyday working roles. We are already said to check our smartphones more than 100 times a day, and this will increase as we become more reliant on the streams of different contacts and data the devices provide. The omnipresence of IT disrupts our ability to be “mindful” of the moment and makes it far harder to detach ourselves from work demands.

When it comes to health monitoring data, there is the risk of obsessive behaviour among people who are constantly monitoring their stats as if they were vital life signs. Just as with IT for work, we will all need to learn how to better cope with the lure of digital material and the constant availability of “new” updates, how to dip in and out when necessary and find ways to balance our natural interest with detachment.

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