

Let's Talk: Supporting employees and protecting their wellbeing



📅 Wed 20 May 2020 - 6:27 am

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By Loren Webb

Supporting employees has never been more important than now, given the uncertainty we are experiencing. Although lockdowns are slowly [easing](#), the working and business world won't be back to "normal" any time soon. In fact, perhaps it will never go back but only move forward towards a "new normal."

How can businesses best support employees and teams during this transition to a "new normal" and in forced remote working? How can employers protect their teams' wellbeing in this period?

It's a question no-one expected to answer in this specific way, as no-one foresaw the situation as it unfolded. However, many of the same principles that should have been in-place pre-covid in the workplace can be adapted to a digital set-up; frequent communication and catch ups, social interaction opportunities and surveys are all examples discussed in today's Let's Talk.

We speak to business leaders and HR Directors today about how they are looking after their employees' wellbeing, sharing tips that every business can take-away to support their teams in this time.

Scott Bidmead, co-founder of euda.co

There is no doubt that right now wellbeing has to be a priority for Aussie businesses. There's a framework in modern psychology called PERMA, which identifies five key elements needed for wellbeing – Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Most of these aspects have been impacted in the wake of remote working conditions, isolation, fear of the unknown and financial stress. On an individual level we need to find new ways to meet these needs, and adopt things like meditation, video calling friends and new hobbies. It also helps to be hitting the three E's of exercise, eating right and energy of the people around you.

On a corporate level, investment both financially and through tangible solutions needs to be front of mind. The key is to avoid a reactive approach and take action by putting systems in place to boost pre-emptive wellbeing. During times of uncertainty, businesses also need high quality data and information to help guide their decision making. There are a number of ways to achieve this but the key is simply to take more action around the wellbeing of your staff.

Shweta Mishra, Director of HR, APJ, Rackspace



The APAC organisations that are doing well during the COVID-19 pandemic are mindful of their employees' health – whether that's their physical, social, or mental wellbeing. Understandably, organisations are prioritising the physical safety of employees, equipping teams with the technology and tools needed to work remotely. But at Rackspace we're looking to do more: we've provided 10 masks per employee globally to further ensure their safety; we've introduced a digital wellness solution that can help to reduce stress and increase resilience; and we've incentivised global exercise programs.

Organisations must understand the importance of retaining team culture and make a conscious effort to socialise virtually – team members should never feel as if they are working alone. Perhaps implement face-to-face video meetings or a 'buddy' system where colleagues take turns checking in with one another? Friday afternoon catch-ups are also a great idea.

Finally, when it comes to business decisions, organisations must communicate openly and honestly with their teams. This will earn leaders respect but also help to reassure employees at a time when it's okay to not be feeling okay.

Jaime Nelson, Managing Director, Hotwire Australia



As we look towards recovery in Australia, I am proud of the work we are doing in prioritising the mental and physical wellbeing of our people. Here are some of the changes we've embraced at Hotwire which can hopefully help other businesses to stay connected:

- Regular team catch ups including virtual lunch dates, Friday happy hours, and passion presentations via Zoom
- Thoughtful working which offers employees the flexibility to nominate where and when they are most productive
- Virtual yoga and meditation classes, as well as personal development training on topics such as resilience and change management
- Personal interest Slack channels – from cooking to gaming, photography to pets, these channels encourage global colleagues to connect on shared interests
- Access to free counselling through our EAP program

Recognition is also a must. Good news and shout outs not only motivate teams; they act as a reminder that hard work and results will always be recognised, even more so during a crisis.

Vijay Sundaram, Chief Strategy Officer, Zoho



Despite restrictions starting to ease in Australia, concern and uncertainty of recent months, and about the road ahead, will naturally have impacted the wellbeing of Australian workers. With Zoho research forecasting that half of all Australian small businesses will continue to work by distance once restrictions lift, businesses should start to think long-term about how remote working can foster ongoing wellbeing.

Nearly half of the small business owners we spoke with said working at a distance unlocks new time, as well as commuting costs, which can be redirected to their home lives. When combined with open, direct and empathetic communication from management, remote working can foster true wellbeing by providing employees with greater freedom, flexibility and autonomy in terms of when, where and how they work.

Jacob Galea, Executive success and mindset coach



Just remember that the most important people in your business are your employees, without them we cannot really take our company to the level it truly deserves, my business catch phrase is People, Performance, Profit. What this means is that we must focus on our people first (internal and external, staff and clients), then when our people have the care and mentoring they need they will always perform, then our business will always go into profit.

So in this time, we must more than ever support our employees to ensure their mental and physical wellbeing is our main priority.

Below are some tips to help support our important employees:

- Make sure you have daily check in calls, no specific agenda just a call to see how they are going
- Create a group chat that enables them to interact with all staff
- Share motivational / inspirational videos to keep their spirit up
- Order them their favourite food to be delivered and surprise them
- Create a group meditation
- Challenge them and get them involved with a passion project for the business
- Involve them in areas of the business they would not usually be involved and upskill their mind
- Create an internal book club and feed their mind with wisdom and knowledge.

What your employees really want is to know that you care, that you are thinking of them, and that they are important to your business. It is the most simple care factors that make the biggest difference in the wellness of our people. We all need someone who cares and reaches out.

Matt Loop, Head of Asia Pacific, Slack

With thousands of Australians now having worked remotely for ten weeks, workplace culture has shifted. Alongside encouraging productivity — leaders also need to absolutely ensure employees' wellbeing during this time.

There are two main ways of ensuring employees feel safe and heard.

The first is to make employees feel trusted, supported and treated as individuals. This will empower them to do their best and feel confident in the decisions they are making.

Second is to encourage connection between employees and leaders. At Slack, we do this through our channels. For example, not all of them are work-focused, some are hinged on personal interests — this enables more free flowing chats.

While Slack is already part of our day-to-day communication, we as a company are finding new ways to help our teams at home feel connected and promote wellbeing. This can range from increasing the number of weekly team huddles, taking time to ask everybody how they are feeling at the start of meetings, to respecting coworkers' notifications and updated status'. In short, listening to your employees and tuning in to their needs is key when ensuring employee wellbeing.

Barbara Parker, Academic Director & Associate Professor, UniSA Online



The sudden loss of work-life structure has been very challenging for many. Deprived of face-to-face contact, employees have had to navigate a wide range of communication methods, from phone calls and email to virtual conferences – with “Zoom fatigue” already a buzzword.

To ensure team members don't feel isolated, set a timetable to check-in on them. It's tempting to schedule more meetings to do this but look at other ways to connect such as spontaneous, virtual coffee breaks. Introduce dedicated channels on Slack or similar collaboration tools where non-work and non-pandemic discussions are held.

A basic "traffic light" system to use with staff to self-assess staff wellbeing can be beneficial – green means things are good, yellow says they're OK and red isn't a great sign. This approach can help us to intervene early to prevent certain situations from spiralling out of control and affecting productivity as well as other team members.

Graeme Orsborn, Everbridge Vice President – International CEM unit



Ensuring employee wellbeing should always be a priority for organisations and with many staff now working remotely, it's important to check in but it can be more challenging. Even before COVID, Strategy Analytics found that almost half of all workers will be mobile employees by 2022. It can be harder to protect and support remote employees, but "out of sight" doesn't mean "out of mind".

Organisations need to redefine duty of care, and ensure the safety and wellbeing of people who work alone. Having good two-way communication is critical, and ensuring regular contact and check-ins with remote staff. Everbridge's Clarity out of Chaos 2020 report found that only 26 percent of Australian workers believe their employers were doing enough to alert them to critical events or business disruptions. Clearly there's much (urgent) room for improvement.

When working from home, work life and personal life boundaries can get blurred, and staff may get burnt out. Set time limits and ensure that staff aren't feeling pressured to be "always on". Provide access to support services to offer independent and confidential advice and counselling for employees in difficult circumstances.

Melissa Hyland, HR Manager, ipSCAPE



ipSCAPE understands the importance of ensuring our employee's physical and mental health is a priority, especially during these unprecedented times.

These are a few initiatives we have implemented:

- 1) **Stay Connected:** ipSCAPE holds monthly company updates, regular department check-ins and weekly company-wide interactive games to ensure we stay connected while we work remotely. Our ability to offer direct routing with Microsoft Teams has helped facilitate this connection as we host video conferences for interactive games and use the 'polly Teams' feature to gather interests and engagement levels. We also use quiz templates and alternate quizmasters weekly to keep things fun and engaging!
- 2) **Invest in employee's physical wellbeing:** The lockdown has resulted in the temporary closure of gyms, making it difficult for employees to prioritise their physical health. As one of a company benefits, ipSCAPE has introduced 30-minute one-on-one personal training sessions. This creates a healthy work-life balance and demonstrates how much we value our employees.
- 3) **Importance of Mental health:** ipSCAPE recognises the importance of facilitating conversations around mental health. We share relevant information in our monthly internal newsletter with a strong call to action for employees to reach out to their manager, HR or CEO if they need support or just simply want to 'chat'.

Vu Tran, co-founder, GO1.com



Change can be a huge driver of anxiety, and undoubtedly, no single event has brought about more change in recent memory to people's lives than COVID-19. As a result, as managers and leaders, we should be thinking about the mental wellbeing of our staff and those around us who may very likely be battling significant personal and professional anxiety in the midst of so much uncertainty. R U OK? Day is a fantastic organisation and one that aims to make themselves obsolete by the nature of the very challenge they are looking to overcome when it comes to reducing the mortality and morbidity associated with mental health.

It's therefore important for all of us to build R U OK? Day's core message into our own regular routines and simply take the time, whether it be in times of stability or conversely in times of great uncertainty to simply ask a friend, a colleague or even a stranger- "R U OKAY?". If we normalise and de-stigmatise mental health conditions it will ultimately lead to more help being asked for, offered and received. Over the past weeks and months, COVID-19 has allowed us to take stock, re-prioritise what's important to us and focus on what matters. In places like Australia, where we have been very fortunate and we now begin to consider what recovery looks like, it is important as leaders and employers that we think about the headspace of our teams and anticipate their needs as we move towards a post-COVID world.

Mykel Dixon, creative leadership advisor and author of Everyday Creative



Give your people a little more room to play. Celebrate the imperfections of working from home, highlight the humour in every tech-related mishap and invite them to put a little more of their personality into every project. The psychological benefits of play are well documented but allowing work to feel like a safe space for self-expression (not just delivering outcomes) will give your employees a much-needed boost. Sunshine, a stretch and a green smoothie make a powerful recipe for wellbeing but even the gift of a quick, shared giggle can work wonders.

Michelle Gibbings, founder of Change Meridian



Be open with your team about the criticality of self-care, and create a safe environment for your team to share their feelings, and seek support. As part of this, be alert to the warning signs of elevated stress in yourself and your team. This may include feeling ineffective, more cynical, and having reduced energy. As a team, agree on the boundaries as to what is acceptable regarding requests for work outside standard working hours, so team members are comfortable not responding to emails/phone calls in their personal time. Encourage your team to take breaks during the day, share self-care practises and role-model this behaviour.

Fiona Robertson, culture change specialist and author of Rules of Belonging



As the ultimate social species, humans are hardwired to stay safe through belonging and connection, so the recent cognitive dissonance of staying apart to stay safe is intensely unsettling. Here are three things we can advise our employees to do to increase their sense of belonging and connection:

- 1) It's not the quantity of friends, it's the quality of trusted relationships. One is enough. Confide in them and encourage them to confide in you.
- 2) Share a positive experience with someone else. Watch silly YouTube videos, have a laugh together.
- 3) Volunteer to help someone else. I know someone who lives alone who is phoning aged care facilities and having long conversations with isolated residents. The perfect win-win.

Simon Banks, Managing Director and SVP – Asia Pacific at Hyperwallet

Leading people you don't see day-to-day poses a unique set of challenges from methods of communication to work-flow issues. One of the biggest challenges is to maintain personal connections and team spirit. When you're all working remotely it takes a different level of effort to build and maintain culture.

Some simple ways we've been able to do that is to use IM, which enables us to quickly communicate with colleagues and makes the team feel like they can just ping you at any time with a question or issue. Regular check-ins have also been important, along with flexibility – the 9 to 5 work schedule has shifted since lockdown for many of us. Making time to connect on a personal level and keeping the camera on during video calls is also essential.

Joe Demase, Managing Director, 5G Networks

Corporate wellbeing is a critical component of supporting a distributed workforce. It tethers directly to the engagement of employees, together with the security and strength of your infrastructure as a business, particularly during times of increased uncertainty. Having the right plan in place for business continuity can make all the difference and keeping your employees informed and connected is paramount. Streamlining modes of communication across the business and empowering employees to collaborate together on the latest tools and software is one of the best ways to instill a sense of purpose in an increasingly mobile and dynamic workplace.

Ben Rohr, CEO, Meluka Australia



Employee health and wellbeing is an integral part of all great work cultures. This is even more pertinent during COVID-19. During this time of heightened uncertainty, employers must focus on the safety of all its employees. The workplace can be a high pressure environment coping with the demands of business and if employees do not feel safe while carrying out their duties then the ability to perform will be severely impacted. In addition to a safe environment it is important to provide clear concise communication. If a business is under financial stress then management needs to communicate clearly how this impacts on the workplace and what plans they are putting in place to manage this so everyone understands the impact this will have on their role in the company. This clarity will help in reducing the anxiety of a company's employees."

Angus Dorney, co-CEO, Kablamo

It's really about keeping everyone informed and letting them know they are part of something bigger. We have allowed space in our work schedule for more casual virtual gatherings, such as the work morning coffee, lunchtime yoga, the odd trivia night, and surprise snack boxes.

But there's more to it than just the virtual get-togethers. The company ethos itself can support mental wellbeing through creating an environment of clarity, trust, and purpose. My co-CEO and I made a pledge that we would make the best decisions for the long term health of all our staff, give visibility and reasons for our decisions, and continue to support our small business partners and suppliers. We asked our team to make this a two-way pledge: to make an extra effort to communicate, to join our remote team meetings and – most importantly – to stay customer-focused and keep bringing their best to our customers each day.

Nick Cloete, founder & CEO, Kounta

During this time, and as we adapt to a new future or working, it's important for businesses to regularly revisit and adapt their policies to ensure employee wellbeing is being met. Businesses have now seen the benefits of flexible working arrangements to the happiness and productivity of employees and should consider updating work from home policies as we have at Kounta.

Of course, employee wellbeing should be top-of-mind in all industries, but it's particularly important in hospitality right now as restrictions start to ease. Restaurant, bar and cafe owners and managers, should clearly set and communicate operations guidelines to ensure the safety of both staff and guests. These can include setting a maximum number of guests/tables allowed at one time, as well as safe queuing, contactless payments, and hygiene systems. It's also incredibly important to ensure you have a clear strategy in place if an employee becomes unwell.

Monica Watt, Chief Human Resources Officer, ELMO Cloud HR & Payroll

Human beings are social creatures that need to feel like they are a part of a community. In the current remote working environment many people would be forced to go about their lives without that physical interaction and connection to community that they get from their workplace.

For employers, the challenge is taking that sense of community that exists in the workplace and moving it into the virtual world. In practice this can mean taking work perks like weekly yoga classes and hosting them on Zoom or dedicating time during the day to chat about the latest Netflix series. Those watercooler conversations aren't a waste of time, they're crucial to keeping people engaged, connected and feeling supported.

Leaders have a big part to play and more than ever must be present, empathetic and compassionate, this is as easy as sharing their fun facts and how they are juggling work and life integration. Most importantly, pick up the phone and give people a call to ask the question, 'how are you going?' Breaking past the work conversation you can understand how people are coping and take steps to support them better.

Richard Watson, Australian Country Director, Twilio

Concerns about productivity levels while working from home have been demystified during this time. For a lot of businesses, this has proven that a more distributed workforce is feasible, and many are now considering longer-term or even permanent remote working practices.

Working remotely does however create a new challenge for employees in balancing the demands of multiple worlds overlapping. Suddenly work, family, school and social lives are all happening in a single space and employees are juggling those often conflicting responsibilities.

To provide support for employees as they continue to work more remotely, promote alternative work schedules that provide employees with the flexibility they require for their own circumstances. Schedules don't need to be prescriptive, and each individual can be encouraged to develop a routine that works best for them. Additionally, all communication needs to be thoughtfully enhanced, and delivered empathetically, as we all adjust to new ways of working and living.

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