

The Power of Employee Wellbeing in the Workplace



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Full transcript

Rob Parsons:

Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership series. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and we write extensively on a variety of HR topics, covering everything from HCM technology, to team engagement, to compliance with state and federal regulations. In this podcast, we speak with leaders and thinkers in the industry to provide our audience with the latest HR insights and information, and hopefully more than a little inspiration. Joining me today is Jake Flaitz. Jake is the director of benefits at Paychex and is responsible for managing our company's comprehensive benefits programs, including the nationally recognized active health wellness initiative. Jake, welcome to the webcast.

Jake Flaitz:

Thanks Rob, it's great to be here with you today.

Rob Parsons:

Fantastic. So today I want to talk about mental health. You and I have been talking about this issue for a few months now, and we've been talking overall wellness quite a bit longer than that. One of the areas where you really opened my eyes is how the workplace is such a big part of our emotional wellbeing. Can you elaborate on why that is?

Jake Flaitz:

Yeah, I think because in part so much of our identity relates to our work, right? And we spend... and often it's the work that we do, do we find purpose in the work? Is it a good work environment that we're in? Do we relate well to our managers? Do we relate well to our colleagues? How do we just feel when we get up every morning, right? At least five days a week, for most of us... And we're going into work, that sort of mindset alone has an enormous thing. And the facts are a lot of us spend an awful lot of time at work these days. And, so, there's a symbiotic relationship, I think, between work and our emotional wellbeing. That's how, we kind of like to call it at Paychex... As well as these other elements of wellbeing too, that I'm sure we'll talk a little bit about today.

Rob Parsons:

And something else you'd you noted that I found incredibly interesting was how in times of change, in times of stress in our lives, work can be a place of stability, something that I can depend on... It's consistent and it can really offer a lot of help when I'm having troubles in other areas of my life.

Jake Flaitz:

Yep. I think that's really true and probably no more evident I think, Rob, than this past year, right? If we think about all the things that have happened this year, the pandemic and the disruption the pandemic caused, and then that kind of economic crisis... We forget about what over 20 million Americans, at one point, out work as a result of the pandemic. And then we had the racial injustice and subsequent civil unrest, as we sort of come to grips with an issue that is centuries old for us.

Jake Flaitz:

And then we think about just the political turmoil that we saw throughout the election season... Even after the election... All of that just creating high levels of anxiety, uncertainty, in terms of its impact on me, and impact on family members, friends, whatever it might be. And so I think in a time of high uncertainty, it's great to have somewhere you can turn where you have some level of certainty and stability, because it provides that sense of security, I think, that we all need to function effectively, right? So work can be that. And I think there's a greater understanding of that today than there has been. And, certainly, I think there'll be a focus for employers going forward too. What actions can we take to provide... Increase stability, increase certainty in the course of, again, we said earlier, right? How much time we spend at work, so it can have an enormous positive impact on our lives.

Rob Parsons:

And it seems to me then it also brings an enormous responsibility to employers to think about that. There's this old theory or this old line of work-life balance, this pretending that when I leave for the day, I don't think about work anymore. When I'm at the office, I don't think about my personal life anymore. I think that's been kind of thrown out the window, especially with so many of us working from home and it's just really gotten murky, hasn't it?

Jake Flaitz:

It really, really has. And I think we see this a lot. I think when a significant event happens or a crisis, right, it sort of accelerates trends, right? That's one of the things that can happen and I think that's what we saw. We saw this really, this acceleration of a movement away from what we used to call work-life balance. And I always do this because I think it was scale, right? We've got to get these things that out of balance, let's bring it back into balance. And there was talk even several years ago about work-life integration. If our life is more integrated, it's more like this than it is like this, a scale. And I think an increasingly discuss notion, and I think there's a lot of merit to this is work-life harmony.

Jake Flaitz:

So how do I make my work and the job that I have work well with other parts of my life and vice versa? And it's becoming really, I think, essential. And I got to tell you, and I'll say this from a personal standpoint, as a person that used to do work, went to the office, did work at night, sometimes did work on the weekends like a lot of us do. But then all of a sudden, we were thrust into a work from home and you're doing everything from home. And then it became not only the disruption to what my normal routine was, but how do I segregate my life at home and my life at work when everything's taking place in the same physical location, right?

Jake Flaitz:

I think moving from room to room isn't the same as moving from your house or apartment to your office, and vice versa. And honestly, that's probably, that's a mental check. That's a mental mindset challenge to try to work through that, and at Paychex, we try to do things and say, like, okay, if you use your morning commute to sort of get ready for your job, and my commute was like 40 minutes, then maybe I'd take a walk in the morning before I start work. And I take a half hour walk that's good for my physical well-being, it's good for my emotional wellbeing.

Jake Flaitz:

And it gets me prepared for the day. And likewise, at the end of the day when I sort of, unwound I guess, from the day at work on my way home, or wherever... If I was stopping on the way home, it didn't matter, there was a chance to unwind. How, how do I take that into account? As opposed to just going like, okay, I can shut the computer down for a while and do whatever, right, in the house. So yeah, I think that's been a really significant challenge this year. I think it's a challenge going forward too, because we need, in my mind, to have separation because both parts of that, our work and our lives, are intertwined, but we need to be able to separate, too.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. I totally hear you. And I like that you brought up that physical component, I love that work-harmony, because we know it's not just work and personal. There's a lot of elements that contribute to my mental health, my emotional wellbeing or lack thereof.

Jake Flaitz:

Yep. Yep. Yeah, and it's funny. I mean, the first time I talked about work-life harmony was actually with our vice president of IT, Nick Whitmore. Nick brought it up to me, and he talked about how he does it and how he, over his career, has tried to make that happen. And I've got to say, he was ahead of the game on that. But yeah, I think the nice thing about that word "harmony," I think, Rob, and that concept is that it really speaks to our ability to, sort of, an individual approach, right? So harmony for Nick from a work-life standpoint could be different from me, and it could be different for you Rob, right? It isn't the same for all of us, we've got to find our own place.

Jake Flaitz:

I think we talked about a little bit, on our life and work, and all the aspects that go in with that, being like an orchestra. You want to make sure that one instrument isn't dominating or isn't doing a poor job for the whole tune to sound good, right? And as I told you, I'm not a musician... I wish I was, I'd be able to speak to it better. And I know you are. All I can do is appreciate music, I can't make it.

Rob Parsons:

It's tough when the guitar players turn up too loud in the band and no one else can hear what's going on, no question about that.

Jake Flaitz:

Right. Exactly.

Rob Parsons:

Another great point that you've made with me is how there's layers, how employers can manage this. Not traditionally, but in my naivete around this issue, I thought, well, it's all just about safety nuts, and "Let's have a Thin Fit program and an EAP," but it's an entire framework and how you approach it. And I think it's something that it could be really helpful to others as well.

Jake Flaitz:

Yeah. Well, one of the ways we sort of bucket this is we kind of look at it, and we really kind of borrow some language out of public health, right? And we talk about things, sort of, in a tertiary bucket in needs that an employee may have, or a secondary bucket or a primary bucket. So I'll describe those a little bit as it relates to sort of mental health and emotional wellbeing. So if we had somebody in my area, my team, the benefits and wellbeing team, we sort of play and have responsibility for the tertiary and the secondary areas. And so I'll give a couple good examples here. From a tertiary standpoint, that would be somebody from an emotional wellbeing standpoint, mental health standpoint, that maybe has been diagnosed with severe depression. They need to be in counseling, right?

Jake Flaitz:

Either outpatient... And maybe there's even a chance that they may have needed a short inpatient stay... One of the ways that they can get to that... So there are a couple of things that are important there. One, you want to have a benefit plan that doesn't create barriers to accessing care when you need it. And typically those are financial barriers. Sometimes there's other issues around access as they relate to stigma like, "Hey, I don't want to go to a counselor's office Rob, because I don't want to run the chance of you running into me, or someone else that knows me, coming out of that office" because of, unfortunately, the stigma that still exists around mental health services... And telemedicine is a great opportunity there, and digital. So that's a way to think about accesses as well.

Jake Flaitz:

EAP... And we've got a great relationship with our EAP. We have very, very good utilization. Utilization that a lot of my colleagues in other companies wish they could have. We think that's a great thing because it's a gateway to services if they're needed. So that's for folks that they're having really significant struggles, right? That tertiary box. Then there's a secondary box and that could be, "Hey, I'm doing okay, I'm showing up for work, life outside of work is okay, but I'm kind of sliding in the wrong direction." And what might we do there, right? That's where I have the ability, I have the knowledge and I have the tools, for self-help. And for us, as an example, we're working with a company called meQuilibrium that's really, really excited about the platform and their ability to strengthen resilience, which all of us had that capability.

Jake Flaitz:

You may be more resilient than I am today. I want to increase my resilience, but you also have the opportunity to do it too. And that's where it's just allowing us to get through the ups and downs that we encounter in our lives. I mean, we all get them. And so our ability to work through those, manage stress sometimes associated, especially in a down moment... Most of us do pretty good when things are going well, right? And so that's kind of that secondary bucket. And there's some other things that we can do. Then there's the primary bucket, and the primary bucket... So in the secondary and the tertiary buckets, we're sort of managing symptoms to a degree. Something's already happened and we're just trying to get back on track. The primary bucket, I think about, is a way to prevent things.

Jake Flaitz:

And so there we can turn, I think, from an employer standpoint to the work site, right? Into our work environment. So that relates specifically to workload issues, to the say that I have in my job. Does my supervisor listen to me if I have an idea on how we might do things better, or do I just get shut down? The relationship that I have with my colleagues is also really, really important. So it sort of gets to that positive workplace, and there's other issues I think in that bucket around, sort of, just general HR policies and practices and things like that, that play into that. I think it's one that, at times, we can overlook, right? Again, I think the pandemic has really shined a spotlight on how important our overall wellbeing is; for employees

to be doing well. I mean, it is just, in particular, their emotional wellbeing. It's hard for me to imagine a business doing well if it doesn't have healthy, productive employees. And healthy, productive employees... An important factor, is going to be their emotional wellbeing.

Rob Parsons:

I'm glad you brought that up because this isn't just, "It's the right thing to do," or, "It's the kindness of our hearts." There is a direct link between wellbeing and performance. I mean, like you said, if I have a culture that takes into account these factors, I'm going to have higher performing employees.

Jake Flaitz:

Yep. I think that's absolutely true, right? Because I mean, I always say well, does anybody think the inverse is true, that if I'm not healthy or I have a lot of anxiety and stress, that I'm going to do a better job? I mean, I don't want to prove that case at all, right? The other is, too, that we know that there's these direct impacts, right? We know that folks that are struggling with their emotional wellbeing, that they have greater absenteeism and it may be just intermittent sick days, or it may be that they're out on a leave, a disability leave. They have issues around presenteeism... That's where I'm sort of showing up to my job and I'm not, really, kind of at my best, right, Rob? And folks just... They're not performing and there's an impact to the business.

Jake Flaitz:

The interesting thing I think, too, is that there's an impact to turnover. And so we know that turnover has a direct impact on business performance. It could be around things like, I think about, opportunity costs, right? If you're a sales rep and you're out because you're just not doing well, the opportunity causes who's going out and seeing prospects, if you're not doing it, right? Now, if I'm also a rep, I may be able to pick up some of those, but I can't do two jobs. There's the impact just on other workers, too, when folks are out, right? And that's that carrying the workload. So it has a domino effect on the workforce, which then has, of course, an impact on the business too. And then lastly, we know that folks, just as an example, that have depression have higher overall healthcare costs, as well. So you have this, sort of... Definitely the impact on job performance, work performance, just human performance... And these other factors that also directly impact the business, whether it's the things we just talked about: healthcare costs to the impact of presenteeism and absenteeism.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah. Directly impacts the bottom line. We conduct a lot of research here on our team. We really try to get a beat on what employees are thinking, HR professionals, business owners. And we recently completed a study on mental health in the workplace. And it was interesting. We found that there was a real disconnect between what employers thought they were providing and what employees felt they needed. Does that surprise you? I found that eye-opening.

Jake Flaitz:

Yeah. It does and doesn't, right? And I think the issue centers around, just, communication. That at times, again, we have very busy lives and so we'll think if we send out some information to an employee that they're going to see it, right? And so we feel at times we do these "one and done's" or very short things, like, we'll have a new program and a lot of work goes into it from an employer perspective, there's communication around the launch and then we don't talk about it again. And as a marketer, that's not a good way to get people to use your product or your service. You've got to constantly remind them. The challenge for us is how do you do that in the context? There's an awful lot of information that we want our employees to know.

Jake Flaitz:

And so I think my stuff is really important, a little bias there. It probably isn't the most important thing that an employee has to know to do their job. In fact, I'm certain it isn't. So how do I fit it in without distracting folks too? Because that's not what we want to do, that's not good for the business, that's not good for the employee. So I think to your point, though, I think it's a great reminder for employers. Folks in my role, in other roles, to ask employees, to make sure that we have alignment on what they perceive their needs to be and what we perceive their needs to be, and then we're driving together on the right solution.

Rob Parsons:

That's fantastic. I think that's sorely lacking in many organizations, this idea of a two-way street when it comes to that kind of communications.

Jake Flaitz:

Yep.

Rob Parsons:

So we're reaching the end of our podcast here. Jake, do you have any parting thoughts or any additional insights for our listeners?

Jake Flaitz:

Yeah, we talked a little bit ,Rob, about, kind of, quite a bit about emotional wellbeing and at Paychex, right? We borrow a lot from a guy named Tom Wrath and the Gallup Organization around the elements of wellbeing. We've got some other elements that might be interesting to just mention real quickly. So we have emotional wellbeing, financial wellbeing, physical wellbeing: most of those are pretty straightforward. Career wellbeing. And we talked a lot about, today, that interplay between career wellbeing and emotional wellbeing. It certainly has impacts on our financial wellbeing, too, and our physical wellbeing. And then, the last is community wellbeing. And the way that we define that is our work environment, and we talked quite a bit about that today, and then also our relationship outside of work... My neighbors, my extended family, the community I am in... Whether it's civic organizations, places of worship, whatever it might be. That's an important part of our wellbeing too. And the reality is this, Rob, that if any one of our elements of wellbeing is low, our overall wellbeing is low. And from an individual perspective, that's not good, right?

Jake Flaitz:

You and I don't want to be in a low around our wellbeing. And from a business perspective, that's not good for the business either. So I think the important thing here is, as we think about it at Paychex is, we want folks to be in a good place in all five of those elements. And we recognize that one element can have an impact on the other element too. And so it's really this comprehensive, holistic approach, I think... To our folks, our employees, to their dependents... To try to help them be at their best so that they can be at their best in their life. If they're at their best in their life, they can be at their best at work and that's the payoff to the business.

Rob Parsons:

That's great. But you certainly have your work cut out for you, Jake.

Jake Flaitz:

I do. I've got an interesting job, and of course I'm biased... I feel like I work for a great company, too that really understands us and really takes us into consideration. So lots of good work to be done. Lots of good work to be done.

Rob Parsons:

Love it. Well, Jake, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Jake Flaitz:

Thank you Rob, been my pleasure.

Rob Parsons:

And thanks you to our listeners for joining. Mental health is a huge issue and I'm afraid it's not one that's going to be going away anytime soon, I encourage you all to visit [paychex.com](https://www.paychex.com) to see our research report on the issue, as well as articles, eBooks, webinars, and other resources to help you put together the right set of solutions for your business and your employees. Thank you all, and please stay happy and healthy.

Speaker 3:

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