

# Investing in Total Worker Health with Dr. Casey Chosewood



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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 Dr. L. Casey Chosewood. Dr. Chosewood is the Director of the Office for Total Worker Health at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In this role, he promotes the protection and improvement of the safety, health, and wellbeing of workers around the world. Previously, Casey served as the Director of the CDC Office of Health and Safety, safeguarding the 15,000 members of the CDC workforce as they faced the new challenges of the modern public health era, including emerging infectious diseases, workforce protection, and other global health challenges. Casey, welcome to the podcast.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Thanks so much, Rob. It's great to be with you today.

**Rob Parsons:**

And it's great seeing you again and talking to again. When we last spoke, I was prepping you for your session at our Thrive Business Conference.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Right.

**Rob Parsons:**

It was a session that was very well received by the audience. There was a lot of interest around this concept of Total Worker Health.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

That's great to hear, Rob, I really enjoyed being part of your conference and I'm happy it was a success.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, it was fantastic. So for our listeners here, maybe you can just give me a quick highlight of what you mean by "Total Worker Health," and why is this something more than just safety and OSHA, as some of us are familiar with?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Sure. We know our work is such an important concept in our lives, that we believe at NIOSH, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, that you should think of it in a very broad, comprehensive way. So whenever you have total in the name of a program, it's obviously pretty comprehensive. So we really try to bring to organizations programs, policies, and practices that really do improve the health of workers on the job and away from the job. We're not separate people, we're not a work person and a home person. We're one person and we share, sort of, responsibilities and duties across both spheres. We also take challenges and risks to work with us every day, and home from work to our families and our communities every day. So optimizing our wellbeing in both of those spaces is really what Total Worker Health is all about. So keeping workers safe, obviously, a very important component of it, but not only that... organizations that invest in the health, safety, wellbeing of their employees beyond just what's required by law. Those are the ones that really get it. Those are the ones that have engaged employees, and that attract and retain workers, which is a really critical topic right now.

**Rob Parsons:**

Huge.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

And they're the ones who actually send people home at the end of every shift with more health than when they arrived. So not only do you get a paycheck and a Total Worker Health employer, you get a better life, a healthier life, a happier life as well.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's a really interesting concept; that I leave the day more fulfilled... that I've done something that... it sounds great. How do you all help organizations put that into place? What does Total Worker Health look like in practice?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah, it's a great question. You mentioned this whole concept of fulfillment. Some people call it engagement. Maybe from my personal perspective, I'm fulfilled from my work experience and my interaction with my supervisor, my coworkers, my colleagues, my customers. From an owner/operator/HR sort of lingo, some people call it engagement. How are our folks really connecting with their jobs so that they actually do enjoy it? There's tons of definitions of what engagement is, but my favorite is the concept of discretionary effort. It's not what you have to do to get a paycheck or to fulfill the needs — the actual requirements of the job — it's what you do over and above that. That is really the marker of engagement. And the good news is that engagement is great for organizations. People are happier, the organization's more profitable... but if I'm engaged in my work, there's a huge benefit to me as a worker as well. I want to have a job that means something to me because I spend so much of my day doing that. So really fulfillment, engagement... sort of two ends of the same spectrum, but really, really critical. And I think an important deliverable when it comes to Total Worker Health interventions, you ask, so what is it? How does it look like day-to-day? We focus on the three P's: policies, programs and practices. The typical workplace wellness program focuses mostly on programs. We swim upstream a little bit and say, what are the organizational policies? What are the organizational practices? Benefits design is a good example, or pay and bonus structure is a great example. How we recruit, how we work to retain employees, how we train supervisors to enhance the worker experience... Those are all critical pieces of the Total Worker Health puzzle.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love that. And it's so aspirational, and really also speaks to the fact that everything is impacting my health and my employee's health. Everything... it isn't just a problem that needs to be solved on occasion.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Right, it is a comprehensive approach. Obviously, some of these issues and challenges matter more to one employee than another, but that's an important part of the Total Worker Health approach as well. Find out exactly what are the interests, the needs, the challenges facing your own workers and drill down into fixing those. The best manager and the best supervisor asks this important question every day: "What can I do to make your work easier?" That has tremendous benefits, both for the individual and their perceived level of stress and the duress that they may feel from the responsibilities of the job, but it also makes them more efficient. If I lower the problems that workers face each and every day, they're going to be able to accomplish more. They're going to be happier doing it, serve customers in a better way. It really is that sort of win-win for both worker and employer.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's a real cultural focus for us here at Paychex too. As managers, it's strongly encouraged to have one-on-ones with your employees to help clear the decks and make it easier for them to be the best they can be at their jobs. I'm really glad to hear that.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

That's great, yeah. I often say this in a number of different ways, but most people think, "Oh, my doctor is a pretty important person when it comes to my own personal health." I guarantee you, your frontline supervisor is far more important to you when it comes to your health and wellbeing than your doctor will ever be. And that amount of power that that frontline supervisor has to create conditions of work that not only make you successful on the job, but allow you to thrive as a person, is extremely powerful. I don't think organizations invest enough in training and readying those frontline managers to do their difficult work. And I think that's an important intervention where we all can up the game.

**Rob Parsons:**

I think you're exactly right. And I bet you it's even more telling right now, Casey, with all the challenges we've all been facing... have really exacerbated health. Mental stress and mental health and emotional wellbeing have all gone through the ringer. And I wonder if managers are even equipped to deal with some of these new challenges. What are you seeing in terms of what companies can and should be doing and what HR professionals can and should be doing in light of these new challenges?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Right, it has been a challenging year and half or so. And even before the pandemic, we know that mental health and work-related stress and the challenges of coping with a rapidly changing economy, rapid demands... sort of a global 24/7 economy that people deal with each and every day. All of those things do increase the workplace stress that individuals feel day-in and day-out. If we look at the console and the questions coming in to our own agency, folks are needing help. Employers are saying, "Hey, we need help with the work-associated stress that our employees are reporting, that we're seeing... that it's sort of playing out day-to-day in our workplaces." So we think this is an important space for organizations and employers to be in. Some folks are going to say, "Hey, that's not my job. I don't feel equipped to do that." There are some very clear-cut, easy, early steps that organizations can do. I mentioned stronger, more supportive supervision. That's probably one of the best ways that we can lower the stress level that employees feel each and every day; offering more day-to-day flexibility. If workers are given a choice between, hey, do you want more vacation or do you want more day-to-day flexibility? Almost invariably, they pick more day-to-day flexibility. In fact, a lot of American workers leave vacation on the table every year. So increasing our ability to have a little bit more say — personal say in the structure, the timing, the sequencing of my work — is an important way to lower stress. We know that there's an association between stress and poor mental health outcomes, between stress and substance use disorders,

stress and suicide and other challenging mental health outcomes. So it is important for organizations to think about this and take steps to intervene.

**Rob Parsons:**

It seems like a tall task. There's a lot on the table. You just laid out there, and I know you're just scratching the surface. There's a whole hierarchy of how we can approach this. Say, "I really want to start breaking this down and attacking this as an HR pro in my organization. What are the first couple of steps I should take to start thinking about in implementing Total Worker Health?"

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah, I actually love that question, Rob, because it really gets to the heart of knowing your workplace and knowing your own employees. We call that first step the participatory part — the participatory approach — which means that you invite workers to come in and be part of framing what the program is because it's an important to know, exactly, what are their challenges? What are they struggling with? Is it a home issue? Is it a work issue? Is it a supervision issue? An hours of work issue? Is it a pay, or benefits, or some other kind of HR issue that they're struggling with? And focus on those things first. What matters most is, your employees should be your first approach when it comes to Total Worker Health. We shouldn't assume that everybody wants a lunch-and-learn on diabetes. They may have more needs around caregiving or personal growth and development from a career standpoint, or retirement planning, depending on what the needs of your particular workplace is. We also say it's important to take a look at your metrics. Do you have good measures of how happy and engaged your workers are and how safe they are? So we're going to look at two simple measures. What are the safety challenges in our workplace? And quickly go about fixing those because that's actually where your first dollar of cost savings is going to come from. And then second, I would look at what are those issues that workers are telling me they're most challenged with around their health? Your payoff is going to come later with those, but early wins are in that culture building of happier, healthier employees who are serving their customers better, who have less absenteeism because they're happier at work, who are more engaged day-to-day, and who are safer. So you're going to see cost savings around injury prevention and workers' compensation, for example, early on. Your health savings from these kinds of interventions, typically year two, three, four or beyond. So we are talking about a long-term program development — comprehensive over time culture building, if you will — that's going to be the key to Total Worker Health success.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love the idea of aligning my efforts to what my employees find important, prioritizing. I know you came out recently with a survey instrument to even help me ask the right questions. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Right, I love the opportunity to talk more about our newest tool. It's called the NIOSH WellBQ. And WellBQ stands for Worker Wellbeing Questionnaire. And this is a quick, roughly 12 to 15-minute questionnaire that organizations give to their workers, that really gives a comprehensive picture of the wellbeing of those employees. But more than just one simple measure, it breaks it down into a number of different domains to help identify, what are the most challenging wellbeing issues that workers have? Is it something at home? In the community? Is a personal health issue? Is a worker or a supervisor issue? Is it a personal mental health concern? It really does get at, what are the main wellbeing challenges that workers are having? And it allows an organization to tailor their approach to intervention. It's great as a baseline measure, but even more important, to measure over time as you intervene to address the challenges that the survey uncovers.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love that because I love having an objective tool to help me get that objective feed on what's going on, and then addressing it. Something else that came out recently — and I thought it a little disheartening, but you have a more positive spin on it — it's some research that suggested the programs that we think are great, that we think we should be putting into place to help our workers, are oftentimes merely band-aids that aren't really addressing the issue. Can you elaborate on that research a little bit?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Sure. This is a brand new study just released in June of 2021. And it will be easy for folks to find if they want to read the complete study, but I'm happy to summarize it here today. And you're exactly right. We all really want workplace wellness programs to succeed, but this study shows that unfortunately, we're not getting the results that we hope in the typical approach to workplace wellness programs. So this is a study out of the University of Illinois in Chicago and Harvard Medical School, and it basically looks at the impact, the outcomes of workplace wellness programs over a three-year analysis. So it's a fairly robust look at this issue. And even though they did see some early wins, especially on self-reported health, there were not as many good outcomes around other clinical markers of health. Health care spending, for instance... absenteeism didn't significantly improve... the tenure of workers in those organizations that had workplace wellness and programs did not improve... and job performance reports did not improve. So even though there were some marginal gains, some of the longer term and more substantial things that we hoped for from workplace wellness programming did not appear. So for us, this really is saying that the dose, if you will... the intervention strength of most workplace wellness programs is just not simply powerful enough to create the significant change that organizations need to have, to have better overall long-term health outcomes. That's why we really focus less on the plug-and-play programs of workplace wellness and more on culture building. What are those long-standing policies and practices within an organization — specifically, again, around benefits design, around supervisory training and support, around all of those things — that have more substantial long-term impact day in and day out? Those are the things that drive engagement, which we know... there's a powerful evidence-base around engagement and better health outcomes, engagement and less absenteeism, engagement and less presenteeism. So the things that drive engagement have to go beyond what the typical workplace wellness program does. So I think it's a critical distinction between the most traditional workplace wellness program — around maybe nutrition, physical activity, tobacco — and something far more pervasive as culture change within an organization.

**Rob Parsons:**

It's really being a healthy organization, not just doing the things a healthy organization is supposed to do. It's...it's living it.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah, yeah. More than just checking the box. "Hey, we have this program, we have that program..." but really sort of asking employees, "Are these programs meeting your need? And if they're not, what actually is it that you need?" And beyond just these kinds of programs, what about our practices, our supervision, our HR policies, our sort of global approach to how we establish our workplace? Those are bigger, broader issues that are going to be that more powerful dose that workers need to create better health.

**Rob Parsons:**

It lines up so close with a lot of work me and my team are working on right now around inclusion. And it's not just a "check the box." It is a way of thinking, it is a way of leading, it is a way of being an organization. Let's switch gears just a little bit here, and maybe you can answer this question... maybe you can, in addition to Employee Wellness Month, June is Men's Health Month. Men are notorious for not being great when it comes to health, taking care of ourselves. It's a joke in some ways, but in a lot of ways, it isn't. What do men get right when it comes to health, and what do they get wrong?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah, you're right. This is Men's Health Month. And it is an important time to spotlight maybe some of the more critical issues that men face throughout their lives. In general, men do a little bit better around weight management, for instance, and staying more physically active than maybe the women out there. But unfortunately, that's where most of the good news ends when it comes to men and their health. They tend to not get their regular health screenings. So they oftentimes lag behind on that. They don't see their doctor routinely, maybe, for the blood pressure or cholesterol check. Unfortunately, they have higher rates of chronic disease and some of those conditions that lead to disability... or an early end to life are more common in men, unfortunately. Men die at an earlier age. They also have jobs, right? Men have jobs that are more hazardous. So most — like an overwhelming percentage — of workplace fatalities involve men and not women. So the

whole issue of workplace safety for men really is quite a bit more important than it is for female workers. The other thing that I think men don't do as a good job as women is to manage, and take care of, and optimize their mental health, right? Men tend to try to "tough it out." They see quite a bit of stigma with seeking care for mental health challenges. Unfortunately, depression, anxiety are quite common in men, oftentimes untreated, and that's a real challenge because mental health is something that permeates every other aspect of our life, our physical life, our family interactions, our performance at work. It's sort of like an overarching lens that we see the world through if our mental health is struggling. Unfortunately, men have higher rates of substance use disorders and completion of suicide. So those are real challenges for men. And hopefully, June is a month for us to remind the men in our lives, and ourselves, that health matters. And this is as good a time as any to think about some of those screenings and interventions.

**Rob Parsons:**

That's great advice. And I think another reason I love the idea of the WellBQ survey, especially if you administer it anonymously, it does give people an opportunity maybe to express themselves in ways they normally wouldn't be comfortable doing.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Right, yeah. We definitely think the WellBQ needs to respect people's privacy, and certainly it doesn't need to be a mandatory intervention, it should be voluntary. And obviously, a good feedback to an individual is going to really, we believe, help spotlight where they may not even recognize they have challenges and hopefully, lead to better outcomes.

**Rob Parsons:**

For sure, so I want to touch just once again, it looks like we're turning the corner here with vaccines. Things are opening back up. I've been hearing more and more companies returning to the office. Of course, many companies never left, but they're starting to staff up again. Will we learn from this collective experience that we all went through? Will we get back to business-as-better, or is it just going to slide back to business-as-usual? What do you see, Casey?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Yeah, Rob, I'm really hopeful that the sort of, as you put it, collective experience that we've all been through, really will be sort of a spark for some important changes. I also think there's a shortage in many industries and many areas of labor, right? There are lots of job openings and not a lot of workers, which will also be a driving opportunity for organizations to think more closely about optimizing the work, optimizing their approach to employment. Benefits design, again, pay, bonusing, strategies to recruit and retain workers... is going to be more important than ever when labor is in short supply. So for me, that provides both the challenges that we've seen, and new opportunities that lie ahead for an improving economy — but also as organizations — really struggle and push to keep workers they have, and bring in new workers and retain them... I think it's an opportunity for them to focus on what will optimize this workplace? What benefits can we offer? What new approaches to better management, better supervision? How can we really grow the work experience for individuals, and obviously benefit our own bottom line as well? So I have a lot of hope for the future. And many of our listeners really don't remember World War II, but afterwards, there was a shortage of labor, right? And we had all of these new benefits programs, retirement plans, employer sponsored healthcare. All of that was brand new, brought on to try to attract and retain workers. We may see this new layer, new level of new worker benefits that arise from this new environment that we find ourselves in. So overall, I'm hopeful for the health of our workplaces and our workers across the country.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love it. Thank you, Casey so much for joining the podcast today. It was great talking to you again.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:**

Thanks, have a great week.

**Rob Parsons:**

Thank you. And thank you to our listeners for joining. Employee wellbeing as a huge issue, and one that's becoming more and more important to employers — especially, as Casey noted, with the real challenge of finding and retaining talent. If you'd like to see Casey's session from the Paychex Business Conference, we have it available on-demand at [paychex.com/thrive](https://paychex.com/thrive). There's also a great session from our own Alison Stevens, who was talking about constructing a benefits plan that really talks about the four key pillars of wellbeing, and all the things you can do to really create a total healthy workplace. Thank you all, and please stay happy and healthy.

**Speaker 3:**

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