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Rising Up to Meet the Challenge

A Post-Pandemic Playbook for Addressing Employees' Mental Health Needs

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Why Addressing Employees' Mental Health Needs Matters

The origins of the widespread mental health challenges employers are facing among their workforces pre-date the global pandemic. **About 41 percent of Americans have experienced at least one adverse mental health condition related to the pandemic.[1]**

The social isolation, burnout, videoconferencing fatigue and worries about the virus have led to a gradual de-stigmatization around mental health. More people have publicly acknowledged feelings of excessive stress, anxiety and even depression, normalizing mental health discussions.

The impact is enormous for employers. Many employers that had historically high rates of employee retention have been hit hard by the "Great Resignation," as burned out and exhausted employees, many of whom are working remotely and feel less connected to their employer, have felt that their employer was indifferent to their mental health needs.[3]

Companies' bottom lines are directly impacted by increasing "absenteeism" – where an employee is habitually absent from work- and "presenteeism" – a situation where an employee experiencing mental health symptoms shows up for work but isn't as productive because they feel stressed, fatigued, disinterested, or unable to concentrate. **One study found that productivity losses tied to personal or family health problems – including mental health – cost U.S. employers $1,685 per employee, or $225 billion annually.[4]**

In June 2020, when most of the U.S. had experienced the first waves of COVID-19, **about 31% of U.S. adults reported anxiety or depression symptoms,** and 13% had started or increased substance abuse.[2]

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Employees Expect More Support from Their Workplace

In a survey of 1,100 U.S.-based, full-time employed adults, commissioned by Uprise Health in 2021:

43%
of those surveyed felt overloaded with work

39%
felt frustrated with their managers or colleagues.[5]

Yet there were also positive signs...

83%
said their workplace had been supportive during the COVID-driven uncertainty

60%
were comfortable talking with their managers about mental health and wellbeing needs.

Human resources teams are more aware of the scope of the problem.

Employers have an important role to play in helping to put into place effective tools and interventions that keep employees healthier and more productive.

This playbook serves as a guide for employers, including managers, members of the C-Suite, HR and brokers, on actionable steps they can take to address mental health in the workplace, improve employee retention and reduce employee turnover.

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Addressing the Challenges of Mental Health Access

The U.S. faces an **acute shortage of mental health care professionals,** including psychiatrists.

40%
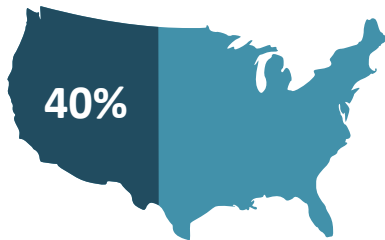
129 million people, nearly 40 percent of the U.S. population, live in an area designated as a health professional shortage area.[6]

When mental health problems go unaddressed, they can spiral into other negative impacts like poverty, substance abuse and lead to suicide ideation, while also driving up healthcare costs and impacting employers as well as the American economy.

Part of the challenge in addressing mental health issues is that there is a spectrum of acuity. Some people more at-risk may need behavioral health therapy and counseling, and in some cases medication. Chronic conditions like COPD, obesity, cancer, or diabetes must be addressed in tandem with people's mental health symptoms. Other people have less acute symptoms that they can self-manage, and need access to proactive care, support, counseling, and tools to manage their stress and anxiety. Finally, there is another cohort of people that have undiagnosed mental health conditions and therefore go untreated.

The traditional approach for employers to help employees deal with stress, grief, alcohol or substance abuse or even psychological disorders has been to offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). A typical EAP may include confidential assessments, referrals, and counseling. But too many EAP programs aren't as effective as they should be, leading to low utilization, and many employees aren't even aware that the benefit is available, or worry about the confidentiality.

Simultaneously, employers are facing growing health care expenses.

U.S. employers' total health care costs per employee rose from $11,750 in 2015 to $13,728 in 2020.[7]

It's also prohibitively expensive for many Americans to pay for mental health care out of their own pocket. On average, the cost for psychotherapy in the U.S. ranges from $100 to $200 per session.[8] There also are significant racial disparities in access to care, with mental health challenges being "borne largely by young, less advantaged people of color, and women, with the potential for expanded interruptions to optimal functioning and societal recovery from COVID-19."[9]

The market is shifting from EAP only to expanded digital tools that provide a comprehensive and varied amount of support. As this playbook will explore further, offering effective digital cognitive behavioral therapy tools, in conjunction with an EAP, can be a highly effective approach to scaling mental health care to employees experiencing mental health symptoms.

Proactive and preventative mental health care can be incredibly cost-effective, saving employers significant healthcare costs and reducing lost productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism.

Steps for Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace

Independent, highly credible organizations have built frameworks for how an organization can create a mentally healthy workplace.[10, 11, 12] The frameworks are built on meta-analyses of large-scale research. This means that your organization doesn't need to reinvent the wheel. You can follow steps that are most likely to lead to your desired outcomes.

① Get Leadership Support

Leadership sets the tone and culture across an organization. For any new mental health and wellbeing program, leadership commitment and support are crucial. They can act as models and champions who cultivate a work environment. All leaders across your organization need to understand why mental health is important (as we've discussed above), and they must embrace your plan of action to improve workplace wellbeing.

② Talk to Your Company

In Uprise Health's Employee Mental Health Report, we asked employees what they were experiencing as well as what they wanted and needed. It's important for you to understand your employees and their perspective. You can hear from your employees in several ways: focus groups, workshops, open team communication, mental health champions. This (and leadership support) also coincides with an important piece of evidence about stigma. Studies show that education and improved literacy on mental health can reduce stigma about mental health struggles. [13, 14]

40 PERCENT of employees don't feel comfortable speaking with their manager about their mental health needs.[5]

③ Use Data to Make a Plan

In step 2, you've gathered some data on what your employees are experiencing and needing. You need to link that with what health data you have from HR (health condition costs, workers' compensation claims, unplanned leave information, bullying and harassing complaints, productivity issues). And lastly, evaluate the research on successful outcomes for mental health programs (i.e., what does evidence say about CBT programs? Resilience coaching? Well-being checks? Emotional debriefing?). Then match your company needs (from HR and your employees) to the actions to manage each need. Put a plan in place to adopt and roll out new programs, processes, and policies. This isn't an easy step. Uprise Health has materials that can help. We can provide employers with resources that pull together existing research on outcomes related to mental health programs.

Employees are
13 PERCENT
more productive when happy

④ Put Your Plan Into Action

Your plan can only work if it's implemented well. It might be an excellent plan, but if it gets filed away in a policy guide then you won't see the return on investment for your people or your company. Communicate your new programs, processes, and policies clearly and effectively. Include the plan in training and make sure you're transparent with your employees. As part of your plan, adopt a process that tracks and follows-up on the success (or failures) of your plan. Track your overall company mental health data within your EAP or mental health solution. Ask human resources to compare key HR KPIs post-plan implementation to pre-plan implementation. Look at business data and see if you're seeing an increase in productivity or a decrease in turnover. Monitor progress and adjust based on the results.

When considering the most effective approach to addressing employees' mental health and wellbeing struggles, employers should also consider the following:

Offer more intensive, specialized mental health support during the COVID-19 pandemic. 78 percent of respondents in Uprise Health's employee survey said their mental health had been affected by the pandemic. For as long as the pandemic remains, employers should include in their mental health solution support for negative impacts from COVID-19, such as grief, trauma, excessive alcohol or tobacco use, sleep difficulties, stress, and worries about the virus. Providing support that is directly relevant to life crises people are currently experiencing will make it more likely those employees will stay engaged in the program.

Ensure that employees feel comfortable asking for support from their managers. Only 60 percent of employees in Uprise Health's survey said they felt comfortable speaking with their manager about their mental health and wellbeing needs. If employees feel embarrassed or intimidated by the thought of telling their managers about an emotional problem they're having, their symptoms could spiral further. Executives and HR should establish a culture where employees feel empowered to tell their managers when they're feeling overwhelmed or excessively stressed. Managers should be aware of options to point employees to.

Provide solutions designed for a spectrum of mental health and wellbeing needs. Provide the right balance of technology and in-person care. Digital, self-guided tools such as apps, online videos, and mental fitness courses can give a boost to people with lower acuity conditions, lifting them into a more stable state of wellbeing. But for people in crisis, digital tools may not be enough. Caring interactions with real people can be highly effective. That's why self-guided forms of support should seamlessly hand off to more intensive supporting capabilities, like EAP counselors, crisis management, personalized wellness coaching, and clinicians.

Expand your benefit framework. Medical, dental, and vision are a limited way of approaching your employee needs. HR departments need to consider a new framework of "medical, dental, vision, and mental health" to adopt a research-based whole person care approach that reduces health care cost and improves employee outcomes.

How Effective Are Clinically-Validated Digital & Telehealth Solutions?

When employers are expanding their mental health offerings to include digital tools, they'll need to assess the effectiveness of these tools.

Approximately seven out of 10 providers said telehealth helps reduced missed appointments.
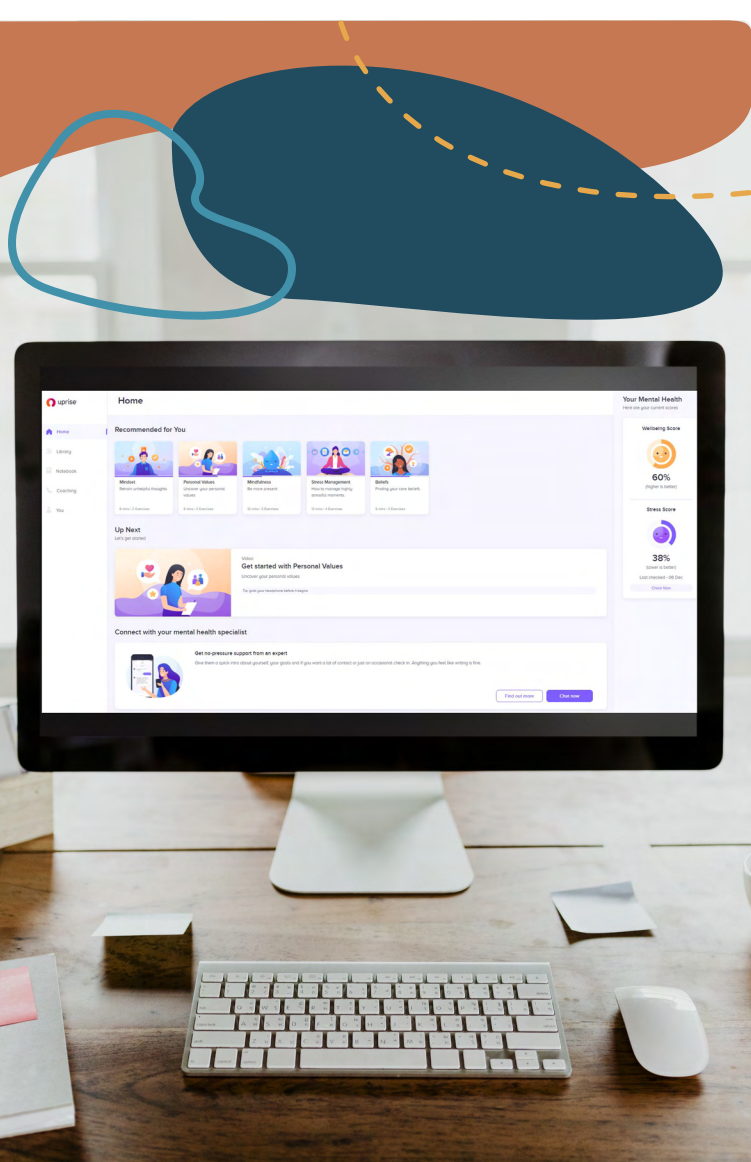
A face-to-face visit to a clinician is often the most effective intervention for someone experiencing a mental health crisis. However, accessible, digitally-based mental health tools and telehealth visits are effective because of the alternative care and proactive, supportive care they offer. A person facing mental health challenges who can't book an in-person visit with a therapist because the wait is too long, or because of transportation issues, risks having their symptoms worsen to a crisis state. Additionally, wellbeing checks within digital mental health tools can analyze whether a person's wellbeing is getting worse before they hit a high-risk stage.

But not all digital mental health solutions are the same. Solutions that are backed by an evidence-based, clinical methodology have been vetted and proven to be effective through rigorous testing. They remove the subjectivity and guesswork from therapeutic approaches, relying on science and data. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which can be delivered through self-guided tools, in-person, or via telehealth and digital channels, is a structured approach to treating mental health that helps people better manage stressful situations, and can even help treat depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.[15]

Employers should ensure that their mental health and wellbeing benefits provide access to CBT programs in flexible ways, either in-person, by phone or video, or text chat.

How Uprise Health Helps Employers Address Mental Health Challenges in the Workplace

Employers looking to keep their employees feeling well, productive, reduce healthcare costs, and improve retention, have access to a powerful set of tools with Uprise Health's digitally-enabled mental health and wellness solution. Uprise Health's solutions are designed to wrap members in a full system of well-coordinated, multi-dimensional support that cares for the whole person. It takes into account how social, emotional, economic, and environmental conditions all impact overall health. Uprise Health's technology- and human-driven approaches check all of the boxes for companies. Below is how Uprise Health's solution addresses employee mental health needs during and post-pandemic:

Workplace **CHALLENGE**

Uprise Health **SOLUTION**

Only 41 percent of men and a shockingly low 34 percent of women said they found it 'easy' to access coaching and counseling through their EAP or employer provided mental health or wellbeing program, according to Uprise Health's employee survey. They may not need to talk to a clinician or a mental health coach immediately, but they do need to know where they are in their mental health journey, what their options for care are, and how to schedule an appointment if they need one.

Care Navigators: Uprise Health offers a care navigator who helps members figure out their available health and wellbeing resources. Whether or not the employee is healthy or struggling with a complex chronic condition, the care navigator is there to assist. A care navigator is a person who provides a "white glove" approach to helping members navigate their mental health journey. They can assist members with:

- Booking virtual coaching sessions with Uprise Health's staff of expert coaches
- Connecting to and scheduling sessions with local providers in Uprise Health's network
- Providing case management and follow up to ensure a successful hand-off and seamless member experience

Care navigators make the Uprise Health solution easy to use.

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Workplace **CHALLENGE**	Uprise Health **SOLUTION**

Many people struggling with their mental health don't want to be forced down a particular path. Engaging with technology may not be enough for some. Others may not be ready to see a clinician in-person.

Balance of technology with in-person care: Uprise Health's solution seeks to facilitate, undergird, and fill in gaps, where possible, to help alleviate access to care burdens and unrecognized or ignored mental and behavioral health and wellbeing issues. Uprise Health's solution offers both digital solutions and in-person support.

- Digital/virtual solutions include virtual group sessions, CBT-based modules available via the mobile app, telehealth visits with licensed clinicians and mental health coaches, and a 24/7 phone line for immediate support, including assessments and urgent consultations, real-time virtual coaching bookings, referrals to counseling and work-life services, and tech support.

- In-person care includes in-person visits with licensed clinicians, managed behavioral health services with psychiatrists and licensed clinical care managers, and interactions with chronic care nurse health advocates

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People with mental health issues often have an accompanying chronic physical illness that goes untreated.

Whole person care: Uprise Health offers solutions that focus on the relationship between mental and physical health. This includes a combined focus on improving mental health and wellbeing that addresses physical impacts, and offers support and resources on social, emotional and economic parts of life. Here are some examples:

- Work/life support (e.g. financial or legal)

- Chronic condition management that focuses on both physical and mental health support, and digital courses on chronic condition management including: stroke, cancer, asthma, diabetes, heart, and arthritis.

- A digitally-enabled library of courses that cover a wide range of topics including: mindfulness, communication, listening, sleep, dealing with pain, alcohol addiction, financial worries.

- Uprise Health also empowers employees with information to proactively manage their health, including newsletters and webinars on a variety of topics (heart health, PTSD, trauma, men's and women's health, suicide prevention, breast cancer, lung cancer, and COPD).

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Workplace **CHALLENGE**	Uprise Health **SOLUTION**

Employers aren't sure which companies offering digital mental health services they can trust.

Check for research validation: We're proud of the research and validation that undergirds our mental health programs. Your best practices should come from the valuable and comprehensive research that have proven to provide the outcomes that you and your employees need.

Legacy history of EAP and mental health: Uprise Health isn't just a technology company. The company has a history of more than 30 years of providing EAP services to employers, including 35,000 customers and 8 million lives helped. Uprise Health has clinicians, nurses, EAP experts, health and wellness coaches, life coaches, nutritionists, substance abuse experts, chronic care managers, and psychologists on staff. The people at Uprise Health offer a combination of longevity and knowledge of the latest digital technologies. Our programs are built by experts who understand the most effective ways to improve your mental health, wellbeing, and employee happiness outcomes.

Many available digital mental health apps and services lack an evidence-based approach and don't demonstrate their effectiveness.

Evidence-based approach and validated outcomes of Uprise Health's app: All of Uprise Health's digital courses are created by clinical psychologists and are designed around only evidence-based approaches.

- An independent University of New England evaluation examined the use of our mental health platform in a multinational company. The results showed statistically significant improvements in PSYCAP for wellbeing, sleep, productivity, and stress. Importantly, results were still maintained for productivity, psychological capital, and sleep four months after completing our program.

- An independent review conducted by Melbourne-based Swinburne University of our mental health app with users under age 25 found statistically significant reductions in unhelpful psychological processes. Participants maintained these results three months after finishing the program. They also experienced improvements in wellbeing and quality of life.

- There have been 14 peer-reviewed publications supporting Uprise Health's care protocols.

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Workplace **CHALLENGE**	Uprise Health **SOLUTION**
Many mental health providers only offer a "one-size-fits-all" solution that isn't tailored to each individual.	**Stepped-care focused on the entire needs spectrum:** Uprise Health offers an evidence-based, stepped-care proactive solution to addressing mental health challenges at every stage of the wellbeing spectrum. • The "proactive well" population can access tools like self-guided mental fitness courses accessible via a mobile device and live, coach-based guidance when needed. • For people with more severe mental health issues, Uprise Health can scale the intensity of care to include proactive outreach to at-risk members, virtual group sessions, to on-demand coaching for chronic issues, prescription management, and managed services, including inpatient care. Studies have found that stepped care pathways offer the potential to improve health outcomes cost-effectively.[16]
Employees often don't fully utilize mental health solutions because the experience feels impersonal.	**Personalized care plans:** Employees are automatically offered the most appropriate services for their mental health needs at any time, based on Uprise Health's wellbeing algorithm. • **Step 1** includes an interactive wellbeing check exercise that allows employees to quickly check-in on their current wellbeing, mood, and stress levels. • **Step 2** provides the employee with a score out of 100. Based on this score, the employee receives recommendations tailored to their risk, needs, and preferences. Members are stratified into low-, moderate-, and high-risk segments. The employee receives a simple care plan with clear steps.
It's hard to get the data companies need to run a successful mental health program and achieve positive outcomes.	**Analytics and reporting dashboard:** We provide a real time reporting dashboard for better trend tracking and earlier times to intervene in order to prevent trends from escalating

The Benefits of Addressing Employee Mental Health Challenges

Helping employees to be more resilient and able to withstand life's ups and downs isn't just the right thing to do. Employers can attain a substantial return on investment. Here are two of these broad, tangible benefits:

IMPROVED EMPLOYEE WELLBEING AND WORK STANDARDS

Giving employees access to tools that help them with mental health and wellbeing challenges makes it more likely their employees bring the best version of themselves to the workplace every day, working remotely or not. This means employees are more productive and enjoy working with their colleagues more.

One research study found that employees are 13 percent more productive when happy.[17] Most executives would gladly sign up for an initiative that could boost productivity at that level. One research study published in the Journal for Leadership and Instruction noted that the "happiness of a single employee has a wide-ranging reach" and can "either positively or negatively affect many people."[18] Companies strive to build a singular workplace culture that fosters creativity and empowers people to be leaders. Helping even a single employee do their job more effectively can have a major impact on the organization's success.

IMPROVED EMPLOYEE RETENTION AND REDUCED TURNOVER

In Uprise Health's employee survey, 33 percent of Generation Z employees (ages 18-29) said they have considered leaving their career or job to do something else because of mental health needs. Yet 34 percent of employees overall said their company doesn't offer mental health and wellbeing benefits.[19] Feelings of being overworked, burned out and underpaid have directly contributed to the ongoing Great Resignation.

There are numerous studies pointing to the substantial financial and cultural impact that happens when an employee resigns, and a replacement is hired and trained. Gallup estimates that U.S. businesses lose about $1 trillion annually due to voluntary turnover. Gallup also found that a 100-person organization that pays its employees an average salary of $50,000 could face turnover and replacement costs of approximately $660,000 to $2.6 million per year.[20] Offering more robust mental health and wellbeing benefits would help address their needs while also sending a strong message that their employer cares about their health, making it more likely they'll stay with their current employer.

How Uprise Health Helps Employers Reduce Turnover: Case Studies

Global Manufacturing Company Improves Staff Retention

The Challenge

A manufacturing company with 40 locations globally identified a need to proactively reach out to its employees with a program that mitigates mental stressors in the workplace before they worsen. The company's Environment, Health and Safety Specialist wanted to start treating "mental injuries" just like any other workplace injury, while also reducing causes of stress, improve employee retention and reduce turnover risk. As the company repairs and produces aircraft parts, the roles are highly specialized, and there are significant costs to hire and train new employees.

The Solution

The company rolled out our program to all of its employees. The program included digital and phone coaching to help employees resolve life and work stressors, as well as learn skills for resilience and stress management. The company's workforce is male-dominated, and the company found that there was a stigma associated with asking for help with mental health issues. Our solution overcame this challenge by allowing employees to privately access the solution from their homes.

The Results

Our program included an initial wellbeing check where employees shared their current workplace stressors. Through the wellbeing check, employees identified that at times they felt disengaged from their project and lacked support. The company took steps to improve these areas of stress, and as a result, the proportion of employees who had reported a "very high" risk for turnover dropped from 14% to 0%.

Tweed Shire Council Enhances Staff Wellbeing

The Challenge

The Tweed Shire Council has nearly 700 employees in diverse roles helping the Tweed Shire build and maintain infrastructure. The organization identified a need to improve wellbeing access for staff. Many staff were having small difficulties at home which, though not rising to the level of a crisis, were still causing stress. The organization wanted to take a skills-first approach, rather than promoting crisis and therapy services.

The Solution

The organization launched our platform to help its staff focus on prioritizing their mental fitness as well as physical health. The Uprise Health solution helped Tweed Shire staff to learn new skills, such as how to resolve specific issues. Staff could access short videos or book a coaching session after hours, on their own time.

The Results

The Uprise Health solution helps the Tweed Shire organization understand employee wellbeing and also psychosocial hazards in the workplace that were impacting performance, such as inadequate support or resources, lack of advancement or poor role descriptions. After six weeks of use, our solution identified that absenteeism had been reduced by 0.2 days a week, and presenteeism was reduced by 0.3 days a week. "The Uprise data provided some useful insights into the culture and needs of employees," said Lorraine Dawson, Work Health and Safety Coordinator for Tweed Shire Council. "We'll use the data to develop programs for the rest of the year."

Conclusion

The most effective approaches to addressing employee mental health needs are evidence-based and research-backed. Engaging your employees to understand what challenges they're experiencing, and combining that feedback with the health data of your overall workforce, will help you choose the mental health programs most likely to drive successful health outcomes. Employers are getting better at acknowledging the scale of the challenge and many want to help their employees. The global pandemic has normalized discussions around facing one's mental health struggles. High-profile executives have publicly acknowledged their own challenges and about needing a mental health break. This has helped to foster an environment where employees' expectations for work-life balance and of having a supportive workplace have been heightened.

The timing is ideal for employers to evaluate their current portfolio of benefits and consider expanding their EAP, mental health, and wellbeing support. In this playbook, we've provided a high level and evidence-based approach to achieve positive outcomes. Those companies that act quickly and invest in new solutions that cater directly to employee needs will go a long way toward keeping their employees happier, healthier, and more productive, retaining their employees for longer, and building a strong, resilient culture.

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