A workplace where employees can thrive

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For a time, it looked as if the cultural norm of keeping set hours and collecting a regular pay cheque from a single employer was back after decades of deregulated labour markets and flexible labour regimes in certain advanced industrial economies. In a classic paper published in 1937 entitled The nature of the firm,an economist named Ronald Coase stepped back and asked a very basic question about why companies exist, in order to deal with the niggling question of production costs.[1] The answer was that it was cheaper to perform many functions within a company rather than going to the market every time something needed to be done. Companies wanted to avoid finding an outside provider for every function, as this required the processing a multitude of contracts and transactions – all processes that were difficult in Coase's age of limited technology and sluggish communication. Keeping functions in-house avoided what he termed 'transaction costs'.

Coase had a point in another sense. What all this meant was that employees would spend a large part of their lives within the physical confines of the workplace. Starting with Adam Smith's famous example of a pin factory, the efficient, mechanised production regime that emerged during the Industrial Revolution depended on standardising not only machinery and work processes, but also the way labour was deployed. Long hours and six- or seven-day work weeks were commonplace as most factory owners sought to keep assembly lines humming and maximise output.

In 1926, Henry Ford's Ford Motor Company adopted a regular five-day, 44-hour-a-week production regime for its factory workers. Ford himself was quoted as saying, 'It is high time to rid ourselves of the notion that leisure for workmen is either lost time or a class privilege.'[2] But he was also following a business instinct: Ford guessed correctly that well-rested, emotionally content employees would be more productive and their newfound leisure time would boost consumption across the economy.

Then came the real test of Coase's question: in 1989, an Irish author named Charles Handy observed an emerging economic trend at a time when the global economy was on the cusp of what would become one of the most dramatic makeovers since Ford's mass assembly line.

Many large corporations were undergoing fundamental structural changes. They began spinning off non-core functions that were once managed internally, turning over their operations and the jobs associated with them to vendors and sub-contractors. This altered the nature of the employment arrangement for the workers involved. It created a class of individual workers with greater autonomy, flexibility and control of their lives.

It also renewed the debate on the divide between work and life, and whether there were lessons to be learned from the productivity of autonomous, emotionally content workers.

These days, a confluence of external pressures from family and friends, financial stresses and internal workplace pressures to work longer and harder has brought Handy's observations into sharper focus.

The world of work is changing – structurally and technologically. The divide between work and home is once again being eroded as technological innovations disrupt traditional paradigms.

In his business management classic, The Age of Unreason, Handy called it the 'portfolio life', a reference to the unbundling of work and life into work-life.[3]

Alongside this has emerged a general appreciation among employers that creating the right workplace environment to stimulate employee engagement and commitment has tangible benefits not just to employees but to the bottom line.

The big picture: work and life

To argue that work and life are two separate entities is to minimise the significance of more than a third of your waking life and more than half your working life.

We have come to think of the workplace as a place where people go to earn that much-needed income for day-to-day survival.

We even talk about work–life balance as though there is some nice, neat dividing line between this world of work and our actual lives. There's a fundamental flaw to this line of thinking, though.

Figure 3.3.1 shows the median number of hours worked each week by employees in the non-agricultural sector. The average is 44 hours a week, with employees in mining, trade, transport and finance working more hours than the national average. Those in transport work the longest, at 48 hours a week.

Figure 3.3.1: Median hours of work each week in the non-agricultural formal sector
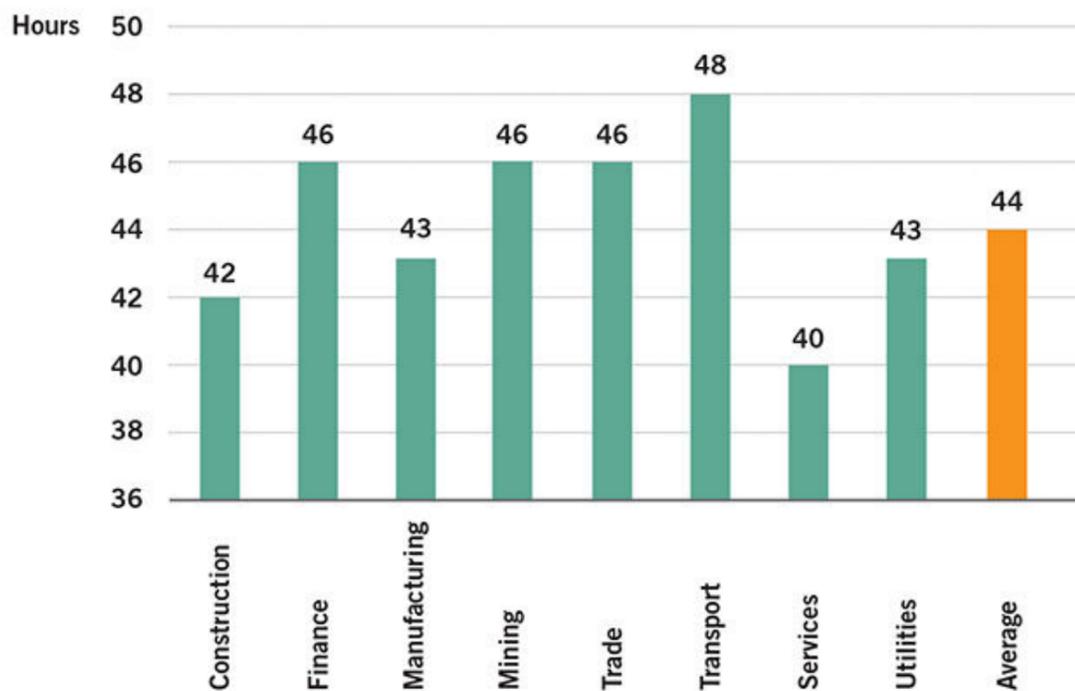
Source: Statistics South Africa^4

Fresh data from Statistics South Africa shows that, on average, 44 hours are worked a week, 1 571.42 hours a year (assuming 250 working days in a year for South Africa), and 73 857 hours over a lifetime (assuming a full adult working life from 18 to 65). As a percentage of your life, 44 hours a week spent working is equivalent to:

> 11% of your total time over 76 years of life
> 16.8% of your total time over 47 years of working
> 16.6% of your total waking hours over 76 years, assuming eight hours of sleep a night
> 26.9% of your total waking hours over 47 years, assuming eight hours of sleep a night
> 55% of your total waking hours during any given working day

Culturally, we're beginning to accept that people aren't wired to work long hours without leaving the stresses of their lives at the workplace door. Some of the exceptional companies of today understand this. Many employers in South Africa recognise that physical health enhances productivity. And, thanks to the efforts of the financial services industry, solutions that focus on financial well-being are also getting a bit of traction.

Two areas employers have tended to overlook are their employees' emotional well-being and social well-being.

The vast majority of employers are only just beginning to realise that how they shape the work environment for their employees makes a massive impact on the effectiveness, productivity and resilience of those employees – in essence, it is the foundation for much of employees' well-being.

In a life portfolio, our work reflects life. The days of employees as commodified appendages to the mechanised assembly line are gone. Diversifying your **interests**, and establishing your identity and **individuality** will make you a more wellrounded person and set you up for success in this new economy. The ability we have right now to deliberately design our lives and realities is greater than at any time in history.

In South Africa, the workplace and the employer take on an even more critical role. Because the workplace is the most consistent meeting point for South Africans of all backgrounds, it can help shape the discourse and interaction between them. If social cohesion plays such a vital role in mobilising people to work for the betterment of the group and not just for self-interest, then there is no better environment for stimulating its growth than the place of work.

Employee assistance programmes (EAPs) were introduced to address some of these missing elements. But, as we argued in the previous article, until we can link all the components of employee well-being – social, emotional, physical and financial – efforts by employers in these areas will be reduced to tick-box exercises, with little visible impact on individuals and their families, the employer and corporate, or broader society.

In completing the circle for employee well-being, we need to take a deep dive into its emotional and social aspects, which is the focus of this chapter. Here, we try to bring some order and clarity to what is currently a complex discussion.

The question is not whether employers should start building holistic work–life environments that solve for emotional problems, but how.

A roadmap to creating a workplace where people can thrive

Sometimes the best way to stop a problem from flaring is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. The last 20 years have shown that preventative measures in the workplace can significantly reduce costs further 'downstream'. This applies to health maintenance, wealth creation, risk management or having a safe and healthy way to manage emotions. Our best advantage is a pre-emptive environment that allows us to identify when trouble might be brewing and provide employees with techniques that will allow them to defuse problematic situations.

How do we tackle this fundamental – and multidimensional – topic?

For starters, we need to address a whole ecosystem of factors that contribute to an employee's emotional and social well-being in the workplace. Some of these factors may be a function of actions that employers have simply failed to implement effectively. Others may be a function of something the employer simply hasn't considered. Figure 3.3.2 attempts to capture how diverse this ecosystem actually is.

Figure 3.3.2: How the workplace affects an employee's mental health

Source: Mercer Marsh Benefits^5

Ask yourself these questions:

> Where do you go in your workplace if you just need to cry?
> Whom do you turn to when you feel so angry you might do something you will regret if you can't release the tension?
> What do you do when you feel that if you could just lie down for a few minutes, you could easily get that 'second wind' to work?
> What do you do when you're so worried about who's going to pick up your sick child from school that you can't focus?
> And when you know you could get that big project done if you could just find some peace and quiet somewhere…what then?

If you've had any of these thoughts or experiences at some point in your working life, we've proved an important point: you are human. These are real-life situations that can affect any of us at any time in the workplace. They don't necessarily suggest that the person experiencing them is mentally ill or suffering from a debilitating condition. But the fact that we may find it difficult to answer some of these questions provides an important insight: workplaces don't always accommodate the fact that we are all, indeed, human.

Let's start with what gets recognised least, much less measured at all. What we may have missed in our discussions about productivity, absenteeism and presenteeism is that it's often the small, day-to-day interruptions to life that contribute most to productivity slippages. These are the factors we have captured in the innermost circle in our infographic (Figure 3.3.2). They include short-term disturbances that could crop up at any time in everyday life, such as:

> hangovers
> partner problems
> affairs of the heart
> colleague problems

> family problems
> basic life admin problems
> inadequate sleep
> inadequate nutrition
> hormonal fluctuations
> overeating
> blood sugar fluctuations

None of these seemingly trivial intrusions would seem worthy of a special course of treatment. Their impact tends to be short-lived and occurs at all levels of employment. But their impact on productivity is real.

To date, employers have not been able to do much about these daily interruptions. But a range of important insights and technologies are emerging that could have a dramatic impact on our ability to assist employees with managing these productivity sappers.

1. Emotional management by pre-emptive strike: how we can use technology

Prof Rosalind Picard, founder and director of the Affective Computing Research Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has a wonderful way of describing what we are dealing with:

I've always found emotion like weather. You can measure the rainfall, you can measure the barometric pressure, you can measure the temperature and humidity. Every now and then, a particular set gets a special name like a hurricane, much like you can have a special state called anger or depression. But underneath the anger or the depression are lots of continuously changing things in our body that change with stress, with social change, with physical activity, with novelty, with what you eat and how you sleep. As we start to make it easy for those things to be measured, we start to make it possible to build the equivalent of meteorological models that forecast the weather.[6]

Picard argues that cellphone technology could provide us with a monitoring capability that forewarns us about 'the gathering storms'.[7] From this point, it's then simply a matter of either sending mood stabilising interventions to the person to administer themselves, or alerting medical professionals that a more serious intervention may be required. The objective here is to keep the individual resilient and stable before the company itself must intervene; we may not be able to change the weather but it's possible we can change our emotional forecast.[8]

If this all seems a bit futuristic, consider this attention-grabbing headline:

China is monitoring employees' brain waves and emotions – and the technology boosted one company's profits by $315 million[9]

The Chinese believe that their emotional surveillance technology has evolved to such a sufficiently reliable level that they can now start rolling it out across the country: in factories, state-owned enterprises and the military. This technology appears to be able to identify the point at which an individual's mood has shifted dramatically enough to warrant such interventions as a change in break times or a change in the employee's task, or taking a mindfulness or tai chi break. It might even suggest that it's best to send the employee home.[10]

Chinese companies are already declaring that this form of monitoring is having a significant impact on their bottom line. According to a *South China Post* report, the State Grid Zhejiang Electric Power in the southeast city of Hangzhou saw its company profits jump by $315 million since the technology was introduced to its 40 000 employees in 2015.[11] The report states, 'More than a dozen businesses and China's military have used a different programme, developed by the government-funded brain surveillance project Neuro Cap, based out of Ningbo University.'[12]

But if the thought of making all your employees wear emotion-monitoring devices seems a bit draconian, there are far less invasive ways to provide this sort of assistance. The number of cellphone apps currently available is expanding rapidly.

Figure 3.3.3: A selection of apps for connecting people to counselling and other personalised interventions

Help in your pocket

A wide range of apps and services lets you quickly connect with counselling and other personalised interventions. Some offerings that are available or in development are:

Crisis Text Line Counselling for anyone in crisis

Ginger.io Employer-sponsored mental health coaching

Happify Activities and games designed to increase happiness

Lantern Coaching and daily exercises based on cognitive behavioural therapy

Mindshift Guidance for teens and young adults with anxiety, produced by a charity called AnxietyBC

Pacifica Tools for managing stress, anxiety and depression

Pear Therapeutics Plans to roll out 'digital therapeutics' that would be prescribed for addiction, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD Coach Tool and guidance for PTSD, from the US Department of Veterans Affairs

7 Cups Text-based counselling

Talkspace Online therapy sessions

Source: Waters^13

The aim is to give employees access to these preemptive facilities in a way that keeps costs to an absolute minimum and allows employees to have as much privacy as they wish.

Charlotte Stix, in a set of articles on mental health for the World Economic Forum, has argued that artificial intelligence (AI) can be a boon to companies looking for lower-cost solutions for employees to manage their emotional well-being. She identifies three specific benefits: early detection, easy accessibility and lowered fear of stigma.[14]
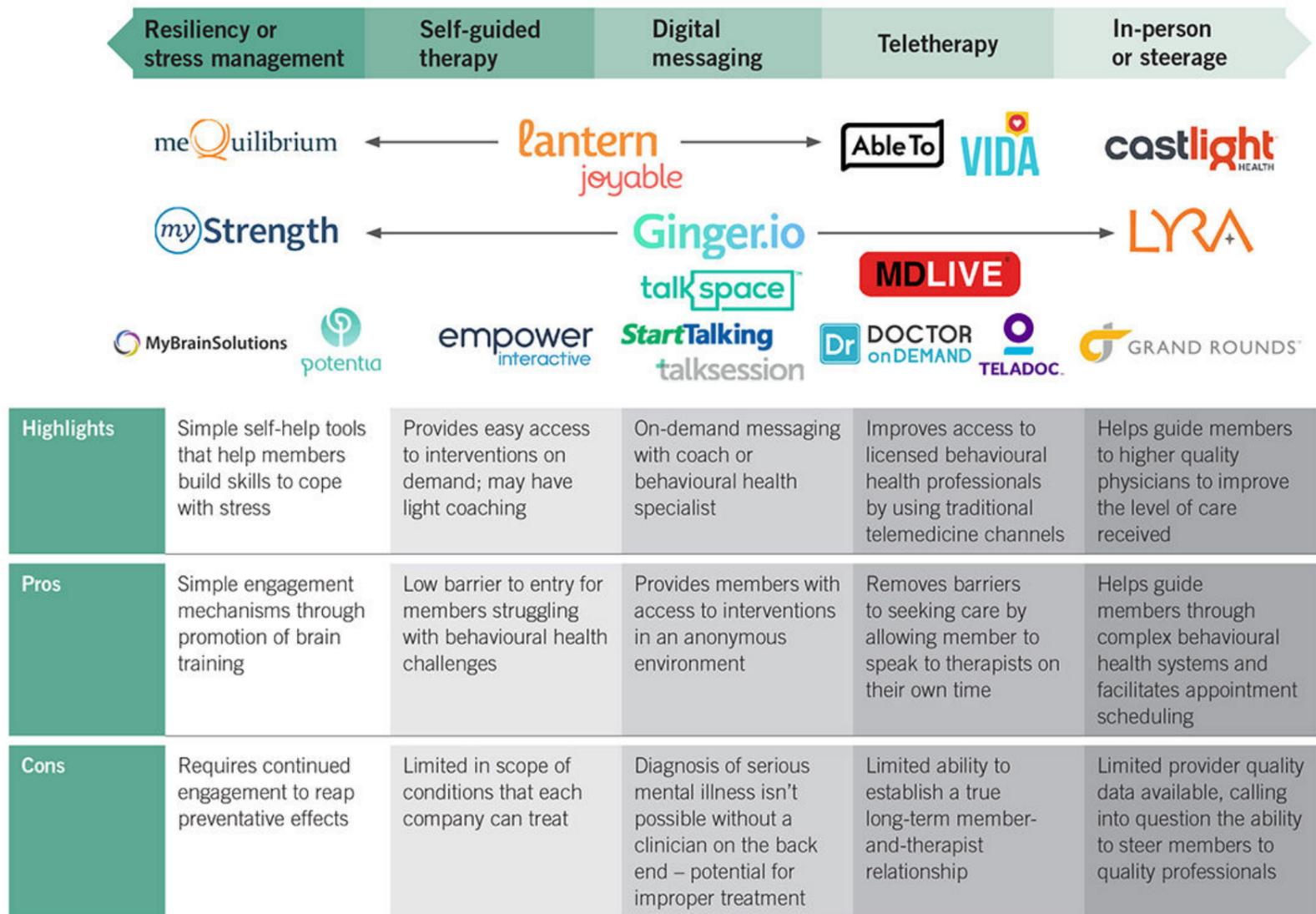
Benefits of using AI as a pre-emptive measure include:

> **Early detection:** Traditional ways of monitoring mental health rely on observation and self-reporting. But what about monitoring phone calls to detect crucial changes? IBM's Computational Psychiatry has been particularly successful in using coherence of speech and ideas as predictive indicators of psychosis to provide all-important signals.[15]

> **Providing broader reach**: In South Africa, there are 0.03 psychiatrists for every 100 000 people in our public rural primary healthcare sector.[16] Compared with The World Health Organization (WHO) recommendation of 2.5 hospital beds for every 1 000 people and 230 core health workers (doctors and nurses) for every 100 000 people, South Africa has a relatively low level of availability, with 1.9 public hospital beds for every 1 000 people who depend on in-patient services in public hospitals (non-medical scheme members).[17] However, our core health worker levels in the public sector exceed the WHO recommendation, at 339 nurses and doctors for every 100 000 people, although these levels are lower than the average in upper-middle-income countries (503 for every 100 000 people).[18]

> **Tailoring interventions to the needs of the user and providing access to a variety of treatments:** AI lowers barriers to access to advice, services and personalised treatment.

> **Lowered fears of stigma:** Chatbots have a distinct advantage in that they don't tire of a long conversation, are always available and are perceived as being non-judgemental. This allows for anonymous self-expression.[19]

Jargon buster
Chatbot: a computer program designed to simulate conversation with human users, especially over the internet[20]

In summary, technology has gone a long way to enabling the workplace to address the full gamut of issues that may affect employees' stress levels. It can start by simply helping us manage the most trivial of day-to-day disturbances. More importantly, though, it can suggest when it's time to get professionals involved. And then, it can take us face-to-face to those professionals.

Figure 3.3.4: Innovations in addressing emotional well-being

	Resiliency or stress management	Self-guided therapy	Digital messaging	Teletherapy	In-person or steerage
Highlights	Simple self-help tools that help members build skills to cope with stress	Provides easy access to interventions on demand; may have light coaching	On-demand messaging with coach or behavioural health specialist	Improves access to licensed behavioural health professionals by using traditional telemedicine channels	Helps guide members to higher quality physicians to improve the level of care received
Pros	Simple engagement mechanisms through promotion of brain training	Low barrier to entry for members struggling with behavioural health challenges	Provides members with access to interventions in an anonymous environment	Removes barriers to seeking care by allowing member to speak to therapists on their own time	Helps guide members through complex behavioural health systems and facilitates appointment scheduling
Cons	Requires continued engagement to reap preventative effects	Limited in scope of conditions that each company can treat	Diagnosis of serious mental illness isn't possible without a clinician on the back end – potential for improper treatment	Limited ability to establish a true long-term member- and-therapist relationship	Limited provider quality data available, calling into question the ability to steer members to quality professionals

Source: Mercer Marsh Benefits^21

2. Workplace facilitation of the human touch

Technology may not always be the most effective solution. Some emotional problems simply require a human touch. But companies can go significantly further than what's currently offered to employees through their EAPs. For example, in *Benefits Barometer 2015*: **'Financial Well-being'** we described in detail how BMW in South Africa employed on-site counsellors to manage a broad range of employee social and psychological issues, from HIV Aids counselling to family counselling and financial crisis counselling. These days, such counselling services can be made available to employees over Skype links to designated counsellors, enabling the company to contain costs while allowing the employee to get counselling when they need it, and without taking significant amounts of time off work.

Another powerful workplace resource that is highly underused is the workplace self-help group. We have been experimenting with the concept of workplace stokvels in companies where employers have introduced emergency savings funds. The idea here is for employees to support one another with financial management options that give them alternatives to accessing their emergency savings in times of financial need. Another example is a financial self-help group that deals specifically with the tricky aspects of family dynamics that often come into play around financial issues. Group members support each other by sharing their stories and experiences.

3. Subtle but significant: how to take a break

Another way to help employees keep stress under control is to simply pay greater attention to ergonomic solutions. Ergonomics is the study of people's efficiency in their work environment.

What we've learned from this area of research is that productivity actually increases (because stress decreases) when there are:

> quiet rooms where employees can hold private conversations, either one-on-one or on the phone
> sleep or nap areas where employees can recharge their batteries
> games or sports areas where employees can blow off steam
> spaces for people to illustrate their thinking, not just talk about it (for example, rooms with smart walls or whiteboards)
> workspaces that allow employees to work on large-scale, ongoing collaborative projects without having to dismantle their thought work each day

4. Flexing the way you need it

Workplace flexibility is one of the most important factors in helping employees manage stress that may be coming from outside the workplace. A work policy that genuinely allows work-hour or workplace flexibility across the whole company could have a surprisingly powerful multiplier effect on managing workplace stress, simply because it allows employees to deal with:

> family administration challenges
> healthcare or long-term care obligations to a significant other
> children's school demands
> general life chaos

5. Making sure the work environment works

More ergonomics here. According to a *Harvard Business Review* study, the rush to implement open office spaces may not be producing the results hoped for. For a number of companies, the stated intent is that by 'encouraging cross-functional collaboration, enhancing exposure to different kinds of expertise, and accelerating creativity and innovation',[22] these open-plan configurations should prove to be a magnet for talent. Often, these exercises mask a more basic desire to simply reduce overhead costs, and when employees internalise that reality, the strategy may backfire. An important insight from the study is that employee acceptance may have more to do with how people identify with the space than the space itself.[23]

To maximise an employer's chances that their employees do identify with the new layout, the study suggests the following three strategies:

> Employees first need to understand 'the why'. How does the new configuration relate to a vision of work that the employer believes will be most effective for executing the corporate strategy?
> Consider whether additional resources need to be added to this new configuration to get the job done: proper strategy rooms, wall space for plotting projects, adequate private spaces for sensitive conversations, and so on.
> Encourage workers to adapt the space to their needs and give them leeway to personalise it.

Bottom line: 'When leaders communicate the value of the space beforehand, proactively help workers acclimate, and give employees leeway to adapt the space, organisations are much more likely to reap the benefits of the investment in redesigned workspaces.'[24]

Now we turn to slightly more familiar ground in engaging with mental health in the workplace: the realm of the regulatory framework, where employers and employees need to understand their reciprocal obligations.

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WORK LIFE BALANCE   MEDIAN WORKING HOURS   STRESS   TECHNOLOGY   ERGONOMICS   WORKPLACE ENVIRONEMENT

OPEN PLAN OFFICES   SDG 3   SDG 8   SDG 1