

Home Is Where the Health Is:

Proactively Elevating
Employee Well-Being

It's no secret that every component of employee well-being – mental, physical, financial, social, career – has suffered over the past two years.

But the employers that are doubling down on well-being support and resources with a home-first/life-first perspective are creating meaningful advantages for stakeholders.

Deb Smolensky,
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Home Is Where the Health Is

According to NFP's survey data, employers realize that **home access to care** is necessary to employee well-being.

Over half of employers have introduced virtual solutions in mental health (**55%**) and primary care (**54%**), and better care for employees is a key driver, with about a third (**29%**) citing it as their main driver for considering healthcare delivery alternatives, and a little more than that (**36%**) saying better care and cost containment are equally important motivators.

We've all heard that investing in employee well-being is a business imperative.

Most organizations have taken at least some steps to address the challenges employees are facing. But enhancing employee well-being, especially when challenges are unlikely to let up, requires new ways of thinking and strategic focus in addition to investment.

Supporting well-being also means evolving your total rewards offering for the blending of home life and work (it's here to stay for many). Employers must take into account the 24/7/365 whole-person experience and acknowledge that life experiences and challenges don't disappear when the workday begins. They must also recognize that while employees want fulfilling work experiences, they want their lives – not their work – to come first. The goal is no longer work-life balance, its life-work integration.

Yes, there is an upfront cost. Most employers are already investing the money, and many expect to invest more in the next year. But, our survey revealed that more than half of employers are already spending over \$200 per employee on well-being. Rather than moving straight to budget allocation, these companies should make sure they're making the right cognitive investment: assessing needs and strategy development to ensure they're spending their well-being dollars where it will have the most impact on employees. Smart investment pays off, leading to a healthier, more empowered workforce, better recruiting and retention results, higher productivity and increased resilience — all of which have significant value for your organization.

This conversation with Deb Smolensky includes her insights on what employers should be considering, and why.

Q: When you say “home is where the health is” what do you mean in the context of well-being?

A: Well-being isn’t something that matters only at certain points in the day. It’s naïve for an employer to be concerned only with an employee’s well-being during work hours or expect them to suppress their “issues” from 9-5.

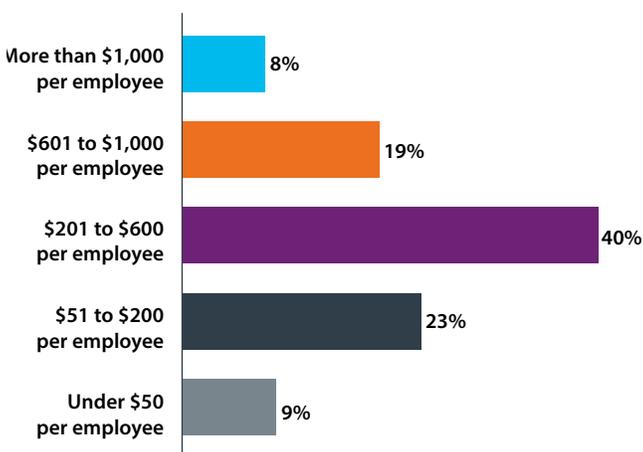
So with our survey showing 65% of companies adopting an alternative work schedule, and three quarters of those companies planning to keep the new schedule permanently, it’s time to embrace the home as a key part of the workplace. Employers have to focus their well-being strategies on the home environment and daily life challenges.

Think of all the things that may be weighing on an employee at any given time. Multigenerational caregiving responsibilities, debt, home maintenance needs, rising utility costs, limited or strained colleague connections, poor home office ergonomics, higher food bills, not being able to connect with the care

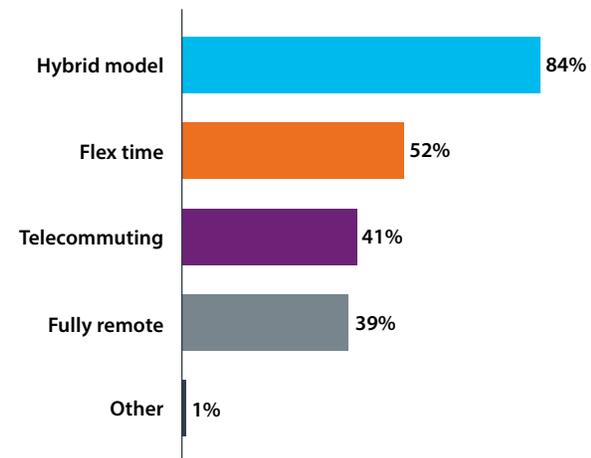
they need — it’s all happening at home. The stress is compounded by workloads and a lack of flexibility, which leads to burnout and then turnover, which puts more pressure on those left behind to backfill and find a replacement.

A better path is to see employees in the context of this new era, thinking beyond what most have known throughout their careers to visualize the whole employee experience in and out of work. Empower and support them to navigate and thrive no matter where they are working. Build a well-being strategy that touches every part of their lives on their terms – how they access healthcare, care for their family, implement ergonomics in their home office, or find quiet time for recovery and reflection – while having the right mindset to address their financial and health challenges. Ultimately you’ll see good things happening in your business.

WB Figure 1:
Total 2021 Well-Being Spend Per Employee



WB Figure 2:
Type of Alternative Work Schedule Offered



Q: This sounds like the right thing to do for people, but does it have a meaningful impact for businesses?

A: Absolutely. Let's take life-work integration as an example. The reality is that the experiences and challenges of life and work are co-mingled for most. What you're dealing with at home doesn't go away when you start working, and more and more work is happening outside of the traditional workday.

That makes flexibility a critical element of well-being. According to LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends 2022, when a company's job posting mentions flexibility, there is 35% more engagement in that post. That means you are expanding your pool of talent and creating an opportunity to welcome a more productive, engaged and loyal employee. MetLife found that employees who feel their employer provides the flexibility they need are 40% more productive and 57% more likely to be resilient. For those still on the fence about the importance of flexibility, this data provides a compelling case that it's more than a trend.

Flexibility to address the whole person also comes into play with paid-time-off options. Employers can implement options that allow for choice on how those excess, unused days are allocated, beyond just carrying them over. Some may want to donate the value to charity, use PTO to pay down student debt or even contribute it to their 401(k).

Even the types of life-related leave employers are offering is expanding. We are seeing a variety of types – marital, sabbatical, study/exam, volunteer,

surrogacy – increase in prevalence, as seen in WB figure 3.

The same reality exists for programs that support mental health and emotional well-being and solve problems people face in life. Any time you can help an employee address a challenge, that challenge is no longer a barrier to overall well-being, including what the person does at work. And when an employer demonstrates an ability to be a problem solving partner for an employee, it creates a connection that benefits the company.

Q: You mentioned resilience. Why is this important and what can employers do to help?

A: Effective well-being strategies have to involve understanding what people value (or are struggling with) and offering solutions that have the right impact. But there is also an opportunity to cultivate a greater degree of emotional regulation and resilience in employees that better equips them to deal with the challenges of life that adversely affect our well-being.

If change is the only constant, and change is stressful, stress will be constant too. Resisting, ignoring or eliminating change isn't great for business continuity so it's critical to empower resilience as a skill through classes or brain training.

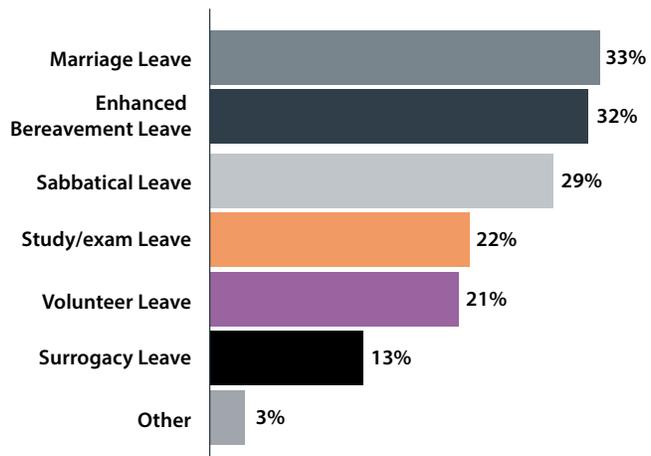
When an employer acknowledges that it's likely something is going to happen that may throw employees off their game, but shows that they're going to partner with employees so they're better prepared to deal with it, what do you think that does

for retention, loyalty and productivity? It's positive across the board.

Mental health solutions have become the key focus for employers, especially with COVID-19 spurring a sharp spike in anxiety and depression worldwide. Many employers offer online mental health resources (51%, according to our survey), and mental health support that can be accessed from home is vital. That said, while historically about 20% – 30% of employees will experience a mental health condition, 100% of employees will experience stress, burnout or some other daily life challenge that only mental well-being solutions can address. Providing accessible resources to address mental *well-being* challenges in the now, while also adding skill building solutions like mental fitness, brain optimization and resilience training is critically important.

Resilience training isn't a substitute for a portfolio of clinical mental health support and resources, which is a must have (and should go well beyond an employee assistance program with limited visits). Employers should ensure they're covering both mental health and mental well-being. This means offering high-quality, accessible support that addresses challenges in the now while investing in complementary resources that improve each individual's ability to deal with adversity.

WB Figure 3:
Prevalence of Various Leave Types



Q: How do diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging align with well-being strategies?

A: It's been great to see companies prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, and to have the opportunity to help them integrate it across their organizations. The stats are compelling — for example, according to Harvard Business Review, if workers feel like they belong, their job performance increases by 56%. They are also 50% less likely to leave the company, and they take 75% fewer sick days. For a company with 10,000 employees, that translates into an annual savings of \$52 million.

And it's very important to recognize that DEIB can't be a siloed endeavor. It has a clear intersection with benefits and requires an integrated HR and systems-based approach from the employee experience lens. Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging are each essential for life-work integration to be possible for employees.

Companies need to recognize the differences in their workforces, from their needs to how they access benefits and what they are offered. Gig workers, for example, often have access to lesser benefits or no benefits at all. Fortunately, that's changing as companies realize that the well-being of all employees is critical, no matter how they're employed (full-time, part-time, contract, hourly).

Social determinants of health also remain a big factor. Almost half (45%) of companies see social determinants as having a big influence on their benefits strategy. This is good, but it's not enough.

More companies need to take time to understand differences in socioeconomic status, education, neighborhood and physical environment, and access to healthcare, and reflect this understanding in how they develop and offer benefits programs. This is huge when building a culture of belonging and getting well-being right. According to our survey findings, employers with 1,000 employees or more are likely to find that their greatest challenge in terms of employees' mental, physical and financial well-being is that their organization's culture needs to improve, with 37% reporting this as their primary concern. So focusing on DEIB in a benefits context can have a positive impact on both the company's culture and the employee experience.

Q: Knowing where to start is difficult, especially when there is so much pressure on companies to get it right. What advice do you have for companies that need to take the next step?

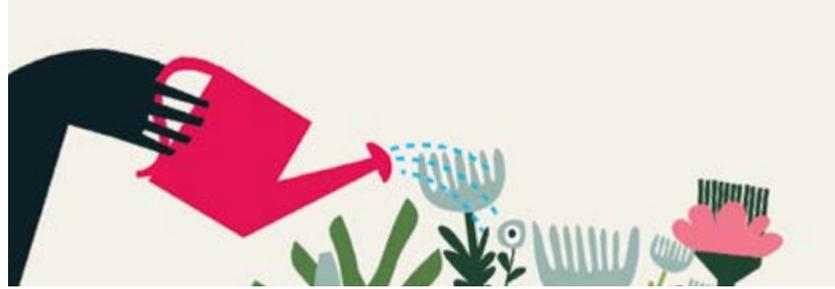
A: There is no question that the demand for well-being resources can be overwhelming. That's why working with the right partner is critical.

First, recognize that 100% of your workforce has changed in some way over the past few years and so have their needs.

Most often, employers are spending between \$200 and \$600 per employee on well-being expenses, according to our data. Over the next 12 months they expect this expenditure to increase at least some amount. The majority (56%) expect to spend between 5% and 25% more. Make sure you aren't pouring that money into solutions that don't actually address your workforce's needs.

Listen to your employees to understand what they are experiencing and how they're connecting their challenges with the solutions/support you're offering. Use this insight to define personas of your new workforce, identify what has changed and where the true need is. It's often not what you think it is. Then articulate one or two main goals that will foundationally support the employee experience, which includes well-being.

Next, define and commit to a budget that will help achieve these goals.



The reality is that the challenges of life and work are co-mingled for most — and more and more work happens outside of the traditional workday.

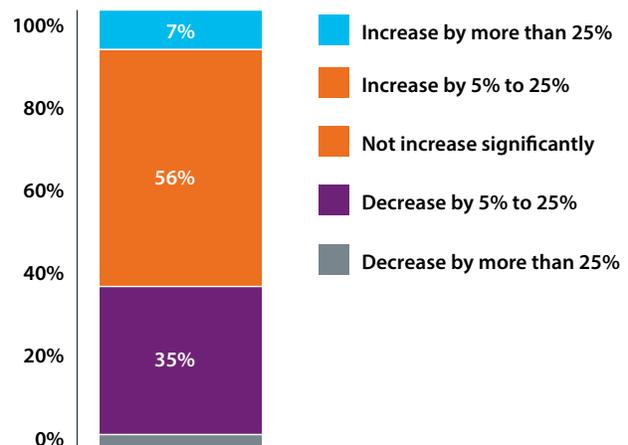
Then think about the new-reality table stakes of a successful well-being strategy.

- **A robust clinical mental health solution:** Think beyond the EAP to provide the care employees need to manage stress, anxiety, depression and other major mental health concerns.
- **Mental fitness training:** Invest in resiliency so your workforce is ready the next time adversity comes their way, no matter where they are.
- **Improved work environment:** Offer childcare/ eldercare (WeeCare), ergonomics, health insurance for the home (Armadillo).
- **Digital transformation:** Make it easy for employees to understand, access, utilize and appreciate their benefits (PeopleEQ).
- **Leadership training and well-being:** In this new era of work, it's critical to complement health and well-being training with support that fosters the development of new skills such as self-regulation, compassion and having difficult conversations.
- **Prioritize belonging:** If you do everything else right but people don't feel like they belong, it's a miss.

Finally, remember that flexibility is essential. Listen and learn, provide choices within the offerings and know when to adapt. Never let perfect be the enemy of progress.

WB Figure 4:

Expected Change in Employee Well-Being Investment in Next 12 Months



- 1 Read more about the philosophy of the change from work-life balance to life-work integration in Arianna Huffington's Fortune.com article, "It's Time to Replace Work-Life Balance with 'Life-Work Integration.'"
- 2 LinkedIn Talent Solutions. 2022 Global Talent Trends: The Reinvention of Company Culture, business.linkedin.com, 2022.
- 3 MetLife. Redesigning the Employee Experience: Preparing the Workforce for a Transformed World, metlife.com, 2021.
- 4 Alison Brunier. "Covid-19 Pandemic Triggers 20% Increase in Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Worldwide," World Health Organization, who.int, 2022.
- 5 National Alliance on Mental Illness. Mental Health by the Numbers, nami.org, 2022.
- 6 Evan Carr, Andrew Reece, Gabriella Kellerman and Alexi Robichaux. "The Value of Belonging at Work," Harvard Business Review, hbr.org, 2019.