

## Creating a Well Workforce: A case study

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Recent years have seen a move in larger organisations towards a more proactive approach to health and safety. Instead of ensuring that steps have been taken to comply with current health and safety legislation (eg The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974), employers are taking the well-being of their workforce into their own hands and offering a range of activities to promote their health and well-being. The initiatives are holistic in focus, looking at both the risks in the workplace and the risks present in the employees' lifestyle outside of work, such as lack of exercise, poor diet, smoking and drink problems.

To what extent is it employers' responsibility to look after their employees? At a recent IES HR Network conference these questions were debated amongst participating organisations and the recurrent view was that employers and employees should share responsibilities for their welfare. How far then should employers go? What is the best approach to take and what are the benefits they are likely to see? This report seeks to answer these questions by presenting a case study of one organisation currently involved in health promotion activities. British Gas Business (BGB), part of Centrica, has been running a series of activities to promote health and well-being amongst its workforce for a number of years. Most of these originate from the Well-being Team based primarily in the Leicester call centre.

Since the start of their well-being activities, BGB has seen a 20% reduction in staff absence equivalent to over 6,000 days' extra productive time. Over the same period, there has also been a 15% reduction in staff turnover.

### The drivers for health and well-being promotion

The benefits of a healthy workforce for an organisation are well documented and include lower levels of absence and turnover, and increased productivity. As such, an employer may hope to reap the rewards of helping employees lead a healthier lifestyle both in and outside of work. In addition, such activities can benefit an organisation by improving its employer branding, making the company more attractive to employees and customers alike. For example, IES research into employee engagement has shown that employees who believed that their employer cares about their health and well-being have higher levels of engagement with their company.

**BGB has seen a 20% reduction in staff absence and a 15% reduction in staff turnover**

In BGB, the Well-being Team insisted that they genuinely care about their employees, but recognised that there are business benefits to promoting their health and well-being amongst their staff:

*'We do this because we want a healthy workforce. It benefits the business but we genuinely do care about our people. They're the most valuable asset of any business, it's the people. They determine whether it's a success or not.'*

### Taking a holistic approach

The initiatives in BGB aim to improve both health and well-being amongst staff. But what exactly is 'well-

being'? Whilst the precise definition is often under debate, in essence well-being is a broad concept, with both physical and psychological dimensions, influenced by all sorts of factors originating from both within and outside the workplace. For BGB, well-being is all-encompassing:

*'It's a happy and healthy workforce. It encompasses everything. If there's one thing in their life they're not happy with, they're not going to perform their best. If people don't feel one hundred per cent, everything else is affected.'*

Addressing such a broad concept requires designing a number of initiatives that target the numerous components of people's lives, and this is exactly what the Well-being Team in BGB have been trying to do. In addition to putting in place the more obvious activities focused on health, such as smoking cessation classes, healthy eating options in the canteen, massage sessions and fitness classes, they run a series of activities aimed at helping employees to have more fun both inside and outside of work. Some examples of the range of activities are given below:

- annual BBQ with live music from the BGB band
- BGB football teams and tournaments
- competitions within work, eg decorating Christmas trees, raffles
- events for children, eg teddy bears' picnic in the summer, Christmas party in the winter
- opportunities for staff to do voluntary work for charities
- snowball fights (using soft foam balls) during work hours in the week leading up to Christmas.

Whilst some may think that having fun at work is a separate issue to well-being, in BGB it is seen as just one way of improving well-being and often the fun initiatives include an element of healthy activity such as exercise.

Many of the activities they put on are for the whole family, so often employees are encouraged to bring their children and spouses along to BGB events or get them to take part in competitions. For example, in December all employees with children are invited to send in a Santa's letter, and each child receives a personalised reply and a gift. Whilst it can be hard work to cater for both employees and their families, the Well-being Team believes that it is very

important for staff to involve their loved-ones in their life at work.

*'It's like a big family here, and we want that to be whether it's inside of work or outside of work.'*

Part of the reason behind setting up so many activities is to ensure that there is something for everyone. It is safe to assume that not every member of staff will be attracted to every initiative, as individuals have their own tastes and preferences, but through providing a mix, the Well-being Team hope that they can at least cater for most. In addition to the numerous activities around Christmas time, the call centre has activities to celebrate other faiths and festivals. Within Leicester there is a large Hindu population, so the call centre puts on events during Diwali such as encouraging all staff to come in saris and to bring in traditional foods. Other festivals such as Eid are also celebrated.

## Educating employees on how to be more healthy

A major part of any health promotion activity involves a process of educating employees, providing them with the necessary information to make informed choices about how they look after themselves. But how exactly should employers get these messages across?

When the new Well-being Team in BGB was initially set up, their first task involved deciding how to brand their activities. From previous experience of struggling to generate much interest in the range of activities set up annually during European Health and Safety Week, they were conscious that a more positive approach was needed:

*'We were very conscious of the fact that health and safety switches people off.'*

The term 'well-being' was considered to be more attractive to staff and to better encompass the range of initiatives they wanted to put in place.

In place of the European Health and Safety Week events they created their innovative well-being events which take place twice a year, once in the summer and again in the winter. Each event runs over the core lunch period and is open for all staff to attend, including contractors and cleaners. At each event a number of external organisations are invited on site to talk to staff about their particular campaigns and provide them with information.

***'If people don't feel one hundred per cent, everything else is affected.'***

Some examples of topics and participating organisations include the following:

#### Summer event

- barbecue and food safety from Sainsbury's
- children and beach safety from RNLI
- sun safety from Boots and Cancer Research

#### Winter event

- firework safety for children and pets
- drink driving campaign information from the police and vehicle safety from the AA.

Usually the companies attend free of charge, as the events provide good PR opportunities, and hand out freebies such as suncream to staff. Since launching the events, BGB have been surprised by the number of new companies approaching them asking to take part.

### well-being as opposed to health and safety

Whilst the events still cover the European Health and Safety theme in each session they also look at a range of other issues:

*'Really it is looking at well-being in the broadest sense, but with underlying health and safety messages going all the way through.'*

The Well-being Team have seen that by simply switching the focus to 'well-being' as opposed to 'health and safety' they have been able to dramatically increase the popularity of the events, which are now attended by around half of the workforce. Many other companies have shown interest in putting on similar events for their own staff and have asked the Well-being Team for advice on how to take these forward.

Another effective channel used for educating employees is the display of posters and leaflets in the toilets. This came about after the team realised that some individuals dislike looking for information in front of others and therefore might be wary of seeking information at the public well-being events. By putting the same kind of information in discrete parts of the building they have provided staff with the chance to learn and obtain information in private. Examples of topics covered include DSE safety, cycling safety, slips trips and falls, looking after your heart, and the Samaritans. During the summer they tried to encourage staff to drink more water and even put up urine charts in the toilets

allowing staff to see how dehydrated they are. The team believe the leaflets have been a huge success, as evidenced by the fact that they disappear very quickly, particularly in the men's toilets.

*'How brilliant is it that we're providing information for people who wouldn't normally pick that kind of thing up but they can now do it in their own time?'*

The team spend a significant amount of time searching for relevant posters on the internet, and try where possible to link these in with national campaigns. They also work hard to ensure that the message of the campaign is consistent with their general approach, which is to inform rather than dictate how employees should lead their lives.

*'We don't want to say "You can't do this" or "You can't do that".'*

## Creating the right environment for health promotion

Ensuring that people feel well whilst they are at work begins with providing them with a safe and comfortable work environment. One lesson the BGB Well-being Team have learnt over the last few years is that the specific layout of a workplace can in itself facilitate or hinder an effective health promotion plan.

Two years ago the team was struggling to improve health and well-being in an old office block spread over nine floors. Whilst the building was safe, the layout made it hard for the team to implement their plans as there was little integration between the different floors, and trying to encourage a simple exercise like taking the stairs was futile as often there were just too many floors to go up.

*'We were stifled by the surroundings and the environment we had. People were wanting to do things and since we've got to the new building it's really happened because we've got the opportunity to do it now.'*

In 2004 the Leicester team moved to a new location and a new site, and members of the Well-being Team were given the opportunity to get involved in the design of the building. They saw it as an obvious place for them to start to improve well-being:

*'Most of your time is spent at work. What's the best environment you can work in within your budget or remit? What's the best that you can provide for people that makes it easier?... It wasn't about replicating what we had. It was a case of thinking what's the best we can have?'*

They began by asking the workforce what they thought would improve their well-being at work. Throughout the construction of the property there was lots of consultation with staff, and employees were given the opportunity to trial some of the new equipment and office furniture before any were purchased. There was even a webcam set up for staff so that they could see the progress of their new work premises.

*'People were involved in the whole project. It's so important that people can come along with you on the journey.'*

The new Leicester office provides a spacious relaxing environment with fish tanks on each floor, music at certain times of day, chill out zones with comfy sofas and CD listening posts. There are also games rooms with table football and arcade games. The atmosphere is laid back and casual, but the colour scheme and lighting help to give the workplace an energetic feel.

As the new premises are based on the outskirts of Leicester, the team were keen to provide facilities that stopped them losing the advantages of being close to the city centre. They set up specific bus services for staff, brought dry cleaning facilities on site and even set up a monthly market for local traders to come and sell their goods. The team told how part of the success of all their initiatives, including the well-being events, lies in bringing services directly to employees, and thereby saving them time and hassle. For example, in recent times they have arranged for the blood donor bus to come to their premises and for Lloyds chemist to deliver the free diabetes tests they run in their pharmacies on site for staff.

*'There are all sorts of things that just make it easier for people to be here.'*

## The impact

At present, the scientific evidence on the impact of health promotion activities is not clear cut. Whilst published evaluation studies have found moderate success in affecting lifestyle (smoking, drinking, diet, weight loss and exercise), the evidence on stress is ambiguous and they have failed so far to show a link to organisational benefits such as reduced absenteeism (see the IES HR Network Report *Promoting a Healthy Workplace*). However, much of this is due to the fact that there has, so far, been little methodologically sound research in this area, rather than the fact that health promotion activities do not work. Clearly, much more research is needed on this topic to identify the benefits to organisations that set up such activities. In particular more is needed on the

effectiveness of initiatives, like those of BGB, that are designed to improve well-being as well as physical health.

The BGB Well-being Team admits that not all their health promotion activities translate into healthier behaviour. For example, they told how they have been slightly disappointed with the take up of the healthy food options they now have on offer in the canteen.

*'I think the main thing with us is we can only advise, we can give them the information and then the choice is up to them.'*

However, they believe the proof of the overall effectiveness of their work comes from the positive feedback they receive from staff. Each year BGB takes part in an annual employee survey, which is analysed by an external consultant and shows improvements year on year. The response of staff has been so positive that the company has won a number of prestigious awards including The Sunday Time's Best Companies Award, The BBC Big Challenge for Health Workplace Award (Midlands), The Best People Experience in the European Call Centre Awards, and the Financial Times' Great Places to Work Award, amongst others.

*'Every year we blow our targets.'*

In particular, they score very highly on engagement and commitment, which are two key areas for the company, as these facilitate recruitment and retention.

*'Commitment is probably the most important from a business point of view. How do people talk about us outside of work? Would people recommend us to their friends and family?'*

In terms of harder measures of impact, whilst there has been no formal evaluation, the team point to the fact that churn in the company is low, and they believe they compare favourably with other similar firms of the same size. Absence is not something they feel they need to worry about.

*'But absence isn't a big deal. Take this week (lead up to Christmas). There's so much going on that people want to be here, for snowballing and things.'*

But the question remains that even if staff are at work, are they necessarily being productive at work? Could there be an argument for saying that with all these activities in place there is too much play and too little work? An employee I spoke to was very positive about the efforts of the Well-being Team:



*'They honestly do as much as they can. They really try to keep everybody happy.'*

However, the individual told how sometimes the activities coincide with busy work periods, which means staff face the dilemma of wanting to join in with the fun whilst at the same time meeting their targets.

*'It's a case of "Let's have fun", but also "Bring the cash in, bring the cash in". You can have one or the other, you can't have both.'*

The Well-being Team believes that the games and competitions help staff to de-stress and provide them with a natural break. However, it recognised that it is important to get the balance right.

*'It's balanced by the fact that we're a successful business, and we do perform and we do have happy people and productive people. It's about getting the balance right. It can't be that we come to work and have a party every day.'*

## Advice for others

On reading about the range of activities in BGB, some companies might assume that setting up a health promotion agenda is an expensive process. However, the Well-being Team were keen to stress how it is actually much cheaper than people might think. One of their most successful initiatives, the well-being events, is actually very cheap as the companies that attend tend not to charge and often provide prizes for any competitions.

Nonetheless they were the first to admit that it can be hard work, and requires a lot of dedication, especially as they are required to fit the work in with other more traditional health and safety tasks, such as conducting risk assessments. The biggest challenge they face is trying to come up with new and innovative ideas to keep staff interested. They aim to try something different each time but they are finding it increasingly hard to better each initiative.

*'The biggest challenge is coming up with new things and making it bigger and better each time.'*

When asked whether they could recommend any one particular initiative to other companies, they were adamant that their work comes as a package rather than a series of discrete elements.

*'There's an energy about this place. You can't put your finger on it. It's a culmination of all the different*

*things we do. All the bits we do are equally important. It's not one element; it's the whole thing together that makes it like that.'*

Partly it is facilitated by the culture of the organisation, which they believe has always been forward thinking, open and trusting.

*'Taking this into another company might not work ... It would be about changing things around to fit. It's not a one-size fits all.'*

Instead they recommended that any company thinking of promoting health at work should begin by asking its workforce what they want. They are constantly checking their ideas with staff before they go ahead and requesting feedback for activities that do take place.

*'There's no point in putting a lot of time and effort into things if it's not what people want.'*

## Conclusion

A number of organisations are starting to move away from compliance with health and safety legislation towards promoting the health of their workforce. BGB is one such company, which over the last few years has put in place a number of initiatives to improve the well-being of its workforce.

Whilst the academic literature provides inconclusive evidence on the effectiveness of health promotion activities, the BGB Well-being Team is very happy with the outcome of its work. Despite some disappointments in behaviour changes, particularly in regard to healthier eating, absence and churn are low and their feedback from employees has continued to improve year on year.

One of their key achievements to date is an increase in engagement and commitment, which arguably benefits the organisation in a myriad of ways. Such feedback has enabled them to win a number of prestigious awards, which in turn benefit their employer branding.

The experience has taught the company many lessons which could prove valuable for other companies interested in taking such an approach themselves. In particular, they were able to note the importance of the following:

- **A holistic approach** – they recognise that well-being encompasses different components of people's lives so include non work-based lifestyle activities and events for the family.

One of their key achievements to date is an increase in engagement and commitment

- **Positive marketing** – they found that focusing on ‘well-being’ rather than ‘health and safety’ made their activities more attractive to staff.
- **Understanding that different people have different needs** – they respect the diversity of their workforce and offer a range of activities to ensure that most people are catered for. They also recognise that people like to obtain information in different ways and therefore share information through different channels including events, posters and leaflets.
- **A non-dictatorial message** – they also aim to facilitate healthier ways of living rather than dictate them.
- **A healthy work environment** – moving to a new site enabled them to design well-being in from the very start, through the layout of the offices and the addition of chill out areas and games rooms.
- **Consulting staff** – they always check their ideas with them before they go ahead and seek feedback on all their initiatives.
- **Bringing the services to the workforce** – by inviting companies to their premises and providing facilities on site they reduce the time and hassle for employees.
- **Making it fun** – adding fun activities into the mix adds a positive slant and increases the appeal for employees, but they recognise that a balance needs to be achieved so that activities in work act as effective destressors rather than distractors.
- **Keeping it fresh** – the team work hard to come up with new ideas and new activities to ensure that they continue to attract staff.

However, it should be recognised that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to health promotion. The team were keen to stress the importance of an open and trusting culture, which has allowed them to develop their own ideas, and allowed staff to make suggestions. What works for BGB may not work for others, so the biggest recommendation for other companies wishing to take up such an initiative is to do the ground work and ask the workforce what they think would improve their well-being.

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## About IES

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in human resource issues.

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- design and deliver bespoke development programmes for HR people
- evaluate how they are progressing against their goals