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G L O B A L



A **COVID-19** Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: **Workplace Wellbeing 15**

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COVID-19 & The Future of Workplace Wellbeing

A COVID 19 Virtual Ideation Experience
by Group 15 | CoreNet Hackathon



COVID 19 has brought Workplace Wellbeing into sharp new focus. For a diverse group of Corporate Real Estate (CRE) professionals in Asia Pacific, the initial encounter felt all too familiar with Bird Flu and SARS in many of our working memories. But the current pandemic is having far greater reaching consequences; economies as well as lives will be changed.

This article sets out to explore the roots of 'wellbeing' in our workplaces, the impact of COVID, the changes we anticipate that it will bring, and what we feel CRE professionals will need to address to ensure that our holistic wellbeing is catered for – whether our workplaces be communal or individual.

The Value of Workplace Wellbeing

According to the International Labour Organization, “Workplace Wellbeing relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization.”

Its roots are founded in the Trade Union Movement of the Industrial Revolution, created to help workers with wellbeing difficulties such as low pay, unsafe or unsanitary working conditions and long hours. Employers obliged to abide by evolving statutory workplace regulations soon realized that the health of their employees made economic sense as well as fulfilling their social obligations – a healthy workforce tends to be a more productive workforce.

Today this holds true, wellbeing is a major determinant of productivity with many researches evidencing that workplace health and wellbeing strategies can bring about the following tangible and intangible organizational benefits:

- Better staff morale, and improved work culture
- Greater employer reputation and ability to attract and retain talent
- Lower absenteeism, and costs associated with illnesses
- Increased work performance and productivity

Wellbeing is comprised of the mutually supportive relationship between the physical, mental and social health of an individual, all of which are influenced by the organizational environment. This means corporations must create and support environments where employees can be healthier through access to information and choices that improve wellbeing.

Pre COVID-19, many CRE professionals were wrestling with the ever-changing requirements of a fourth workplace revolution – characterized by a fusion of technologies blurring the fine lines between work and life. These technology have not only enabled improved physical infrastructure in the workplace (air quality, daylight access, biophilic design), but also enhanced our consciousness of our own health and wellbeing. The stress of a 24/7 technologically ‘switched-on’ age has compelled conscientious employers to overtly enable wellbeing, as part of their corporate offering.

The Immediate Impact of COVID 19 to Workplace Wellbeing

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization announced COVID-19 a Pandemic, unprecedented in its impact to all levels of society. More than ever, corporate health and safety policies, business resilience plans, and holistic wellbeing strategies are being tested. Entire working models needed to reconsider the obvious health risks associated with employees commuting to and gathering in workplaces.

A survey by Willis Towers Watson showed that some immediate actions taken by Asian employers, who were first thrust into the COVID spotlight, were focused on basic safety and virus controls including providing free protective equipment (medical masks and antibacterial products), setting up emergency response teams, and providing free psychological counselling.

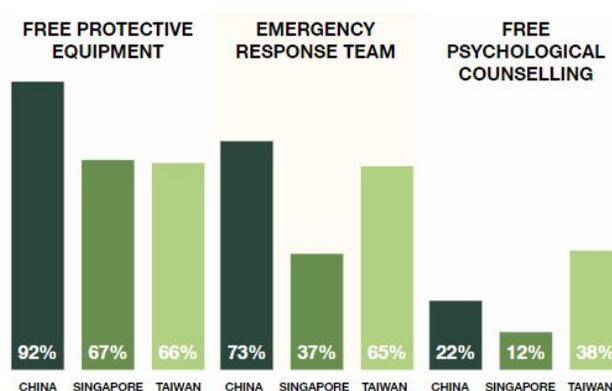


FIGURE 1 : Actions taken in support of employee wellbeing

The global spread of COVID-19 has necessitated a very practical and physical response from employers. Promoting hygiene and infection control measures such as temperature screening, heightened cleaning, contact tracing, masks, staggered work times, and social distancing arrangements have become of urgent importance. Continued spread of the virus has overwhelmed health care systems forcing governments to restrict movement causing organizations to implement, in a short span of time, large scale work-from-home strategies. Overnight, the majority of today's working population, whether they like it or not, is working from home.

The human-centered design elements that create a healthy collective workplace at scale now must be translated to the domestic setting. Extended isolation and confinement are bringing a whole new range of mental health considerations – coupled with the difficulty of providing solutions via remote, technological means.

Communication and cultural connectivity have become paramount to helping a remote workforce remain 'well', engaged and productive. Whilst the immediate CRE challenge is focused on levels of hygiene, clean air and social distancing for 'essential' employees still attending the workplace, the looming issue is what will the workplace be like once movement restrictions are relaxed. As colleagues return to work, we will need to re-educate workplace expectations using our newfound, improved communication skills.

COVID 19 & Wellbeing: A Lens on Culture & Diversity

We are now living in the world's greatest work-from-home experiment and with Asia being the first epicenter of the virus, it is important to understand the nuances of working-from-home and the diversity of its impact on wellbeing.

Flexible working, originating in 1967 Germany, is now experienced in many forms across the globe. Introduced to Asia in the 1970s via large multinationals, research shows that adoption of full flexibility including working-from-home is still lower in parts of the Asia Pacific than elsewhere. Factors like a presenteeism culture, extended families in single households, gender stereotypes, and conservative attitudes toward family-work roles in Asian societies (where women are still expected to carry a larger burden of childcare and home chores) limit adoption.

As such, the overnight transition of employees now having to deal with the new experience of not just being productive in their new 'home office' but also dealing with a range of new stresses - extended family care responsibilities, home schooling children, household obligations, and where alone, isolation - is culturally having a greater impact on physical and mental wellbeing. CRE professionals have had to think of innovative ways to bridge this gap, working as multi-disciplinary teams, to provide digital offerings of online physical activities and mental health services in addition to the quality of the internet connection or the ergonomic chair that were previously considered, by many, to be the only staples of a work-from-home set-up.

Future of Work & Wellbeing

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented and devastating impact, yet we must look to the positive learnings that can be gleaned and applied in our future workplaces and wellbeing practices. Absolute essentials will shift from basic health and safety policies to holistic wellbeing strategies

that aim to improve individual physical and mental health in both the communal and individual workplace.

- A higher proportion of work-from-home (WFH) will become a new 'normal' leading to a more flexible working population with greater choice and freedom as to where and how to work to be most productive.
- Home as a workplace will mean organizations need to have compelling WFH offerings (as well as communal ones) that will lay out policies, benefits, allowances and inclusions.
- A rethinking of how commercial spaces are meeting the needs of the transforming workforce is necessary; likely changing the focus of the tangible environment from one that allows you "to get work done" to one that "promotes the culture of the organization, provides a space to collaborate, connect and share a sense of belonging".
- The current trending importance of mindfulness, wellness, healthy buildings and proper nutrition will be accelerated requiring CRE professionals to leverage expertise on digital platforms and software technology to provide suites of programs on mental and physical wellbeing catering to the different needs of employees allowing them to participate in a variety of ways.
- Organizations that display an open culture, promote gender equality, leverage diversity, and have senior leaders (both men and women) championing holistic wellbeing will have a long term, sustainable view that helps change stigma and remove bias where they still exist.

Key Recommendations

The future of work and wellbeing will require CRE professionals to be even more adaptable – thinking, engaging and planning differently. Future workplace wellbeing will require -

- Multidisciplinary teams (CRE/HR/Technology) to charter the 'Future of Work' and address challenges to accelerating common practices in both the communal workplace and WFH programs:
 - Prepare a comprehensive ergonomic program and 'home office' support system
 - Invest in virtual communications and collaboration technology
 - Identify remote work principles and ways of working to help manage employer – employee expectations and build culture of collaboration and transparency
 - Provide right tools and processes to support remote working throughout the Employee Journey (from hiring to exiting)
- More overt support of Mental Health programs:
 - Employee Assistance Programs and Online Courses – stress management, going through uncertainty, dealing with loss, improving personal resilience, etc.
 - Train and promote Mental Health First Aiders
 - Onsite and virtual Mental Wellness programs i.e. meditation and mindfulness

- Creatively reconsider and expand Physical Health & Safety:
 - Continue to promote healthy buildings principles for ventilation, air quality, thermal health, water quality, noise and lighting
 - Adopt new regimes of rigorous cleaning/sanitation including the use of automation and new materials, e.g. Touchless or Voice activation, Nanoseptic surfaces, etc.
 - Ensure that work arrangements have the ability to easily adapt to physical distancing and changed workspace densities
 - Enable onsite and virtual Physical Wellness programs i.e. yoga, pilates, physical exercise
 - Continue to emphasize healthy eating, fresh foods, variety of choice