

Employees' wellness in the spotlight

Illness results in absenteeism and low productivity

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THE more CEOs of South African and global companies I talk to, the more apparent it becomes that the issue of employee wellness occupies much of their thinking. A simple correlation illustrates why. A company cannot hope to function competitively without firstly, the right calibre of human capital, and secondly, having that human capital in as healthy a state as possible. The situation in South Africa is more challenging than in many other countries for two reasons. Firstly the HIV/Aids pandemic continues to decimate the workforce. Secondly, the country suffers a skills shortage courtesy of human capital outflow. The pressure on the pool of human capital has been further intensified in recent years by the emergence of chronic disease and stress-related illnesses. Like so many other problems facing South African companies, these are global issues.

As business organisations strive to maximise shareholder value exponentially, the world's workforces have become more exposed to the pressures that CEOs and their management teams face to deliver on shareholders' demands. The results of this are worrying for many human resource practitioners tasked with ensuring that their workforces are strategically primed to meet the challenges brought about by increased competition and the problems associated with the recent global economic and financial developments.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers Health Research Institute together with the World Economic Forum have identified some startling scenarios for companies around the world to factor into their corporate strategies. Their report "Working Towards Wellness: Accelerating the Prevention of Chronic Disease" suggests that chronic disease, including cardiovascular problems, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes caused 60% of deaths worldwide in 2005, with an expected increase of 17% to 2015. The economic toll of chronic disease for developing and developed nations is estimated by the authors at approximately three percent of gross domestic product. The major contributory factors appear to be poor diet, lack of physical

“EMPLOYEE WELLNESS IMPORTANT.”

activity, stress and smoking. The challenges facing businesses as a consequence of this growing epidemic are enormous.

The study found that on average, approximately two percent of capital spent on workforces is lost to disability, absenteeism and presenteeism (diminished productivity from ill employees who go to work but work below par, due to chronic illness). In addition the World Health Organisation has predicted that by the year 2020 the second leading cause of death in the world will be depression. So to try to protect human capital what can companies do? In addition to establishing wellness centres which has become a popular practice, CEOs and their human resource specialists should also be establishing practices that encourage employees to take responsibility for their own wellness.

I have introduced into a number of my client organisations a holistic yet simple approach to wellness through the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong (pronounced chi-gung). This system of self-development and cultivation enables the practitioner to protect his or her health, promote vitality and prolong life.

The benefits of Qigong include calmness of mind, prevention of disease, balancing one's emotions, reducing stress, as well as improving concentration and focus. Members of management and sales teams, as well as customer service, administrative and shop floor departments that have been exposed to the most basic of Qigong exercises have reported feeling calmer, healthier, less tired and more motivated. These feelings in turn have created better relationships in their private and working lives, improved productivity at work and increased feelings of motivation. As a result, internal harmony and teamwork improve, as does external customer service. Could this ancient practice hold the key to improved wellness for millions in our stressful and chaotic world?

• Paul Dorrian is a management consultant and student of Qigong.