



Role of HR in Employees' Wellness and Mental Health

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Abstract – Introduction Wellness and psychological health are two crucial areas of concern in any modern organization. Due to rising pressures of the modern corporate life, increased globalization, and impacts of the recent global pandemic, organizations cannot turn a blind eye to mental well-being anymore. Human resource department holds key importance here since HR is responsible for designing and implementing the programs that contribute to physical, psychological, and social health of its employees. This paper will look at the role of HR practices in promoting psychological wellness of employees in organizations. Based on the secondary data, such as textbooks, scientific journals, governmental reports, and case studies of specific organizations, the following HR practices will be discussed: Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), flexible employment options, mental health training, programs aimed at developing a safe and healthy organizational culture, and use of technology for promoting wellness among employees. Findings show that the well-designed programs implemented by the HR department are quite effective and can help to reduce absenteeism, increase employee engagement, and raise productivity of employees. On the other hand, many obstacles may appear such as social stigma associated with mental illness, lack of skilled staff, and budget constraints, which are especially important for SMEs.

Keywords: Employee Wellness, Mental Health, HR Strategies, Employee Assistance Programme, Workplace Well-being, Psychological Safety, Burnout, Stigma.

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been several recent changes in how individuals operate at work. As a result of globalization, technological advancements, and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, mental health in the workspace has gained attention as an issue that cannot be ignored by organizations. Many workers suffered from stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression during the pandemic era. The situation did not improve even after the end of the pandemic; many individuals are still experiencing the same issues. It has resulted in making mental health a significant problem that needs to be addressed by HR personnel worldwide.

The financial impact of poor mental well-being is extremely high. According to WHO (2022), depression and anxiety disorders alone lead to a loss of productivity worth USD 1 trillion in the global economy annually. NMHS (2016) found out that around 150 million people needed mental well-being support in India. However, only fewer than 30 million visited psychiatrists. The factors leading to mental health disorders are quite many. Long working hours, excessive target pressure, unsatisfactory manager-worker relationship, and fear of losing jobs are some examples.

This is exactly where the HR department steps in. Over the years, the role of HR has expanded far beyond just hiring and paying salaries. Today, HR is expected to look after the full experience of an employee, including their mental and emotional health. India's Mental Healthcare Act 2017 has also made it a legal requirement for employers to ensure that employees are not discriminated against

because of mental health conditions. This paper explores the different ways in which HR contributes to employee wellness, what problems they face while doing so, and what more can be done to make workplaces truly healthier and more supportive.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many researchers and scholars have studied the connection between HR practices and employee wellness. Over the years, this has grown into a wide body of research that shows just how important HR is in promoting mental health at work.

One of the earliest and most important contributions to this area came from Lathan (2002), who talked about Positive Organisational Behaviour (POB). He said that when employees have qualities like hope, self-confidence, resilience, and optimism, it directly improves both their performance and their mental well-being. His work helped HR professionals understand that their job is not just about reducing problems like stress or absenteeism, but also about actively helping employees grow stronger and more positive. Building on this, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) developed the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model. This model says that job resources such as support from colleagues, feedback from managers, and the ability to make decisions, help protect employees from the harmful effects of job stress. HR-supported programmes are a key part of these resources.

In the Indian context, Srivastava and Kanpur (2014) did an important study across 200 manufacturing companies. They found that companies which had properly



documented HR wellness programmes had about 23% less absenteeism and 18% higher employee satisfaction compared to companies without such programmes. This study clearly showed that structured HR interventions make a real difference even in traditional Indian workplaces.

Danna and Griffin (1999) made the point that employee wellness is not just about one thing. It includes job satisfaction, overall life happiness, and physical health. They argued that HR wellness programmes must address all three of these areas together to be truly effective. Their framework has since been used widely to design better Employee Wellness Programmes around the world.

More recently, Moeller, Wallace, and Marchetti (2018) highlighted how important line managers are for employee mental health. They found that when managers are trained by HR in basic mental health awareness and first aid, employees are much more likely to come forward and ask for help. This shows that training managers should be a high priority for HR departments.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new urgency to all of this. Kniffin et al. (2021) found that organisations that already had strong HR wellness systems in place were better able to handle the crisis. They could manage remote work, social isolation, and health-related stress more effectively than companies that had not invested in wellness earlier. All of this literature together shows that mental health cannot be treated as something optional by HR. It must be a central part of how HR functions.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the specific role played by HR departments in designing and running employee wellness and mental health programmes in different types of organisations.
- To identify and evaluate the key HR strategies that help promote mental health at the workplace, including both traditional and newer approaches.
- To suggest practical recommendations that can help HR departments build healthier and more supportive work environments.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is completely based on secondary data. The research method used is descriptive and analytical. The reason for choosing secondary data is that the main aim of this paper is to review and analyse what is already known about HR's role in employee wellness, rather than to collect new data through surveys or interviews.

Data was collected from a variety of sources including peer-reviewed journal articles from databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate; books and

publications in the fields of HRM and occupational health psychology; reports from government bodies like the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the World Health Organization (WHO), and NIMHANS; annual reports of leading Indian and global companies; and guidelines from professional bodies like SHRM and CIPD.

The study focuses on literature published between 2000 and 2024, with more attention given to post-2015 publications so that the most current trends are included. The method used to analyse all this information is content analysis, where key themes and patterns related to HR and mental health were identified and discussed in detail. This approach makes it possible to draw broader conclusions that can apply to many different types of organisations and work settings.

V. HR'S ROLE IN EMPLOYEE WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

5.1 Making Wellness Policies and Planning Strategically

One of the most basic but often overlooked things HR does is create formal written policies around mental health and wellness. Having these policies is important for two reasons. First, it shows employees that the organisation actually cares about their well-being. Second, it gives everyone, including managers and HR staff, a clear set of rules and standards to follow when dealing with mental health issues.

HR departments are responsible for writing these policies, making sure they comply with laws like India's Mental Healthcare Act 2017, setting clear anti-stigma rules, and connecting wellness goals with the wider goals of the business. According to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2020), organisations with formal mental health policies are about 2.5 times more likely to report positive employee well-being outcomes compared to those without any policy. This shows that having the right policy in place is a necessary first step. Without it, wellness programmes can easily get deprioritised when the company faces budget or operational pressure, and employees may not trust that their personal information will be handled carefully.

5.2 Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)

Employee Assistance Programmes, commonly known as EAPs, are one of the most well-known and widely used HR tools for supporting employee mental health. These are confidential programmes paid for by the employer that give employees access to counselling, mental health support, financial advice, and legal guidance, usually without any direct cost to the employee. HR is generally responsible for selecting and hiring EAP providers, deciding on the services to be included, communicating these services to all employees, and evaluating how well the programme is working.



Research strongly supports the value of EAPs. Attridge (2008) found that for every rupee invested in a well-run EAP, the organisation gets back between 3 and 5 rupees in savings through lower absenteeism, higher productivity, and reduced healthcare costs. Despite such clear benefits, EAP usage rates often remain low in many organisations. This usually happens because employees either do not know the programme exists, or they are worried that using it might be seen as a sign of weakness or might affect their job. This makes it very important for HR to communicate clearly and regularly about EAPs, and to ensure that employees feel completely safe about using them.

5.3 Flexible Work Arrangements

Offering flexible work options is one of the most practical and cost-effective ways HR can help reduce work stress. These options include working from home, hybrid work schedules, compressed workweeks where employees work longer hours on fewer days, flexible start and end times, job sharing, and extended leave for parents or caregivers. HR teams are responsible for creating the rules and guidelines that govern how these policies work in the organisation.

Research by the Association for Psychological Science (2021) found that employees who have access to flexible schedules report around 25% lower stress levels compared to those working in rigid, fixed-time environments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations that had already set up flexible work systems were much better at maintaining both employee mental health and business productivity. This shows that it is important to have these systems ready in advance, rather than trying to build them during a crisis.

However, flexible work is not without its complications. When employees work from home, the line between work and personal life can easily blur, which can actually increase stress and reduce rest. HR therefore also needs to give clear guidance on working hours, communication expectations, and the importance of switching off from work during personal time. Flexibility must be supported by clear boundaries to truly help employees.

5.4 Mental Health Awareness and Training Programmes

One of the most long-lasting things HR can do for employee mental health is to provide training in mental health awareness. This means teaching both managers and employees how to recognise signs of mental distress, understand common mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, and respond in a helpful and sensitive way. HR organises workshops on stress management, programmes to build resilience, mindfulness sessions, and other related activities. Training managers is especially important because they are usually the first ones to notice if an employee is struggling.

A study by Mind (2020), a leading mental health charity in the UK, found that 56% of managers said they would feel more confident in helping employees with mental health issues if they had been properly trained. This is a significant gap that HR can close by offering Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) certification programmes. These programmes train selected employees from all levels of the organisation to provide initial support to colleagues who appear to be in distress, and to guide them towards professional help when needed.

In the Indian context, awareness training is particularly important because there is still a lot of stigma around mental health in society. Many employees are ashamed to admit they are struggling, fearing judgment from colleagues or managers. HR-led awareness campaigns can help shift this mindset over time, creating a culture where talking about mental health is normalised and not seen as a sign of weakness.

5.5 Building Psychological Safety and an Inclusive Culture

Beyond specific programmes, the most important and lasting thing HR can do for employee mental health is to build a workplace culture where people feel psychologically safe. The concept of psychological safety was developed extensively by researcher Amy Edmondson. It refers to a shared belief within a team that it is safe to speak up, ask questions, make mistakes, share personal struggles, and ask for help without the fear of being judged, punished, or embarrassed.

HR creates this kind of culture through several types of initiatives. These include strong anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies; diversity, equity, and inclusion programmes that make all employees feel valued and respected; anonymous feedback mechanisms so employees can raise concerns without fear; open-door policies at senior leadership levels; and leadership development programmes that help managers become more empathetic and emotionally intelligent in their dealings with team members.

The importance of psychological safety was shown very clearly by Google's famous Project Aristotle research in 2012. This research found that psychological safety was the single most important factor in determining whether a team performed well, more important even than the skills or talent of individual team members. This finding confirms that HR's role in building the right culture is not just a soft or secondary concern, but a core driver of both human well-being and business performance.

5.6 Performance Management and Job Redesign

The way an organisation manages employee performance has a direct and significant impact on mental health. Performance management systems that set realistic goals, provide regular and constructive feedback, use transparent



evaluation methods, and recognise and reward good work, create an environment where employees can work hard without constantly worrying about failure. On the other hand, systems that set impossible targets, use unclear or biased appraisal methods, and respond to poor performance only with punishment, are a major source of stress and burnout in the workplace.

Related to this is the concept of job redesign, which is another HR intervention that can make a big difference. Karasek's Demand-Control Model from 1979 explained that the combination of very high job demands with very little control or decision-making power over one's own work is the main cause of occupational stress. HR can tackle this by working with managers to redesign roles in ways that better match the demands of the job to the abilities of the employee, giving employees more autonomy over how they do their work, and making sure that workloads are fairly distributed across teams so that no single person is consistently overloaded.

5.7 Digital Wellness Tools and HR Technology

In recent years, many HR departments have started using technology to support employee mental health in new and scalable ways. A growing range of digital tools is now available, including smartphone wellness apps, AI-powered mental health chatbots, virtual counselling platforms where employees can speak to licensed therapists from their homes, and digital pulse surveys that allow HR teams to check in on how employees are feeling on a regular and frequent basis.

Well-known platforms like Headspace for Work, Calm Business, and Wysa have been adopted by many companies in their wellness programmes. These digital tools offer several important advantages. They can reach employees anywhere, including those working remotely or in different locations. They can be accessed privately and anonymously, which removes the stigma barrier that stops many people from seeking face-to-face help. And they generate useful data that HR can use to better understand the needs of the workforce, target support where it is most needed, and demonstrate to senior management that wellness investments are actually working.

VI. CHALLENGES IN HR-LED WELLNESS INITIATIVES

Even though there has been a lot of progress in the area of workplace mental health, HR professionals still face many serious challenges when trying to design and deliver effective wellness programmes. Some of these challenges are cultural, some are structural, and some are related to limited resources.

6.1 Social Stigma Around Mental Health

One of the biggest barriers to HR wellness programmes in India is the strong social stigma that still exists around

mental health. In many Indian families and communities, admitting to mental health struggles is seen as a sign of personal weakness or failure. This makes employees very reluctant to use EAPs, attend counselling sessions, or even participate in wellness workshops, because they are afraid of being judged or labelled. HR teams need to do ongoing awareness work to slowly break down this stigma, but it is a long and difficult process that cannot be solved overnight.

6.2 Lack of Trained Professionals

India faces a severe shortage of qualified mental health professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and trained counsellors. According to WHO data, India has fewer than 1 mental health professional for every 100,000 people, which is far below the recommended level. This shortage means that even when HR departments want to set up effective EAPs or counselling services, they often struggle to find and retain qualified professionals to actually deliver these services. This is a particularly serious problem for smaller companies that cannot afford to pay high fees for private counselling providers.

6.3 Budgetary Constraints, Especially in Small and Medium Enterprises

Many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in India simply do not have the financial resources to invest in proper wellness programmes. Unlike large corporations with dedicated HR budgets, SMEs often have to make difficult choices about where to spend money, and wellness initiatives are frequently deprioritised when funds are limited. This means that a large portion of the Indian workforce, which is employed in the SME sector, does not have access to even basic mental health support at work.

6.4 Resistance from Senior Management

In many organisations, senior leaders still see employee wellness programmes as unnecessary expenses rather than valuable investments. When HR professionals try to argue for budget allocations for mental health initiatives, they often face pushback from senior management who do not see an immediate connection between wellness spending and business outcomes. This makes it very important for HR to collect and present data that clearly shows the return on investment from wellness programmes, including reductions in absenteeism, lower employee turnover, and improvements in productivity.

6.5 One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Another challenge is that many organisations design wellness programmes without actually understanding the specific needs of their employees. A generic programme that offers the same yoga sessions or mindfulness workshops to everyone may not be relevant or helpful for all types of workers. Frontline workers, remote employees, people from different cultural backgrounds, and employees going through specific life challenges like caregiving responsibilities or financial difficulties, all have different



needs. HR must make the effort to conduct regular needs assessments and design programmes that are truly tailored to their workforce.

VII. CASE STUDIES: HR WELLNESS PRACTICES IN ACTION

7.1 Infosys, India

Infosys, one of India's largest IT companies, has developed a comprehensive employee wellness programme that covers physical health, mental health, and financial well-being. The company offers free counselling services through a confidential platform, organises regular mental health awareness campaigns, and provides its managers with training in emotional intelligence and mental health first aid. Infosys also uses digital tools to conduct regular pulse surveys that help HR understand the emotional state of their large and geographically distributed workforce. These efforts have helped Infosys maintain relatively lower attrition rates and higher employee satisfaction levels compared to many of its competitors in the sector.

7.2 Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), India

TCS has taken a strong approach to employee mental health as part of its broader HR strategy. The company launched a dedicated mental health initiative that provides employees and their family members with access to professional counselling, online mental health resources, and peer support groups. TCS also has a clear and publicly communicated policy on preventing workplace harassment and bullying, which contributes to a safer psychological environment for its employees. The company's focus on work-life balance and flexible working arrangements has also been widely recognised as a factor in its consistently high scores on employee engagement surveys.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of literature, the challenges identified, and the case studies discussed, the following recommendations can be made for strengthening HR's role in employee wellness and mental health:

- Mental health should be made a core part of HR strategy and not treated as a low priority or optional activity. Senior leaders must be educated about the business benefits of investing in employee wellness.
- HR departments should conduct proper needs assessments before designing wellness programmes, so that the programmes are actually relevant to the specific needs of their employees rather than being generic or one-size-fits-all.
- Anti-stigma awareness campaigns must be run on a regular basis, especially in Indian organisations, to gradually change attitudes towards mental health and encourage employees to seek help when they need it.

- Line managers should be given proper training in basic mental health literacy and Mental Health First Aid so that they are equipped to support their team members and recognise when someone needs professional help.
- HR should leverage technology and digital platforms to increase the reach and accessibility of mental health support, especially for remote workers, employees in smaller branches, and those who are hesitant to seek face-to-face help.
- The government should consider providing financial incentives or subsidies to help SMEs set up basic wellness programmes, so that employees in smaller companies are not left without support.
- Organisations should track and regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their wellness programmes using clear metrics like absenteeism rates, employee engagement scores, and EAP utilisation rates, and use this data to continuously improve.

IX. CONCLUSION

Employee mental health is no longer a topic that organisations can afford to treat as secondary or optional. The pressures of modern work, the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growing awareness of mental health issues globally have all made it essential for HR departments to take this responsibility seriously. As this paper has shown, HR plays a central and multi-faceted role in supporting employee wellness, through policy formulation, Employee Assistance Programmes, flexible work arrangements, awareness training, psychological safety initiatives, performance management reforms, and digital wellness tools.

At the same time, significant challenges remain, particularly in the Indian context, where social stigma, shortage of professionals, and budget constraints continue to hold back progress. Addressing these challenges will require a combination of stronger HR strategies, senior leadership support, government involvement, and a gradual but consistent effort to change workplace culture.

The organisations that have already taken mental health seriously, like Infosys, TCS, and Google, are proof that investing in employee well-being delivers real and measurable benefits, from lower absenteeism and higher retention to stronger productivity and better overall performance. The evidence is clear: organisations that take care of their people are also the ones that perform best in the long run. It is time for all organisations, large and small, to make employee mental health a genuine priority and to give HR the support and resources needed to make a real difference.



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