



Episode 5 – Wellbeing, Now and in The Future

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SPEAKER 1: You're listening to Talking Heads, a Willis Towers Watson podcast series featuring interviews with senior leaders on the most pressing human capital and benefit related topics.

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TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Hello, welcome to the latest edition of our Talking Heads podcast. My name is Tom Wooldridge. And today, I'm very pleased to be joined remotely by my colleagues Lou Harris, who's the senior director in our talent line of business and a specialist in employee wellbeing.

LOU HARRIS: Hi, Tom.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Hi, Lou. We've also got Laura Atkinson, who leads the creation of one of our emerging wellbeing propositions in the UK.

LAURA ATKINSON: Hi. Hi, everyone.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: And finally, joined by Thomas Lassetter, who advises a number of global financial and professional services clients on their wellbeing strategies.

THOMAS LASSETTER: Hi.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Hi, Thomas. So in today's discussion, we're going to be talking about some of the immediate priorities in 2021 for any HR professional with a responsibility or interest in the wellbeing of their colleagues. But given that we're recording this very early in lockdown 3, I want to start by asking how each of you are doing and how you're all coping in the current environment. So Lou, how are you doing?

LOU HARRIS: Yeah, I mean, yeah, fresh back from the Christmas break and straight into another lockdown. And not feeling too bad, actually. I think we've done this before. We can do it again. There is end in sight with the vaccine. So trying to just keep putting one step in front of the other and get on with it, really.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Good, glad to hear a nice positive message there. And Laura, are you OK?

LAURA ATKINSON: It has been tough, hasn't it? I think what I really value, though, the past year is actually starting to answer that question more truthfully with colleagues and even actually clients. I've definitely noticed that people really are trying to acknowledge how they're actually feeling without the need to necessarily justify it. And so I often find myself saying how I'm feeling, and then following it up with, yes, but they will always be people who are worse off than you are.

So I think it's important to recognize that your feelings are nonetheless really valid. And so to answer that question truthfully, and OK, but finding it a bit tough to, be honest.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Yes, it's definitely the end of the English throwaway comment of I'm doing fine. How about you, Thomas?

THOMAS LASSETTER: Yeah, I guess I completely echo what Laura is saying, but also exhausted for another reason, because I set definitely way too many New Year's resolutions. And I'm at day six now or seven and starting to feel it in my legs and every part of my body. So two sets of exhaustion going, but still going.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: I'm surprised you haven't just canceled them all.

THOMAS LASSETTER: Yeah, that's next week.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Right. Thanks, guys. So the first question we wanted to cover today is, what do you guys feel that we've learned from the initial phases of the pandemic from back last year that are particularly important as we approach the next six months from a HR perspective? And Laura, I'll start with you on this one.

LAURA ATKINSON: Yeah, thanks, Tom. So I think wellbeing has really been pushed to the forefront of a lot of company's agendas over the past year understandably given what's going on in the world. I think what's really interesting from a wellbeing expert perspective is actually the increasing importance and understanding around social wellbeing. So when we at Willis Towers Watson talk about wellbeing, we often reference four pillars.

And so we talk a lot about emotional wellbeing, and that's all around your mental health. We talk about physical wellbeing, which is all around eating it by the day. And joining Joe Wick's when you get a moment at financial wellbeing, which is making sure that you feel in control of all of your finances. But then we've also got that fourth pillar around, social wellbeing. And I think in the past, clients I've spoken to really get the first three emotional, physical, and financial, and have in place fantastic offerings for their employees in these areas.

But that final one, social wellbeing, I think, is always a bit more abstract for people. But I think the past year has really shone a light on the impacts of negative social wellbeing that come from social isolation that we've all experienced aspects of ourselves this year. And you know what, this isn't really very surprising. So a lot of the research that we've done shows that social wellbeing is often the final pillar to impact people. And I'm sure we've all heard the phrase that the work's hard, the pay's awful, but it's the team that I stay for and I work hard for. And I'm sure some of us have used that exact phrase ourselves.

But the past year, we haven't necessarily felt that great team around us in quite the same way that we would have done ordinarily. And I think that support system is really, really important for wellbeing and also, from a company perspective, people's productivity levels. So I think it's brought social wellbeing more to the forefront and made it feel a lot more tangible for the clients. And in terms of addressing social wellbeing for our clients, that's all around the company culture, how you're emulating that in the virtual world, which is really tough, and also about how you can continue to build and improve your employee networks to make sure that people in your organization have that support network and are actually feeding it as well and benefiting from it.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks, Laura. It's really interesting to hear some tangible examples on how you support social wellbeing. So now, it's one that had our clients often struggle with an organizational level to add to support. So thank you for that. And Lou, how about yourself? What have you learned from the initial phases of the pandemic?

LOU HARRIS: Yeah. Just thinking about what Laura's just said around social wellbeing. I guess from my point of view, just thinking about the impact on organizations and particularly around leaders and the different skills and attributes that they've had to really, really dial up in order to support the organization to keep functioning and to support the teams and the people within their teams, so that they really are supporting people through these really challenging times.

And I think as a leader myself within the business, you've really got to rethink the types of skills that people want you to demonstrate. And some of these things really come from the actions that we take, from the culture that the organization is presenting to employees, and really being able to show that in an authentic way to people so-- we have people in our teams where child care has been a real issue because of the closure of schools.

So being really empathetic to those parents in our organizations and really understanding that you can't actually work sometimes when you've got a three or four-year-old who wants attention. That's a very, very challenging situation to be in.

And the never-ending kind of a tidal wave of change that the government have introduced, and having to react to that, and the way that leaders are having to kind of adapt to that have been so important to help organizations succeed through This and as we go into this third lockdown, that will continue. And I think the learnings that we have from the early part of the pandemic, we can really apply that now as we move forward into 2021.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Brilliant. Thank you, Lou. Thomas, did you have anything to add in terms of what you've learned from the initial phases of the pandemic?

THOMAS LASSETTER: Yeah. I guess it kind of ties really to what Laura and Lou have touched on at the moment. And it's really been that key role that managers had to play and play in a way that they've never-- we've never really seen them before or many organizations might not have utilized them in that way before.

And it's really forming that kind of connection between the company and the employee, and being that key middle step to deliver messages, but also to provide that support system that has kind of been lost through that lack of the team being around them and really becoming a vital source of the business to hear what employees are thinking and feeling in need, but then

also taking that back to employees and delivering the resources and the tools that the company has available, and helping employees really navigate that in a way that they've not necessarily done before.

And doing that all at the same time with empathy and emotional intelligence and really being able to listen and hear and respond in the appropriate way-- and I mean, I'm quite fortunate that I have quite a good relationship with my manager. But that's not the case that we see in all organizations. And sometimes, it can be quite a transactional relationship. And that's really had to change this year.

So I think kind of the biggest learning is really focusing on managers as a real resource and utilizing them and equipping them with those emotional intelligence skills and toolkits and resources that allow them to navigate the organization and an employee's kind of wants and needs, and connect the two.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: And that's the critical point, isn't it, around actually equipping managers with the skills and the tools in order to be effective in their role? Because they can't just do this organically or without being actually taught or given the resources they need to deliver that role effectively. OK. Thanks, guys.

And our next question is focused at more forward-looking. So looking ahead, what do you see as the biggest opportunities to support employee wellbeing in the year 2021? And how can employees support their employees to be more resilient? And Lou, if it's OK, I'll start with you first on this one.

LOU HARRIS: Yeah, sure. Thanks, Tom. And I mean, I guess, being really focused on the continuation of the good things that have been put in place last year will be really important. Every organization has learned something from that experience and has kind of adapted and been able to put certain things in place that they know will be working. And what I would kind of encourage is that you kind of use the things from those learnings that really make a difference, and listen to employees, and find out what they think of the things that are making the difference to them. There's nothing like hearing from employees to understand what's going on from their perspective and adapting in that way.

And I think we're obviously at the start of a new financial year for many organizations. January is often the start of that. And one of the things employees will be thinking about is, how does my performance impact the organization? How can I bring the best that I can be into the organization with all of these challenges around me? And so just thinking about that broader context and how the wellbeing agenda will support people in that, so that the organization is performing at the best that it can from a success point of view.

And then I think really closely linked to that is just the consideration about where work gets done and the flexibility that people now need. And there's an organization that I work with that had a very traditional approach to work in that pre-pandemic and pre-remote working. They really did not support working from home. And this has been a material shift in the approach for them. And actually, the employees really like it they really see the benefit of it. They don't really want to go back into a five-day week in the office.

So the thought of having to do that for those types of employees is quite daunting because they've obviously kind of reassessed their work-life balance. So I think employers really need

to think about taking employees with them through that thought process and getting their insight and their input so that employees' wellbeing is front and center to enable the organization to keep performing and keep being resilient through 2021.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks, Lou. Yeah, they'll certainly be aspects of the experience of work over the past 10, 12 months now that they will look to retain going forward. So that's really interesting insight. Thomas, do you want to talk about what you see as the biggest opportunities to support employee wellbeing?

THOMAS LASSETTER: Yeah, of course. I think for me, it's really about helping employees navigate that change in spending and that's personal spending and budgets, et cetera, but also kind of broader budgets, thinking about the economy as a whole and how daunting that can be. But if we think about it from how organizations can support employees from a personal finances perspective, especially now as we kind of swing back and forth on things, being open, things being close, going into the office, going out of the office, the way we spend our money on a day to day, weekly, monthly basis is continuously changing.

And that's really hard to budget for. And I mean, speaking personally, I don't know whether I can go shopping or can't go shopping. I don't know where that's going to come from or where I'm going to be spending each month.

And we partner with a professional services organization at the beginning of the pandemic to help produce an infographic and articles around how employees could look to reframe what they had previously been spending and see where there could be potential opportunities for saving and just really equipping employees with those tools to be able to reflect on what your budgets are and how that changes, but also kind of helping people get into the practice and routine of a budget is something that will change, and it has got to be able to ride those waves. So you should pay attention to that on a continuous basis.

And then more broadly, naturally there's going to be some uncertainty now about how are we going to pay back all of the government debt that's been built up from furlough schemes, what's going to be happening on an organizational basis from redundancies and restructuring, et cetera, that naturally will feel quite worrying.

And we've seen organizations starting to lean towards actually providing financial kind of information resources or support or connecting them, at least, to support that's already available to help them plan for potential redundancies and what might be happening. And really thinking about if that is something as an organization that you might be looking at or going through, how can you support people that might have an impact from that?

So it's caring for your employees both while they're with you. but then thinking about if there is going to be an economic downturn as a result, how can we still continue support beyond them being with us?

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks, Thomas. Really interesting stuff. It's reassuring, I guess, to hear that you're working with clients on financial wellbeing support and not just in context of some of the difficult messages you've mentioned but also supporting existing employees around their current life stage and some of the challenges that they're going through at the moment. Laura, what about yourself? What do you see as the opportunities in supporting employee wellbeing this year?

LAURA ATKINSON: Yeah. Thanks, Tom. I think back to what organizations have already done over the last year or so and what they can continue to do going into next year, I think the theme of flexibility really resonates. So I think over the past-- gosh, it's coming up the 12 months really, isn't it? Since the start of this pandemic that everyone has needed to be flexible. Organizations have needed to be flexible in the way that they've got things done. And that flexibility has transcended down to individuals needing to flex up that day and just do that.

And I think going forward, there's an opportunity for organizations where they can, say, to keep some of that flexibility because I think a lot of that flexibility has enabled some really positive changes. Lou touched earlier on the fact that organizations have had to bring in flexible working because it's just not been an option for many people to be able to work in the office. And that does have a positive.

For many people, it's really been about [INAUDIBLE] them to how they can spend their day. Obviously, with the current lockdown, it's very tricky, especially working parents who are having to juggle childcare. But I think there is a long-term opportunity for organizations who maybe didn't offer flexible working before to now continue to offer that in the future. And the benefit that could have an empowering diverse workforce is definitely a real strength the organizations to capitalize on.

And then I think another aspect of flexibility is also in the benefits arrangements that organizations can offer. So a lot of the clients that I work with still very much work on a flex window premise, where they ask their employees to sign up on an annual basis to the benefits available to them. There's an opportunity to change that. And I know a lot of clients are moving towards any time benefits that do give employees that flexibility back.

So for example, one client that I work with has opened up their pension contributions for the whole year. So that means that members can flex up or flex down their contributions when they can. And that provides great financial flexibility for people, especially in these uncertain times when actually people do need money now. And they do need to react to what's going on.

So I think there's a lot of opportunities there for the organizations to take some of the changes that they've had to do that maybe they would have found difficult to build a business case for in the past that just needed to be done up for necessity and actually bring those forward and repositioning them actually as benefits for employees going forward.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks, Laura. And critically, I guess, not just making those design changes and tweaks but actively communicating with employees to make sure that they're aware of the adjustments that they're making to support employees. And I know I'm personally excited about the opportunities that will come from our flexible benefits perspective when the economy is eventually reopened and we move back into society and all of the kind of lifestyle benefits suddenly become much more appealing. And there's a real engagement opportunity there when talking about flexible benefits to remind people of what is available from an organization that currently is probably not valued or certainly can't be used.

LAURA ATKINSON: Yeah, definitely. And I'm dreaming of that day.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: OK. So we've just got one more question, I think, for today's podcast, which is thinking about some of the guys that there will be listening to this podcast and who are planning for their activities over the course of the next few months of the year, what would you encourage those with responsibility for the wellbeing of their employees to be doing in these first few months? What should be at the top of their to-do list? Thomas, if I come to you first on that one?

THOMAS LASSETTER: Yeah, of course. I think on the top of to-do list really is connecting with your employee networks and mobilizing them. I think one of the things that we saw last year was a real success and real role that I&D and employee networks played throughout the pandemic to help connect people and touch on those that social wellbeing element that we thought of before. And there's many people with particularly marginalized groups within organizations that do really feel isolation a lot harder than others.

And your employee networks are a really valuable resource to bring people together to bring that social wellbeing out. But also, there are really great way to stay connected with your employees and hear what's going on, hear about those individual issues, and then be able to tailor your wellbeing approach as you go based on what you're hearing from. From whether it's your female networks, whether it's your LGBT plus networks, or whether that's your multicultural networks as well, they all have an individual voice that can help make sure that your wellbeing-- the wellbeing propositions or initiatives that you put in place a representative of what people need. And they can help deliver those as well.

Particularly, with our own LGBT plus network here at Willis Towers Watson, immediately when we went into lockdown first time round, we had to mobilize in a digital way and move everything online. That involved running our Pride celebrations online, but also our ally training and how we get that out to people.

And what it meant was we were actually able to connect with people in more of our remote offices that quite often feel excluded and feel that London is a central hub and that they can't connect to some of the events as they have before. And it's meant that we've had greater attendance. We've been able to train allies in more and our broader offices, but also had an increased uptake in people joining the network itself.

So really, mobilizing your employee networks and making sure they're involved in the conversation will help drive that social wellbeing, but also support an I&D agenda, which really does underpin and run alongside any employee wellbeing that you're looking at to make sure that it's really representative and serving the needs of all. But aside from your networks, to lose the point-- at the top of today's podcast was around the importance of leadership and that empathy.

We've seen that leadership endorsed messaging really is able to connect with employees a lot more and drive really effective results for the uptake and the promotion of wellbeing programs. So now that we know that that's a key channel-- and you may have seen it yourselves with whether any leadership messaging has gone out, and you've had particular success-- continue to tap into that, where it is kind of the appropriate channel to use and really can engage an audience. It should still be something that we continue to look at and utilize

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks, Thomas. That's really interesting on your point around mobilizing employee networks. I know that a lot of clients have seen a huge take-up in participation in their employee networks. And a lot of clients have talked about how they've pooled resources and worked across borders and boundaries that were previously in place in the physical work environment. So great, great advice there. Laura, so what would you be doing to support the wellbeing of employees in the next few months of the year?

LAURA ATKINSON: Yes, definitely. Thanks, Tom. And so I think for me, it's really about continuing developing our digital strategy. So Thomas alluded the fact that a lot of organizations obviously have already had to move completely online because that's, for a lot of people, being the only option to be able to keep working. But I think there is an opportunity here long-term for organizations to really develop that digitalization of their wellbeing communications.

So whether that's making any current resources that you have available that are maybe hiding somewhere on the internet more accessible to employees. Or maybe it's the fact that those resources are actually currently anywhere available digitally, and you need to start from scratch, really needing to focus on that to improve the accessibility of those resources for your employees.

The benefit of meeting digitalization is that we can really improve the data that we get from moving to digital platforms and using that to understand and gain insights around what employees are interacting with, where their needs are. Lou mentioned a couple of questions ago around the need to really engage your employees in conversation of finding out what they need and moving in this space everybody has their digital footprints that you can be monitoring to make sure that you're really delivering what it is your employees need.

So the other thing, just touching on what Thomas has said as well, is that by moving a lot of webinars into that digital medium helps people feel a bit more anonymous and a bit more comfortable, therefore, to ask questions that they maybe may have felt uncomfortable asking in the physical environment, such as around financial wellbeing.

We've had a number of clients run digital webinars this year and seen that a great number of questions being asked in the chat and are much more engaging conversation because of that. So while we may all feel a bit isolated and a bit drained from being on teams all day, it definitely does have benefits to it. And we should be really tapping into what those benefits are and utilizing them to really help people and support them through their wellbeing.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: [INAUDIBLE]. And we've seen-- I've worked with an organization in the financial services sector. And we ran a near identical seminar on pensions last year and this year, so web-based. And the difference in takeup and as you say, the people's willingness to come forward and engage over that forum has just transformed over the last two months. So you should fully be taking advantage of that wherever possible. And Lou, lastly, if I come to you what should be top on to-do list of HR practitioners in the employee wellbeing space?

LOU HARRIS: Yeah, sure. I mean, I guess, it's-- what is it, the [INAUDIBLE] of January to do while we're recording this podcast. And in the UK, we're two or three days into the start of the working year. And in terms of things to do in the first two or three months, if leaders and line managers and HR professionals haven't yet worked out what they want to communicate, then there should be this week something going out, at least, from the senior leadership team

to welcome people back and recognize that we are in the lockdown. And that it is going to continue.

But I think in terms of the kind of communication and the learnings that we've had from the previous nine months or so, it's just so important to make sure that the authenticity is really, really, really genuine. And I really do think that leaders and people that are producing communications have really learnt that from the interactions that they've had so far.

But really also linking that to the business agenda because at the end of the day, we're all individuals, we're employed by our companies, and we want to do a good job, and we want to connect and we want to perform well for the people that we're working for. So more and more authenticity, continued authenticity around those communications would really, really make a difference to people's wellbeing but also to business performance.

So I think, for me, that would be the headline. If you're going to do anything in the next two or three months, makes sure you got really clear communication strategy in place. And that those communications are being really thought through from a genuine point of view, an authentic point of view.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: So as with everything affected by coronavirus, we could talk forever on this subject of employee wellbeing. But if you are interested in continuing the conversation, then details of all of our speakers will be available in the Willis Towers Watson website. So bringing today's conversation to an end, I just want to say a huge thank you to Lou Harris.

LOU HARRIS: Thank you, Tom. And thank you for listening, everybody. I hope that we shed some really great insight.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks, Lou, and to Laura Atkinson.

LAURA ATKINSON: Yeah. Thanks, Tom. Thanks, everyone.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: And Thomas Lassetter.

THOMAS LASSETTER: Yes. Thank you all and thanks for having us.

TOM WOOLDRIDGE: Great. Thank you very much for listening. Goodbye.

SPEAKER 1: Thank you for listening to this edition of Talking Heads. For more information, visit our insights page on willistowerswatson.com.