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A good corporate culture is a prerequisite for job satisfaction

ELIPLIFE ECHO - A SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH COMPANY REPRESENTATIVES ON CORE TOPICS FROM THE KTG AND UVG ECOSYSTEM

echo interview with Reto Ebnöther, Head of Health and Benefits, WTW (Willis Towers Watson) Switzerland

eliplife echo: In its 2023 Benefits Trends Survey, WTW examined current benefit strategies. A total of 85 companies in Switzerland took part in the survey. What are the key findings?

Reto Ebnöther: Companies see “talent attraction” as their greatest challenge. Benefits packages are therefore becoming a decisive element in the race for new talent. Secondly, the current geopolitical and economic challenges are causing significant cost pressure. A company therefore has to think carefully about which benefits it wishes to invest in. Thirdly, companies cited the “employee experience” as their greatest internal challenge. The question here is how to structure and communicate the “employee value proposition” so that employees are and remain satisfied.

Benefits were originally limited to fringe benefits. Today the term is perceived much more comprehensively. What does WTW consider to be the most important benefits?

Traditional benefits such as pension fund benefits are still very important. However, today's benefits also include various holiday benefits (such as extended paternity leave, holiday purchase), mobility offers and further training opportunities. And then there are corporate culture aspects such as wellbeing packages. With offers such as these, companies show that

they are interested in their employees, that they listen to their needs and support them - in short, that they care for them.

Benefits are intended to promote the physical and mental health of employees and increase general wellbeing. However, only 45% of the companies surveyed consider benefit measures effective in this context. Why is this?

Companies are aware that they still have room for improvement in their efforts. As a result, they are cautious about self-assessments. Benefits also cover a broad field, such as the aforementioned wellbeing. WTW takes a holistic approach when discussing wellbeing. We distinguish four dimensions of wellbeing: the physical, the emotional, the social and the financial. It is difficult to prioritise correctly in such a wide area. Companies tend to do nothing rather than risk doing the wrong thing. An analysis of employees' weaknesses and needs would be a good start here. Once this first step has been taken, the rest often develops by itself.

Companies can use benefit strategies to support the mental health development of employees. Have companies exhausted this potential?

Certainly not. Surveys consistently show that employees would like more support. The subject of mental health is complex. Absences due to mental illness have been on the rise for years, and Covid has exacerbated this further. From a corporate perspective, the focus here is on promoting resilience. Listening to and supporting employees, giving them a sense of security and breaking certain taboos. Raising awareness amongst managers is also important, as is creating a good communication culture based on trust. Only then will people consider approaching their line managers if something is wrong.



The corporate culture plays a major role in connection with mental health. What insights have you gained in this regard from the survey?

US economist Peter Drucker once said "Culture eats strategy for breakfast". This does not mean that a company does not need a strategy. But the best strategy is useless if the corporate culture is poor. A healthy corporate culture is a prerequisite for job satisfaction. Our survey showed that in view of the shortage of skilled workers, attracting new talent is the greatest challenge. A company must therefore be able to offer something to people on the labour market. Employees now no longer apply for jobs at companies, but companies apply for employees. A convincing benefits strategy is also important in this respect.

What preventative measures do companies focus on in connection with mental health problems?

Many companies have employee assistance programmes, a kind of company-independent hotline that employees can contact. Some also offer workshops, for example in collaboration with their insurer. For many companies, however, this is already all they do. In our consulting practice, we often find that too little attention is paid to prevention and an empathetic management style.

What is preventing employers from focusing more on occupational health management?

Money certainly plays a role, because the cost-benefit analysis is not trivial. I cannot invest CHF 100 000 in occupational health management today and get CHF 150 000 back in three years. However, the connections are undisputed: physically and mentally healthy employees are more engaged, perform better and are less frequently absent. Our surveys also show that they are more loyal as well.



How important are self-management and individual responsibility on the part of employees?

Very important, but there are many practical difficulties. If a company offers a running group, those who otherwise normally go jogging will join the group. If it offers a resilience workshop or burn-out prevention, those who are already working on the subject will take part. Breaking this pattern is difficult and can only happen through the corporate culture. We need multipliers, real networks of ambassadors, and the topics need to be included in the employee objectives and those of managers.

Do we need to speak of a mental health crisis today? According to the Health Observatory, more than 500 000 people in Switzerland received treatment in an outpatient psychiatric-psychotherapeutic practice in 2020.

The younger generation takes a different approach to mental health and is more open to discussing such issues with specialists than was the case 20 years ago. Not every person who visits a psychologist is immediately on the verge of depression or burn-out. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that mental health problems are a major challenge for our society. I know from my own experience with younger employees how important it is to take them seriously. That's why I seek dialogue and try to address any problems openly. We must not forget that the young generation grew up in a world where - to put it bluntly - there were hardly any problems. It was unable to have certain experiences. And today, young people are confronted with economic uncertainty and a war practically on their doorstep. Lack of experience with crisis situations quickly causes many people to lose their balance. Which brings me back to empathetic leadership. Companies must pass this quality on to their managers and facilitate appropriate further training.

Social trends are also shaping the workplace situation. Do politicians and authorities do enough to support companies or do you see a need for political action?

That's a good question. If there are legal requirements, there is a risk that companies will follow the checklist. They do what they have to do and then tick it off. As a rule, however, this falls short. Certain analyses could become mandatory, as in the case of equal pay. But that would only be the beginning. WTW recommends that companies that do not know where to start first to carry out a wellbeing diagnosis - a short survey of employees to determine in which of the four wellbeing areas mentioned the greatest risk factors exist. It will then quickly become clear where action needs to be taken. Regular analyses make it easy to measure changes and thus the success or failure of measures taken.



PERSONAL PROFILE

Reto Ebnöther

Head of Health & Benefits and Member of the Leadership Team of WTW Switzerland

Reto Ebnöther, born in 1976, has been in charge of the Health & Benefits business area at WTW Switzerland since December 2017. He completed his studies in business administration at the University of St. Gallen in 2002 and later went on to become an Associate in Risk Management and Chartered Insurance Broker. As Head of Health &

Benefits, Ebnöther advises companies on issues relating to (insurable and non-insurable) employee benefits. He has been concerned with the Swiss insurance industry for 20 years, always with a focus on employee benefits. A big sports and Australia fan, he grew up in Egg, Canton Zurich, and now lives in Stäfa, where he is also active as a footballer. He is married with three children.



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