



Organisational health,
the new competitive
advantage in a
post-COVID world

Organisational health, the new competitive advantage in a post-COVID world

Philip Chin, President Europe at Publicis Health, and Chair, European Association of Communications Agencies (EACA) Health Communications Council

Organisational health is a buzz term right now but this isn't a new topic. It existed long before the pandemic.

The idea that you can significantly improve organisational performance based on higher standards of employee wellbeing, innovation, learning and development, leadership, culture and upskilling has existed at least since the financial crisis of 2008.

Fallout from the 2008 meltdown led to many people losing their jobs, and prompted organisations to ask themselves how they could build more sustainable and productive relationships across their business to yield better results.

Post-COVID, we've reached a tipping point in the advertising industry, making this the ideal time for the EACA's Health Communications Council to explore the theme of organisational health in greater detail, provide some ideas to adapt and apply in people's own organisations. This will become increasingly vital when

competing in a market with others offering similar services. If you focus and innovate more on organisational health, you'll find that you become more competitive, and that you're able to attract better talent.

Recognising the increased role of leadership, and the necessity of having in place a cohesive senior team who trust each other, is particularly important here. Ahead of anything else, this team needs to agree on a unified reason why the organisation exists, its values, and they should communicate these clearly and often to the organisation.

Change is also needed in terms of listening to people's changing needs within an organisation, and adopting more flexible approaches in line with this. Caroline Howe, CEO of Ogilvy Health UK/EMEA, says: "Post-COVID, people are asking themselves more questions about what they're doing and why they're doing it. We've seen a shift in people's priorities and need for flexibility – we need to understand that better and we're on a journey of continuously listening."

Higher standards of wellbeing

One clear route towards achieving good organisational health is a strategic focus on wellbeing. This is a theme dear to the heart of Professor Sir Cary Cooper, 50th Anniversary Professor of Organisational Psychology & Health at Alliance MBS Manchester University, and author of defining research and books on the subject.

Building on this, he argues that in advertising, as elsewhere, there's a need for something more strategic with the appointments of directors of health and wellbeing that report right into the HR director, or even the CEO. Companies such as BP and Rolls-Royce were prominent early examples of organisations that took this approach.

Professor Cooper adds: "In the UK, this was formalised further with the launch of The National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work, run through Manchester University's Alliance Manchester Business School. We started with six or seven companies and institutions, and now 42 are involved – including the BBC, British Petroleum, British Telecom, John Lewis Partnership, Microsoft, NHS, Rolls-Royce, and the UK Civil Service. It's a big initiative, and involves people at C-suite level looking to make a difference."

"We've seen a lot of 'low-hanging fruit' approaches towards wellbeing"

Professor Sir Cary Cooper, Alliance MBS Manchester University

Professor Cooper believes that, since about 2015, we've seen a lot of "low-hanging fruit" approaches towards wellbeing: moves such as the employment of wellbeing champions, the hosting of wellbeing days, and an increased focus on mindfulness through employee assistance and counselling services.

Wellbeing in practice

But what can advertising businesses do to help improve their people's health and wellbeing? The number one driver, according to Professor Cooper, is the role of the line manager. He says: "If you have a good boss, your health and wellbeing is going to be great, your productivity are going to be good, your sickness and absence rates are going to be low."

challenging and demanding and, of course, it comes more naturally to some than others" explains Caroline Howe, Ogilvy Health. "So we're evolving the individual support we give to our line managers and also exploring additional ways of supporting our people."

Howe explains that Ogilvy has recently introduced Thrive Partners Coaching, which gives everyone in its business access to one-to-one coaching, across a range of topics in professional and personal development and support. Howe comments: "Coaching has often been reserved for more senior staff but it really needs to become more inclusive and readily available to everyone when they need it most. Everyone can choose from over 300 coaches to find the right person to help their unique needs."

One area in which the line manager can really deliver is flexible working. We've seen the emergence of hybrid working since the pandemic, which often takes the shape of people being mandated by management to work "three plus two" – come into the office for three days, and be at home for two. Or the opposite of that.

"Coaching really needs to become more inclusive and readily available to everyone when they need it most"

Caroline Howe, Ogilvy Health

Professor Cooper details the evidence for this in his recent book, *The Healthy Workforce*, co-authored with Stephen Bevan. His main issue with management in organisations is that people are promoted and recruited on the basis of their technical skills, as opposed to their abilities with people. It's clear that we need to be really focused on the issue of managers within the organisation, ensuring that they connect well with the operational side of the business, and that how people feel, and the culture, is prioritised.

"We've seen the role of our line managers increase in importance. Covering everything from career goals to wellbeing can be really

Wellbeing in practice

However, advertising businesses should think instead in terms of flexible working. In practice, Professor Cooper advises that this involves the manager asking the team member “what suits you?” – and then putting in place a psychological contract that makes it clear when they are required to be present physically. In advertising that might be for team meetings, strategy work, creative brainstorms, but then allowing flexibility to be elsewhere for other tasks.

There is some evidence that this is working already in agencies. Florian Bernsdorf, Managing Partner at Serviceplan Health, says the agency tries to be flexible with people: “We want to make sure that they feel free, that if we give them responsibility then we trust them. We give them the freedom to make their own decisions on when they have to be there, and when they have to work.”

Joerg Hempelmann, President Europe, at IPG Health Europe, describes how his business is introducing measures to provide greater flexibility to its people. This includes the

agency’s “Flexible Time Off” policy, in addition to employees “still having complete freedom to decide for themselves when everyone wants to be present in the office”.

“Work-life separation” as opposed to “work-life balance”, leads to less mental stress and thus overall well-being”

Joerg Hempelmann, IPG

This flexibility, he says, has shown “the intrinsic desire of employees to come to the office more often, voluntarily, because it helps them to separate more cleanly between work and private life.” This creates, he argues, the conditions for ‘work-life separation’ as opposed to ‘work-life balance’, which “leads to less mental stress and thus overall well-being”.

Reshape the work environment

It's also the case that after the confines imposed during the pandemic, many people would prefer more variety in their day-to-day location. Tara Page, Former Global Client Engagement Director at VMLY&R Health, says: "We all went into this assuming everyone wanted to work from home. But some people find that really challenging, because what's flexible for one person means something entirely different to someone else. Once you start talking about flexibility, there are all sorts of connotations and assumptions, but it's different for different people."

André Darmon, Global Chief Innovation Officer at TheBlocPartners says that equipping staff with the latest technology also fosters connectivity highlighting that "with access to the right tools, teams can collaborate remotely on valuable projects and overcome some concerns about location constraints."

"We have a responsibility to protect our people from clients who are making unrealistic demands"

Tara Page, VMLY&R Health

In advertising, the quality of creative ideas is paramount. Tara Page, at VMLY&R Health, says that it's vital that the communications sector becomes better at providing the necessary time and space for people working specifically in the creative department to deliver outstanding ideas. She adds: "Sometimes we're not too good in the industry at making sure that we give people the time, because it does take time and effort to create ground-breaking communication work, and we have a responsibility to protect our people from clients who are making unrealistic demands."

"We firmly believe if people come together, and sit together, then this is the key success factor for mental health"

Florian Bernsdorf, Serviceplan Health

Innovation in terms of office space can play a big role here. Serviceplan has invested in building a work environment that encourages flexible working and greater levels of integration and co-operation between teams of people. Even simple innovations, such as the introduction of open, integrated spaces that encourage collaboration, can make a positive difference. Florian Bernsdorf says: "We firmly believe if people come together, and sit together, then this is the key success factor for mental health."

Reshape the work environment

Elizabeth Egan, Chief Executive for Europe, Havas Health & You, is an enthusiastic advocate of flexible working and, more generally, of “managers and colleagues knowing more about each other’s preferences in terms of all looking after ourselves, to ultimately create better work and live a better life”.

employee engagement programme. This is tailored to help the organisation to measure what it really takes to help people “be their best self at work” in the context of their whole life – including their roles in the organisation – and track change.

Egan says: “We’re proud also of the adaptable nature of the real-time results. For example, we can react very quickly to topics that are really at the forefront of people’s thoughts, such as the current economic climate, the war, and COVID.

It’s also essential to calculate the moments that really matter for human interaction, such as crunch points for a major meeting, and performance feedback.”

“It’s essential to calculate the moments that really matter for human interaction”

Elizabeth Egan, Havas Health & You

“I want to make sure people feel that they can be themselves in the workplace and have the flexibility to live a full life looking at the whole person not just ‘what they deliver for Havas,’” she adds.

To address this, Havas Health & You has invested in, and worked extensively with, the Health and Happiness Foundation on a new

Switch off the tech

Another critical issue is the impact of technology on the work place. With the prevalence of emails and video conferencing, people have to be switched on 24/7, they're looking at emails on holiday, and it's damaging.

To address this, Professor Cooper says that The National Forum has developed clear guidelines covering the 'dos and don'ts' – simple things such as don't send an email on a Friday evening. This is important for the wellbeing of people and the productivity of organisations, which otherwise risk the introduction of 'right to disconnect' laws similar to those that already exist in France and Portugal.

says that this has been maintained and become a "common behaviour" across the business: "Everybody knows that they have a time when nobody can jump in or set up meetings. It means that there's one point in the day where everybody's time is protected."

Howe argues that one of the biggest challenge with flexible working is replacing the spontaneity of the 'quick corridor chat', and that too often this results in people booking in endless meetings. A potential solution, Ogilvy Health has found, is limiting meeting times to provide 'downtime' before the next Zoom or Teams chat, and asking its people to question whether digital or physical meetings are really necessary.

Publicis Health also introduced meeting-free lunchtimes and Fridays during the COVID pandemic. This step was taken after full consultation with clients, all of whom were supportive, and has proved very successful as a continued post-COVID practice.

"One of the biggest challenges is replacing the spontaneity of the quick corridor chat"

Caroline Howe, Ogilvy Health

There's some encouraging news from the agency sector on this, with businesses taking action to enable their people to switch off from work. Ogilvy Health, for instance, introduced a measure during COVID lockdowns to 'block out' 60 minutes in people's diaries each day between 12.30 and 1.30pm. Caroline Howe

Invest in innovation and training

Post-COVID, there are strategic levers that leaders in advertising should pull, and they aren't connected to better tech, or increasing people's wages. Organisational health drivers should now be considered as areas where organisations can build competitive advantage versus conventional areas like marketing, technology and strategy. Most organisations have enough smart people in them with expertise and knowledge: they just need to work together in a healthier way.

More important than ever is pushing forward on learning and development, and on innovation

More important than ever is pushing forward on learning and development, and on innovation. A good place to start in this is by asking yourself the question: how much support do you provide for knowledge sharing and learning?

There's also the danger that organisations trim investment to make savings during tough economic times, resulting in a negative impact on organisational health.

One of the easiest areas to cut is learning and development programmes because they are seen as a cost on the balance sheet. But they're exactly the elements that should be dialled up, because if you're more innovative and your people are more knowledgeable, then you're going to be more successful.

"Developing a culture of innovation keeps employees up to speed with the hottest industry trends and helps them hone their skill sets", says André Darmon. "And it's not just that. Continuous learning initiatives instill a sense of ownership over one's progress within the company. People become more invested in their work and their motivation levels rise significantly".

Invest in innovation and training

Last year, Ogilvy piloted a Learning Day, where the entire agency was officially closed for business to allow all employees focus on their professional and personal development through a choice of workshops, plenary sessions and keynotes. Caroline Howe, at Ogilvy Health, says “We wanted to bring everyone in our agency together for a day of learning, inspiration, creativity and fun. It doesn’t replace ongoing L&D opportunities, but sharing and being inspired together is a really important part of what makes a great agency environment. It was a brilliant day, and more Learning Days are in the pipeline.”

each other within the structure of the business. It’s also essential to push harder to ensure that the agenda on issues such as diversity, equality and inclusion are more visible, and reflected in clear policies and actions that foster a sense of belonging in the organisation.

“Continuous learning initiatives instill a sense of ownership over one’s progress within the company.”

André Darmon, The BlocPartners

This investment in innovation also has a positive impact on an organisation’s culture, the invisible glue that binds things together. To take forward steps on this, it’s important to work on your all-round values, and on how people relate to

The following is a list of action points to help agencies on this journey towards stronger organisational health.

1

Leadership – establish an aligned leadership team, who share common values and are supportive of each other.

2

Direction – ensure that the organisation has a vision, and this is created with employee involvement and communicated with clarity. Above all, there needs to be open and honest communication between line managers and their direct reports on a regular basis.

3

Health & Wellbeing – show care for people in the organisation and they will care about the organisation. Ensure that someone on the Board has responsibility for employee health and wellbeing. Ideally this should be an operational role of Director of Health & Wellbeing, reporting to the HR Director or CEO, whose job is to develop the metrics of ‘what good looks like’. For example, covering subjective measures like job satisfaction, and objective indicators such as staff turnover, and stress-related absence, and then accordingly working to develop intervention strategies.

4

Innovation – invest in innovation that utilises the breadth and depth of the talent in the organisation.

5

Learning & Development – put resources into upskilling talent and building knowledge. In addition, it's important to ensure that all line managers, from shop-floor to top-floor, are promoted and recruited based on parity between their technical skills and social/managerial skills.

6

Working conditions – empower employees with flexibility to set their individual work patterns and workplace arrangements which benefit them, their team and their organisation as a whole. Vitally, this involves providing employees with greater autonomy and control, whether in flexible working or in how they manage their role. It also means ensuring that managers don't overload staff with excessive emails during out-of-office hours, and that people have manageable workloads and realistic deadlines.

Contributors



Philip Chin

President Europe,
Publicis Health
Chair, Health
Communications Council
(EACA)



**Florian
Bernsdorf**

Managing Partner
Serviceplan Health



Elizabeth Egan

Chief Executive
for Europe
Havas Health & You



**Joerg
Hempelmann**

President Europe
IPG Health Europe



Caroline Howe

CEO
Ogilvy Health
UK/EMEA



Tara Page

Former Global Client
Engagement Director
VMLY&R Health



André Darmon

Global Chief
Innovation Officer
The BlocPartners

European Association of Communications Agencies

78 Rue Defacqz
1060 Brussels, Belgium
E: info@eaca.eu
W: www.eaca.eu