

2021 in focus: how companies can make care part of culture to help staff navigate uncertainty



Last year was characterised by widespread change - to the way we work, learn, communicate, and socialise. The ongoing impact of the pandemic caused people and businesses to re-evaluate their priorities, purpose and what they value. And against a backdrop of remote working, learning and social distancing, what emerged as most important was human connection.

The start of 2021, which has seen South Africa battling its second wave of pandemic infections, has reinforced the value of connection as we largely continue to work from home and contend with the associated loneliness and isolation that this may bring. In fact, the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) has reported a growing number of calls to their helplines - about 1 400 every day - related to depression, trauma, and suicide. The 2020 State of Remote Work Report also shows a rise in employee disengagement with difficulty in collaborating with others, loneliness, and the inability to unplug cited as contributing factors.

This illustrates the heavy mental toll the pandemic continues to take nearly a year on in South Africa - and shows just how critical connection and empathy are in counteracting the struggles individuals continue to face.

Companies, in particular, need to consider and prioritise empathy, kindness and connection as part of their corporate cultures in order to be able to support their employees' mental and emotional well-being. The pandemic, and consequent disruptions to the way people worked and collaborated, acted as a steep learning curve for companies.

And some critical lessons emerged. Perhaps the most important of all was organisations and their leadership teams realising that we have to recognise the whole human being - mentally, emotionally,

physically, spiritually and socially – and create and maintain a culture that provides authentic support whilst still taking productivity into account. This balance, between kindness and work-related expectations has proven difficult for leaders to navigate and will continue to be a topic of importance into 2021 and beyond.

2021: Changing in why people work and what they expect from good employers

Employee safety, both from a physical and psychological point of view was top of mind for C-suite executives amidst the pandemic. As we move into 2021, the ability for organisations to show our people that their physical, mental, and emotional well-being is an ongoing priority for us, will define the employee value proposition in the future. Organisations will be tasked with the challenge of providing employees with support amidst a tough economic environment whilst balancing business priorities with authentic and holistic employee well-being.

This of course includes providing access to resources that have a real and meaningful impact on holistic employee well-being that goes beyond the traditional reactive nature of employee assistance programmes (EAP).

Momentum Metropolitan Holdings recently received a Top Employer Certification from the International Top Employer Institute, the global HR authority on certifying excellence in employee conditions. Amongst the criteria, this year's survey data showed that the successful Top Employers focused on three themes in the past year: transparency and inclusion, accelerated digitalisation, and employee well-being.

In its assessment, the Top Employer Institute commended Momentum Metropolitan for its wellness programme which was already in place prior to the pandemic. The programme 'Wise and Well' is designed around a human-centred and holistic well-being solution across financial, physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

Given the pandemic, the last year saw employees take part in more than 3 000 sessions which included direct access to psychologists and training programmes to help individuals cope with the ever-changing needs of the workplace – we also realise that well-being extends beyond the individual and as such our Wise and Well programme was made available to direct family members of all of our employees.

We recorded a rise of more than 200% in terms of critical incidents requiring intervention and a rise of more than 100% of training opportunities for employees regarding well-being and wellness compared to the previous year. We also launched an online LeaderFlix learning channel that provides leaders and managers with access to curated content with a specific focus on well-being. This site has had more than 10 000 hits since it launched in May 2020 with well-being and remote working being the two most popular topics.

But access to formal well-being programmes has also been supplemented by the individual efforts of managers, who have found different and creative ways of connecting with their staff and team members and showing that they care: ranging from weekly online catch-up coffee sessions and quizzes, to sending

care packages, and offering a more flexible approach to working as part of the company's remote working policy. This approach has helped employees be productive in the "flow of life" and adapt their way of work to their own context and demands.

This has given employees the freedom to work from virtually anywhere. Some have moved closer to loved ones who have fallen ill, or to their parents where there is more space, while others have been motivated to move to where there is better internet access. One former Centurion employee is working at full capacity from Switzerland. We believe that holistic care comes in different forms and the implementation of our remote working guideline aims to enable employees as we adapt to this evolving world of work.

Against the backdrop of remote and hybrid workplaces - a mix of remote and office work - organisations and leaders also have to find ways to intentionally craft social connections and support for their people, as well as start thinking about well-being as a core component of culture - in our world, placing the human back into the working environment as part of our #thinkhumanfirst culture story. Providing support, kindness and care in various forms is essential because people seek meaning in their work, and organisations need to show how what each individual does matters to the business.

This includes finding new and different ways of opening up opportunities to forge connections - such as volunteering. Employees who actively sought to connect with and help others through acts of kindness such as volunteering reported that they were able to cope better because it shifted the focus to others and allowed them to see beyond the reality of the pandemic and find reasons to be thankful.

These new approaches show the importance of using empathy and kindness to help individuals navigate the uncertainty and anxiety of the short and medium term. As organisations and business leaders, we need to focus on creating an environment where people receive the required support to need to focus on the challenges the pandemic will continue to throw at them in 2021 - and to do so authentically as we help our people find the light even in the darkest of times.