

Health Versus Wellness

By Jason Brennan, Director of ThinkWell Limited

Understanding business today has become as much about understanding the individual as it has been about understanding the workplace, the organisation or the marketplace.

Business is evolving a consciousness that, one could argue, was either of less priority historically, or simply did not exist before. This shift in consciousness reflects the ability we now have as individuals to find out more about ourselves and how we work. We as individuals are much more aware of our rights today than in the past; our ability to access high-quality information quickly and easily and at no or little cost to ourselves has increased this awareness substantially.

An important part of this shift in managing individuals has been into the area of wellness in the workplace. As a psychotherapist and wellness consultant, the area of wellness and personal health is one in which I spend much of my time – both professionally and personally.

Working in this area, I have become acutely aware of the lack of differentiation for many people between the concept of health and the concept of wellness. To highlight this distinction I can give the example that I am often seeing clients who are healthy but are not well.

What does this mean? How can this be, you may ask – surely it is a contradiction in terms – how are they not both the same thing?

The answer is they are not the same thing, and this confusion is often reflected in business today when these two words are perceived to be the same or to be interchangeable. There is a substantial risk in doing this, and the evidence is very clear to any organisation, and, for that matter, to any individual, if they stop to find out more about the difference.

This misconception or assumption holds inherent risk for any organisation in that it can often underpin the type of services it chooses to provide or not to provide to its staff within the area of wellness.

It is, however, an easy misconception to adopt, as both words seem to imply the same thing and can therefore easily be promoted as such in every day language. It is not until at reverse perspective is applied that we can start to see the difference. The equation goes something like:

Can a person be *healthy* without being well – yes.

Can a person be *well* without being healthy – no!

What is the difference and how can a business mind the gap when thinking of their employees' wellness?

The initial difference to be mindful of in using the term health and the term wellness is to be aware of the importance of language in understanding and in delivering a message of understanding. I have spoken to a number of individuals working in Human Resources departments whose titles are Health, Safety and Wellness and who have confessed to me that the wellness part of their title eludes them. They do not know what it means, let alone what is expected of them. This leaves them somewhat ill-equipped to be promoting wellness for their organisation.

To bring into focus the context as to when to apply the two terms, I follow a simple guide of connecting the concept of health to a *function* and the concept of wellness to a *process*.

A system will result in health if it is functioning correctly, whereas wellness, as a process, requires an ongoing element.

A more in-depth analysis of wellness also highlights that inherent in the word wellness is the concept of wholeness. To be well is to be well in all areas – not just some areas.

These two elements of wellness can be challenging for an organisation – process and wholeness – and if not adequately understood can result in areas of wellness being ignored or undervalued.

The confusion that I have experienced in the workplace in the substitution of wellness for health when deciding on the services or measurements to be applied to their staff, are mainly in the area of physical health. Physical-based surveys and programs focus only on the functional aspect of a person – fitness, diet, blood pressure, cholesterol awareness, etc. and can discount other areas of personal wellness.

While physical health (function) and physical wellness (ongoing process) are important and have their place, it is not all there is to wellness; it is but a portion of the wellness spectrum and needs to be understood as such.

An organisation that believes it is attending to the wellness of their staff by only applying the health aspect of wellness are only partially applying wellness. It is important to be aware of this and to mind the gap that is left in other areas of wellness. As a wellness consultant, one of the areas of focus I provide for organisations is in becoming more aware of these gaps and how beneficial it can be for their business's success to help promote awareness of these other areas with their employees.

All the wellness research being provided now is showing the importance these other areas of wellness are to a healthy business i.e. a business that is functioning successfully.

In bridging the gap a business can reduce the substantial yearly costs related to sick leave, absenteeism, personal grievances, loss in productivity, staff loss – the list goes on.

A more conscious awareness to wellness can encourage growth, development, retention, responsibility, awareness, and the list can equally go forward only the outcome is considerably more pleasant.