



Investing in People & Culture

What, Why and How?

ABOUT HERO

The Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) is a national nonprofit dedicated to identifying and sharing best practices in the field of workplace health and well-being (HWB). HERO was established in 1997 to conduct and share research, policy, leadership, and strategy to advance workplace HWB and provide leadership of the nation's workforce. Much of the good work that HERO does is achieved through the efforts of its volunteer committees.

This report was produced by one such committee, the People & Culture Study Committee. Development of this report was led by HERO staff and volunteer committee members. Contributors to the report are listed below in alphabetical order. Findings and conclusions in this report are those of the contributors and do not represent the official position of the organizations listed.

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Overview

Significant evidence exists on the impact of employee health and well-being (HWB) on healthcare costs, workforce productivity, and on the ability of well-designed initiatives, programs, and cultures of health and psychological safety to improve HWB. Evidence also exists on the organizational value of workplace culture, perceived organizational support, workplace equity and the employee experience in meeting business objectives. To better understand how intentional focus on an employer's people and culture might drive business success, in 2021, the Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) formed an Employee Experience Committee as a spin-off from its Culture of Health Study Committee. In 2023, this committee evolved to become the People and Culture (P&C) Committee to extend the discussion beyond the employee experience perspective.

The P&C Committee was comprised of a cross-functional group of practitioners and researchers with experience designing, implementing, and evaluating workplace health promotion initiatives.

HERO committees, and the focus areas that drive continued informed research in the HWB space is led by the HERO research committee agenda. To read more about the HERO committees, click [HERE](#).

Solutions and Best Practices

The HERO committee reviewed HERO publications and notable industry leading literature to formulate key insights that tie into larger People & Culture objectives, including social determinants of health; workplace mental health; culture; diversity, equity and inclusion; employee resource group development; and engagement. The group determined best practices among inclusionary and workforce community centric employers to identify opportunities, challenges, measures, and evaluation methods. This summary report presents the business case for addressing People & Culture and can help employers formulate an internal business strategy to invest resources and launch internal priorities across the organization.

Key Results and Observations

Six domains were identified as being most impactful in driving business success, namely social determinants of health; employee resource groups; workplace mental health; diversity, equity and inclusion; culture; and engagement. The definitions of these elements along with a synthesis of what they look like in practice with guidance for employer action are described in Table 1.

Highlights from each domain are summarized below:

Social Determinants of Health (SDOH):

Employers are encouraged to focus on SDOH by listening to employees, creating a safe culture for discussions, and collaborating with health plans for social services.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):

Strategies include aligning ERGs with DEI programs, developing recruitment strategies, and soliciting employee input on supportive policies.

Workplace Mental Health (WMH):

Employers can support mental health through evaluating support programs, managing psychological risks, and promoting positive mental well-being.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI):

Opportunities for supporting DEI include benchmarking resources, transparent career paths, and diverse hiring practices.

Culture:

Common elements include supportive policies, mental health support, and leadership support.

Engagement:

Best practices include leveraging the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale and creating policies that enhance work-life balance.

Synthesis of the findings identified several questions and considerations for use by organizations to assess and improve their practices and policies with the aim of creating a positive and supportive work environment for their employees. Some of the common themes identified were the importance of listening to the employee voice, providing access to resources and services, ensuring fair and equitable treatment, fostering collaboration and innovation, and allowing flexibility and autonomy. Several challenges and opportunities that organizations face in addressing these topics include balancing culture and diversity, retaining the social element, targeting the right efforts, monitoring and evaluating outcomes, and aligning leadership and strategy.

Table 1 People & Culture Best Practices and Considerations

P&C DOMAIN Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)

WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are environmental conditions that can directly impact a person's health, including economic stability, education, health access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, social and community context. In addition, SDOH can impact employer business performance and profitability. Examples include cultural norms, social support, education level, economic stability, and the physical attributes of a community (e.g., air quality, access to clean drinking water, access to supermarkets and healthy food, reliable transportation, affordable housing, and jobs that pay a living wage). An individual's zip code has been shown to have a greater impact on health and happiness than one's genetic code, including the length and quality of life.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Employers should focus on SDOH efforts through supporting internal organizational efforts (e.g., policies) and collaborating with external partners.

Key actions:

- Listen to employees share their social needs.
- Work to create a culture where people are informed and feel safe to speak about physical, behavioral, and social challenges.
- Socialize SDOH internally by naming and describing their significance.
- Educate business partners on financial management and health literacy.
- Train managers in appreciative inquiry and to recognize the impacts SDOH have on employee productivity and performance.
- Collaborate with your health plans to provide screening and referrals to social services, including housing support, nutritional assistance and integrated case management.
- Create or amend policies and practices to support employee self-care and care of others, including paid time off for doctor's appointments, subsidized public transportation, and childcare.
- Ensure that all employees have an opportunity for career advancement.
- Review recruiting and hiring practices to incorporate new skills and perspectives, especially those of underserved populations including the formerly incarcerated.
- Consider and provide adequate resource support for employees outside of work (e.g., addressing caregiver concerns).

ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONSIDERATIONS

- Do we offer confidential access to human resources, employee assistance counselors and/or social workers?
- Are our employees paid a fair living wage?
- Does our manager training at all levels include content about SDOH and referral resources?
- What key resources, both in the community and within our workplace, address employee social needs

- Do we offer point solutions and contract with vendor partners who provide effective financial and mental well-being resources?
- Can our health plan provide screening and referrals to social services?
- Do we directly ask employees about which social services and programs would be most valuable to them through focus groups or employee surveys?
- Do our key wellbeing resources provide referrals and warm transfers to support continuity of care while considering the SDOH context of our employee population?
- How much does our organization include beliefs about the importance of workforce human capital in our mission and/or vision statements?
- Do we offer management training to foster constructive working relationships with their direct reports? If so, is there a formal process for evaluating?
- How do employees describe their sense of job security? Do they feel their employment status could change at any point?
- Can all employees leave work without penalty to obtain recommended preventive care services, including cancer screenings?
- Do all employees have predictable work schedules to ensure a steady source of income?
- Do all employees have access to regular pay? Do opportunities exist to facilitate access to emergency funds/advance pay in the event of a financial crisis?
- Are shift work schedules designed to promote/facilitate favorable health outcomes?
- Is paid sick leave available for all employees?

P&C DOMAIN Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) serve as crucial organizational platforms that shape and evolve well-being and business goals and strategies. Employers recognize and value the unique insights and representative feedback that ERGs provide, tapping into their diverse voices to create targeted initiatives. The prevalence of ERGs in most companies underscores their significance in promoting connectivity, fostering friendships, and ensuring a sense of belonging. While ERGs may not always be explicitly mentioned, their potential influence is implicit in various strategies, especially those geared towards inclusivity and addressing specific needs or demographics.

There are numerous types of ERGs across various organizations. ERGs are typically organized by a certain demographic/attribute, life stage, social cause, or professional type.

**WHAT DOES IT
LOOK LIKE IN
PRACTICE?**

ERGs provide organizations with a mechanism to support their diverse workforce through some of the following practices:

- Establish and utilize ERGs that align with your DEI program and include them in developing communication efforts.
- Develop external recruitment strategies that connect with local groups from underrepresented communities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, ability, etc.).
- Train and partner with ERGs to promote EAP and wellness programs, addressing unique needs of each population.
- Ensure that ERGs' perspectives are elicited to ensure provided benefit offerings meet the workforce's needs.
- Solicit guidance and input from employees on the types of policies that would be most supportive of their family or caregiving needs.

**ORGANIZATIONAL
QUESTIONS OR
CONSIDERATIONS**

- Does our organization collect feedback of ERGs?
- Does our organization have defined metrics for the ERG program e.g. measurement of employee and leadership engagement or participant feedback on support for the DEI goals?
- Is there an executive leadership contact supporting each ERG?
- Has our organization considered the strategic evolution of ERG groups?

P&C DOMAIN Workplace Mental Health (WMH)

**WHAT IS IT AND
WHY DOES IT
MATTER?**

While there is no singular definition of 'Workplace Mental Health', the concept is often presented in the context of how work and the workplace can positively or negatively impact our personal mental health and in turn how this impacts our enjoyment, engagement, and productivity in the workplace and in our personal lives.

At work, there are many factors that may impact our mental health, also called psychosocial factors. Examples of these factors include job content, workload, relationships, role clarity and autonomy, challenge, job security, work schedules, feelings of value or meaning, discrimination and exclusion, and harassment and bullying.

In addition, employees may also be facing stressors at home including insufficient or low-quality rest/sleep, loneliness, food and housing insecurity, lack of health insurance or economic hardship, among many.

A workplace that prevents harm and promotes positive mental well-being can positively affect individual and organizational performance, productivity, self-confidence, work enjoyment and engagement, relationships and communication at work, and absenteeism and injury via physical capabilities and daily functioning.

**WHAT DOES IT
LOOK LIKE IN
PRACTICE?**

Organizations can support employees' mental health through the following opportunities:

- Critically evaluate the current mental health support programs and resources available to the workforce. Many employers today review their mental health claims data, solicit employee feedback, and evaluate the vendor marketplace to align resources that meet the current mental health need.
- Create an enabling environment for change and respect.
- Protect individuals that may be at-risk for mental health symptoms or developing a chronic condition, or have comorbidities.
- Manage psychological risks related to work, environment, and culture.
- Provide manager training for mental health.
- Provide training for workers in mental health literacy and awareness.
- Provide interventions for individuals to build skills to manage stress, increase resilience and reduce mental health symptoms.
- Promote belonging, value and meaning- appreciation, recognition, and engagement.
- Create and maintain dedicated, quiet spaces for relaxation activities.
- Give employees opportunities to participate in decisions about issues that affect job stress.
- Establish a strategic communications approach (with leadership support) that is sensitive to how mental health is described, considering anti-stigma campaigns, inclusive language across various mental health needs, and navigation tools.
- Engage all staff across multiple channels of communication that normalizes mental health and is inclusive of all staff across the full spectrum of mental health.

**ORGANIZATIONAL
QUESTIONS OR
CONSIDERATIONS**

- Is our organization aligning with ERGs and other organizational programs to appropriately position the messaging and resources around mental health?
 - Does our organization measure and monitor mental health data, such as claims data, to identify continued areas of opportunity in employee health interventions?
 - Are our policies up-to-date and reviewed to support reasonable accommodation and days off for mental health needs?
 - Is our organization seeking the voice of the employee through survey efforts, focus groups, and/or employee testimonials, etc.?
 - Is the organization conducting gap analyses around access to care, equity in benefits, and affordable cost of care?
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WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are crucial in recognizing and celebrating the rich variety of races, ethnicities, beliefs, and backgrounds that make up our global community and, by extension, our workforce. DEI acknowledges that employees are part of broader communities influenced by external socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, often beyond an organization's control.

By examining policies and practices through an equity lens, organizations can identify and address those that may inadvertently favor certain groups while disadvantaging others, perpetuating potential discrimination. It fosters an inclusive and equitable environment where employees feel seen, heard, and understood, which in turn can improve health, morale, and loyalty. This leads to tangible benefits such as enhanced productivity, reduced turnover, and healthcare savings.

Moreover, DEI initiatives are instrumental in recruitment and retention by meeting the diverse needs of employees and demonstrating to potential hires how they would be supported. It is also notable there are wide variations in views on DEI, including positions that DEI has been ineffective or counterproductive.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

DEI can be supported through the following opportunities:

- Identify future opportunities through benchmarking resources, such as the Meyer Memorial Trust DEI Spectrum Tool, the Disability Equality Index and the Corporate Equity Index through the Human Rights Campaign.
 - Provide transparent career paths and advancement opportunities.
 - Champion policy efforts to support diverse hiring practices, inclusionary efforts, and equity in benefits.
 - Benchmark the organization against the Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equity Index for LGBTQ+ best practice employer standards.
 - Establish a budget for continued DEI opportunities and support efforts throughout the organization.
 - Report benefits and talent/acquisition outcomes to leadership team and board of directors.
 - Continually monitor changes in demographics due to new acquisitions or employee turnover.
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ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONSIDERATIONS

- How can we leverage our diverse workforce to support business innovation?
- Is the organization targeting the right efforts and opportunities through DEI activities?
- Are employee benefits being evaluated through a DEI lens?
- How are employees perceiving the organization's support in DEI?

WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Culture is a critical element in every organization that impacts many internal and external business facets. The definition of culture is unique to each organization, however there are key tenets which include, but are not limited to, supportive workplace policies and procedures; psychological safety; mental health support; work/life balance; diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging; health and well-being programming; and leadership support. When an organization has a positive culture, it is felt by most of the workforce and can be articulated. Measurable outputs have been tied to positive business performance; customer service (if applicable); productivity measures; recruitment and retention rates; employee satisfaction; and diversity, equity, and inclusionary measures.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

These culture of health elements are most common among employers:

1. Communications
2. Executive leadership
3. External community connections and altruism
4. Policies and procedures
5. Supportive built environment

Focusing on cultural elements must be woven into the fabric at all levels of the organization, from individual employees to managers to leadership, and the CEO. When an organization promotes a culture of health or positive work culture, their actions should continually drive to improve the intended goals and ensure employee feedback is gathered continuously. These workplace attributes predict a supportive culture: respectful, inclusive, ethical, supportive, and friendly/kind.

There must also be a shared purpose that contributes to meaningful work, generates pride, and fuels motivation. This involves establishing alignment between an organization's mission and employees' day-to-day work to create organizational purpose.

The following tactics support employee growth and learning:

1. Offering training, education, and mentoring;
2. Fostering clear, equitable pathways for career advancement; and
3. Ensuring relevant, reciprocal feedback.

Organizations have the opportunity to leverage the HERO Scorecard to measure current initiatives, policies and efforts against best practices, along with monitoring continued progress towards addressing opportunities.

ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONSIDERATIONS

- Is there an organization understanding of the balance between having a strong culture and effective diversity, inclusion and belonging practices? Organizations should weigh that diversity comes at a cost, and hiring for a cultural add-on versus fit can be a benefit.
- Is the organization considering how to retain the social element or 'water cooler talk' at work when work is taking place at home?
- Is the organization taking opportunities to allow the culture to evolve over time?

WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Employee engagement has a broad scope, however it can be defined as “the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in their work and workplace”¹ and “the motivation employees have to help the organization succeed—and line of sight—the focus and direction employees need—to know what to do to make the organization successful.”²

Employee engagement has a direct connection to many elements we have discussed in this report, specifically if an employee is supported as their authentic self, has the proper program/resources to thrive, and has a sense of purpose and belonging that directly influences their engagement.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

A multi-department approach to Employee Engagement includes these best practices:

- Access the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, a common tool to assess engagement in organizational success.
 - Leverage ERGs, a fundamental component in the engagement approach for fostering belonging and social ties, and reevaluating policies that can inhibit or enhance engagement.
 - Create policies that enhance work-life balance or harmony.
 - Provide learning and development opportunities for employees.
 - Offer hybrid and remote work options.
 - Train leaders to express compassion, empathy, and generosity; communicate openly, often, and clearly; and practice human- and wellbeing-centered leadership by recognizing the connection between individual strengths, growth, and organizational change.
 - Provide teams with effective collaboration tools, and include time for non-work connection, such as community service.
 - Deploy messaging from leaders that caring for employees is part of the business objectives and the organization’s core values.
 - Facilitate open and candid conversations between employees and managers, and across the workplace, on topics and experiences related to emotional well-being or mental illnesses.
 - Train managers to improve their ability to recognize workplace stress-related issues and individuals under emotional distress and provide adequate management and direction.
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ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONSIDERATIONS

- Do employees feel supported by their organization and supervisor?
- Do employees feel like they are a valued member of a team?
- Is there a perception of fair pay?
- Are we assessing the employee’s perception of the organization annually?
- Do employees feel like they have autonomy to do their jobs?

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2. WHO (World Health Organization) guidelines on mental health at work. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240053052>

Lessons Learned

The foundational elements for organizations to support the health and well-being of the workforce, while creating positive business outcomes, have remained unchanged for many decades. While this is the case, there are continued opportunities today for each organization to evaluate how effectively they are supporting every employee holistically as the workforce becomes increasingly diverse, multi-cultural and multi-generational. While there are many opportunities for organizations to address People and Culture, as informed through this white paper, every organization has a unique pathway to establish foundational resources/cross-collaborations. There is no right or wrong way in how each organization approaches these opportunities, however making small progress yearly can create longer term successes over time.

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