

Improving Workplace Wellness in Asia: A Business Case, Approaches, and Successful Practices

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IMPROVING WORKPLACE WELLNESS IN ASIA: A BUSINESS CASE, APPROACHES, AND SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES

White Paper for the Asian Development Bank

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I. Asia's Unwell Workforce

Asia's workforce is increasingly unwell, and the region can scarcely afford it.

Every day, over 1.9 billion people in Asia go to work.¹ In a lifetime, the average person will spend at least 90,000 hours working.² Some lucky slice of the population may find meaningful purpose through work, but for the majority of people, work is a necessity to survive. Globalization has brought rapid economic growth to Asia over the past two decades, pulling millions of workers into the formal economy, lifting their families out of poverty, rapidly expanding the ranks of the middle class, and creating mega cities across the region. Yet, the health and wellness of Asian workers is far from optimal. The issues vary across countries and industries—from the investment banker who is perpetually exhausted by working 14 hours days; to the small business employee who receives no benefits or sick leave; to the manufacturing worker who receives no break and is forced to work overtime; and to the miner who toils in life-threatening conditions.

Work-related illnesses, injuries, and deaths

In 2015, an estimated 1.8 million people died from occupational injuries or work-related diseases in Asia (accounting for over two-thirds of all work-related mortality globally). In 2014, an additional 267 million persons suffered from nonfatal occupational accidents that resulted in at least 4 days absence from work.³ The most vulnerable workers are typically the poorest, least informed, least trained, and least protected, including women, children, disabled workers, migrant workers, and ethnic minorities. Not only do these injuries, diseases, and fatalities bring immense suffering to workers and their families, they also represent massive economic losses to businesses, communities, and the overall economy.⁴ Globally, the economic costs of work-related illness and injury have been estimated at between 1.8% and 6.0% of gross domestic product (GDP) across various countries, including 3.2% of Singapore's GDP in 2011, and 4.8% of Australia's GDP in 2008–2009.⁵ One alarming trend is the global shifting of hazardous industries (e.g., manufacturing, construction, mining, and agriculture) to the rapidly industrializing countries in Asia, which is likely linked to the declining trend of occupational injuries in higher-income countries, and the increase in occupational injury fatalities across Asia. In 2015, among the 1.8 million occupational fatalities in Asia, the biggest killers were work-related

¹ International Labour Organization (ILO). 2018. *International Labour Organization Database (ILOSTAT) – Status in Employment, ILO Modelled Estimates*. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/> (accessed 29 October 2019).

² J. Pryce-Jones. 2010. *Happiness at Work: Maximizing Your Psychological Capital for Success*. Chichester, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

³ P. Hämmäläinen, J. Takala, and T.B. Kiat. 2017. *Global Estimates of Occupational Accidents and Work-Related Illnesses 2017*. Singapore: Workplace Safety and Health Institute. <http://www.ichoweb.org/site/images/news/pdf/Report%20Global%20Estimates%20of%20Occupational%20Accidents%20and%20Work-related%20Illnesses%202017%20rev1.pdf>.

⁴ ILO. No date. *Occupational Safety and Health in Asia and the Pacific*. https://www.ilo.org/asia/projects/WCMS_099347/lang--en/index.htm (accessed 29 October 2019).

⁵ J. Takala, P. Hämmäläinen, K.L. Saarela, et al. 2014. Global estimates of the burden of injury and illness at work in 2012. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene*, 11(5), 326–337. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15459624.2013.863131>.

circulatory/cardiovascular diseases and stroke (31%), work-related cancers (24%), work-related respiratory diseases (21%), and occupational injuries (15%).⁶

An aging workforce and the rise of chronic disease

Asia's population is rapidly aging, and so is Asia's workforce. Globally, the share of people over age 60 is expected to nearly double, from 12% to 22%, between 2015 and 2050.⁷ Much of this aging will take place in Asia, where the share of the population over age 60 is projected to increase to over 24% (or about 1.3 billion people) by 2050.⁸ The aging of the workforce has profound implications for businesses across Asia, particularly because older employees are more likely to carry the burden of chronic diseases into their working lives.

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are on the rise throughout Asia, not just among older demographics, but across all segments of the population. NCDs, also known as chronic diseases, refer to diseases or medical conditions that are not caused by any infectious agents, including cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, cancer, and diabetes. In Asia, NCDs accounted for 76% of all deaths in 2016, and this percentage is on the rise across the region, in developed and developing countries alike.⁹ A recent study has put the total macroeconomic losses from chronic disease at \$16 trillion in the People's Republic of China (PRC), \$5.7 trillion in Japan, and \$1.5 trillion in the Republic of Korea (ROK), over the period 2010–2030 (measured in real United States dollars with base year 2010).¹⁰ Many countries across Asia do not offer universal health coverage; therefore, many multinational firms pay for the health costs of their employees in the countries where they operate, or otherwise these costs are borne out-of-pocket by workers themselves. Chronic disease affects all employees and the overall economy because it reduces the quantity and quality of human capital across all age groups. Beyond direct health care expenses, the indirect or hidden costs of chronic disease to employers include lost productivity because of absenteeism (e.g., sick leave, disability, and time off for medical care) and presenteeism (i.e., when a person at work is unable to perform at full capacity because of illness, stress, or other issues). A 2017 global benefits survey found that employees in poor health have twice as many absences, more than 25% higher presenteeism, and are twice as likely to be disengaged at work as employees in good health.¹¹ Workers and their families also face the threats of lost income, job insecurity, and possible unemployment.

⁶ Hämäläinen et al (2017).

⁷ World Health Organization (WHO). 2018. *WHO Fact Sheet: Ageing and health*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>.

⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. 2019. *World Population Prospects 2019*. <https://population.un.org/wpp/> (accessed 30 October 2019).

⁹ WHO. 2018. *Global Health Estimates 2016: Deaths by Cause, Age, Sex, by Country and by Region, 2000–2016*. Geneva. https://www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/estimates/en/.

¹⁰ D. Bloom, S. Chen, M. Kuhn, et al. 2017. The economic burden of chronic diseases: estimates and projections for China, Japan, and South Korea. Program on the Global Demography of Aging at Harvard University, *PGDA Working Paper No. 140*. https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1288/2012/11/The-Economic-Burden-of-Chronic-Diseases-Estimates-and-Projections-for-China-Japan-and-South-Korea-Bloom_etal_2017-FINAL.pdf.

¹¹ Willis Tower Watson. 2017. *2017 Global Benefits Attitudes Survey*. <https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/2017/11/2017-global-benefits-attitudes-survey-health-and-well-being>.

Job insecurity and financial stress

Along with globalization, a confluence of business, technology, and demographic trends has brought great changes among Asian economies, transforming work and work life for many people. In today's fast-paced, hypercompetitive, and globalized business environment, company life cycles have become shorter, as have employees' tenures with specific employers, bringing greater insecurity for many workers. The Great Recession of 2008 led to widespread downsizing and a reduction in real wages, benefits, and retirement security in many developed countries. Contingent, part-time, temporary, irregular, informal, and unpaid work arrangements are rising around the world, while only one-quarter of all workers have a permanent, stable, and formal relationship with an employer.¹² According to Gallup World Polls conducted from 2014 to 2016, only 32% of working age adults across 155 countries work at least 30 hours a week for an employer who provides a regular paycheck—what Gallup calls a “good job.”¹³ The share of “good jobs” varies across Asia, from 34% in East Asia, to 28% in South Asia and 25% in Southeast Asia. The gender gap in the percentage of residents with a “good job” is especially large in South Asia, where 43% of male workers have “good jobs” versus only 14% of female workers.

Over 68% of workers across Asia work in the informal economy, informal employment is predominant especially in developing and emerging Asian nations (with over 71% of jobs informal), in rural areas, and among younger workers.¹⁴ A job in the formal economy is no guarantee of good working conditions either. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 40%–60% of wage workers across Asia have no formal written contract of employment. In addition to financial insecurity, workers in informal, temporary, and contingent jobs face immense challenges to their health and wellbeing, such as a lack of health insurance and social protections, as well as lack of oversight for working hours and workplace health and safety risks. These workers have a limited capacity to save, invest in housing, or consume goods and services, which has broader impacts on economic growth.¹⁵

Financial insecurity and informal employment are not limited to developing nations. The rise of the “gig economy” in developed countries has brought additional stresses for workers, many of whom have to work irregular and long hours, or multiple “gigs,” to compensate for their lack of a stable job and income. In a 2017 global benefits survey, many people reported that they live paycheck to paycheck, including 32% in the PRC and India, 31% in Japan, 28% in Australia, 27% in Singapore, and 19% in Hong Kong, China. Employees who are worried about their finances reported higher stress levels, more absences and presenteeism, and lower levels of work engagement than those who are financially secure. With rising longevity and health care costs, alongside the decline of traditional retirement benefits, many more workers will have to work into their later years to make ends meet,

¹² United Nations. 2015. *Most workers now employed in part-time or temporary jobs – UN labour agency*. UN Sustainable Development Goals Blog. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2015/05/most-workers-now-employed-in-part-time-or-temporary-jobs-un-labour-agency/>.

¹³ Gallup. 2017. *State of the Global Workplace*. New York: Gallup Press. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238079/state-global-workplace-2017.aspx>.

¹⁴ International Labour Office. 2018. *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*. 3rd Edition. Geneva: ILO. https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_626831/lang--en/index.htm.

¹⁵ International Labour Organization. 2018. *Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2018: Advancing decent work for sustainable development*. Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_649885.pdf.

which leads to higher numbers of disengaged, financially insecure, and unhealthy older workers. In the same survey, 45% of respondents in Japan; 17% in Hong Kong, China; and 15% in Singapore reported that they expect to work to age 70 or later.¹⁶ In many developing economies, modernization has been accompanied by the erosion of the traditional safety nets that were provided by families and communities in the past (e.g., health care, education, and childcare).

Rampant mental stress and burnout

Technology now enables people to do their work anytime, anywhere, and from a variety of devices. Technology increases freedom, autonomy, and flexibility for many workers. However, it also allows work to constantly intrude on private lives, removing the boundaries between work and life. With higher expectations from clients, colleagues, and bosses for instantaneous responses, many people find it difficult to take time to recharge outside their scheduled work hours or during vacations. Collaboration among globalized teams also means that more people are working across different time zones and calendars, creating more intrusions on evenings, weekends, and holidays. The inability to “unplug” has become a fact of life for many workers in many fields, and it has become one of the biggest sources of stress in modern work life. In a recent global wellbeing survey conducted by the health care firm Cigna (covering many Asian economies, including Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; the PRC; the ROK; Singapore; Taipei, China; Thailand; as well as Australia and New Zealand), 87% of workers said they are stressed in their workplace, and 12% felt their stress is unmanageable, with 64% claiming to work in an “always on” environment. While 46% of workers reported that they receive support from employers to deal with stress, only 28% felt this support was adequate; and, 38% claimed that no stress management support was provided by their employer at all.¹⁷

The physical and mental impacts, as well as the costs, of the 24/7 work culture and the resulting worker exhaustion are increasingly gaining the attention of workers, employers, researchers, and public health authorities. In May 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) expanded its definition of “burnout” in the International Classification of Diseases as an “occupational phenomenon:” “Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” It is characterized by: feelings of exhaustion; negativism, cynicism, and increased mental distance from one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy.¹⁸

A culture of overwork and burnout seems to be particularly rampant in East Asia. In Japan, 60+ hour work weeks have been commonplace for decades. In Taipei, China, a survey reported that over 60% of salaried employees worry about health issues stemming from overwork, while 75% of them have considered quitting their jobs because of work-related exhaustion.¹⁹ In the PRC, the grueling work schedules for workers in technology fields have inspired an “anti-996” campaign to shame offending employers and combat the norm of working from 9 am to 9 pm, 6 days a week—a work system and

¹⁶ Willis Tower Watson. 2017. *2017 Global Benefits Attitudes Survey*. <https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/2017/11/2017-global-benefits-attitudes-survey-health-and-well-being>.

¹⁷ Cigna. 2019. *2019 Cigna 360 Well-Being Survey: Well & Beyond*. https://wellbeing.cigna.com/360Survey_Report.pdf.

¹⁸ World Health Organization. 2019. *Mental health: Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases*. https://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/burn-out/en/.

¹⁹ T. Huang. 2018. More than 5 million Taiwanese suffering from overwork: survey. *Taiwan News*. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3412318>. (ADB officially recognizes this member as “Taipei, China”).

culture that is often glorified by business leaders.²⁰ Death by overwork is a term in East Asia: *karoshi* in Japan, *guolaosi* in the PRC, and *gwarosa* in the ROK. A 2016 Japanese paper on *karoshi* found that working more than 60 hours per week significantly increases the risk of *karoshi* for males, while the threshold for females is about 45 hours. Because Japanese women tend to bear more of the burden of housework, when housework is added to working time, women face a serious risk of *karoshi*.²¹

Asia's overtime culture could be aggravated by the traditional respect for authority and hierarchy, which makes workers feel that they should not leave the office before their managers. Some managers may conflate long hours (i.e., inputs) with performance (i.e., outputs), and frown upon those who leave early. Still, some managers may think that they would look lazy or set a bad example if they leave before their employees, thus creating a vicious cycle of staying at work beyond the point where it is harmful to workers and unproductive for employers. Experts at Singapore's Institute of Mental Health have described poor organizational culture, unrealistic expectations of workers' productivity, role ambiguity, and lack of recognition as chief reasons that drive the vicious cycle of burnout in the country, where two out of three workers report above-average to high levels of stress.²²

Widespread workforce disengagement and disenfranchisement

Engaged employees are happy employees. They are highly involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace. They are psychological "owners," driving performance and innovation, and moving their organization forward. However, worker engagement has been persistently low since the Gallop Organization began measuring employee engagement in the late-1990s.²³ The most recent Gallup World Poll across 155 countries found that only 15% of employees worldwide are engaged in their job, that is, psychologically invested in their work and motivated to be highly productive. In Asia, the level of employee engagement varies widely. It is highest in Southeast Asia at 19%, close to the global average in South Asia and Australia/New Zealand at 14%, and very low in East Asia at 6%. Meanwhile, the level of active disengagement is alarmingly high. Actively disengaged employees are not just unhappy at work; they are resentful of and dissatisfied with work, and are acting out their unhappiness. Studies have found that actively disengaged employees are less productive, have more on-the-job accidents, miss more workdays, and quit at a higher rate than engaged employees. They are also more likely to steal from their company, negatively influence their coworkers, and drive customers away. Globally, Gallup found that 18% of employees surveyed were actively disengaged, including 11% in Southeast Asia, 21% in South Asia, and 20% in East Asia.²⁴

Key factors that drive the varying rates of employee engagement around the world include economic uncertainties (e.g., people feel that they are stuck in jobs they do not like); management styles (e.g.,

²⁰ L. Qiqing and R. Zhong. 2019. "996" is China's version of hustle culture. Tech workers are sick of it. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/technology/china-996-jack-ma.html>.

²¹ A. Kamesaka and T. Tamura. 2016. 労働時間と過労死不安 (Working hours and karoshi risk assessment). *ESRI Discussion Paper Series* No. 325. http://www.esri.go.jp/jp/archive/e_dis/e_dis325/e_dis325.pdf.

²² C. Chan and S. Fan. 2019. Commentary: what's behind burnout? Confusing long hours and face time for work performance. *ChannelNewsAsia*. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/behind-burnout-long-hours-face-time-work-performance-fatigue-11579678>.

²³ Gallup. No date. *Gallup's Employee Engagement Science*. <https://q12.gallup.com/help/en-us/about> (accessed 6 November 2019).

²⁴ Gallup. 2017. *State of the Global Workplace*. New York: Gallup Press. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238079/state-global-workplace-2017.aspx>.

top-down or “command-and-control” management); and poor workplace cultures (e.g., high stress or people gaining advancement at work through personal relationships rather than good performance). The persistently low rates of employee engagement and high rates of active disengagement in East Asia suggest that cultural norms are at work, in particular, the collectivist mindset where individual needs and desires concede to organizational goals, breeding a culture of overwork that is harmful to employee health and wellbeing.

Gallup’s engagement data indicate that most people are at their jobs only because of the paycheck. The fact that 81%, 86%, and 94% of employees across Southeast, South, and East Asia (respectively) are disengaged or actively disengaged at work is analogous to a key business asset operating at only 19%, 14%, or 6% of full capacity. In a 2015 global study by Deloitte, “culture and engagement” was rated as the number one challenge affecting businesses around the world.²⁵ Employee dissatisfaction represents an enormous hidden cost for employers—affecting productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and much more. Gallup estimates that the economic costs of employee disengagement are about \$7 trillion in lost productivity globally.²⁶

²⁵ Deloitte. 2015. *Global Human Capital Trends 2015: Leading in the new world of work*. Westlake, Texas: Deloitte University Press. http://d2mtr37y39tpbu.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/DUP_GlobalHumanCapitalTrends2015.pdf.

²⁶ J. Harter. 2017. Dismal Employee Engagement Is a Sign of Global Mismanagement. *Gallup Blog*. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231668/dismal-employee-engagement-sign-global-mismanagement.aspx>.

II. The State of Workplace Wellness in Asia

A brief history of workplace wellness

Unwellness at work is not a new phenomenon, although the challenges have changed over time alongside economic transformations and the evolving nature of work. Historically, the health, safety, and wellbeing of workers have been shaped by the labor–capital relationship—the extent to which labor is an essential and valued factor of production, the costs and risks faced by employers, and the “voice” of employees to advocate for their rights. Many of today’s laws, policies, and programs that support workplace wellness originate from labor movements that sought to protect worker safety and health amidst the difficult and unsafe working conditions that arose during the Industrial Revolution. For example, the first occupational safety and health legislation enacted in the mid-19th century in the United States and the United Kingdom mainly had railroad, mine, and mill workers in mind.

Early workplace wellness programs, focusing on fitness for executives, were introduced in the United States in the 1940s and proliferated and broadened their focus in the 1970s alongside the growth of the modern wellness movement.²⁷ Concern for workers’ health also extended to their emotional and mental health. The first employee assistance programs (EAPs) were launched in the United States in the 1940s to combat widespread alcoholism. By the 1970s, these programs expanded to include mental health, addiction, and family issues, and they were adopted more widely by large companies.

The proliferation of workplace wellness programs and approaches in Asia tends to track industrialization, globalization, and the expansion of multinational companies. For example, Japan established its first workplace health measures in 1972 with its Industrial Safety and Health Law, which mandated that employers provide periodic physical checkups for all employees.²⁸ Australia adopted the EAP model in the early 1980s, and its modern occupational safety and health system was adopted around the same time.²⁹ In the PRC, the first formal EAP was introduced in 1997 and, by 2012, there were more than 20 foreign and local providers of EAPs in the country.³⁰

²⁷ For a more detailed history of workplace wellness: Global Wellness Institute. 2016. *The Future of Wellness at Work*. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/the-future-of-wellness-at-work/>. For a detailed history of the wellness movement: SRI International. 2010. *Spas and the Global Wellness Market: Synergies and Opportunities*. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/spas-global-wellness-market/>.

²⁸ M.P. O’Donnell. 2002. *Health Promotion in the Workplace, 3rd edition*. Albany, New York: Thomson Learning.

²⁹ R.F. Peters and T. Firth. 1990. *Employee Assistance Programs: Their Development and Benefit*. <http://www.heas.com.au/publications/eap.htm>; and C. Chu et al. 2000. Health-promoting workplaces – international settings development. *Health Promotion International*, 15(2), 155–167. <http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/content/15/2/155.full>.

³⁰ X. Zhu, Z. Wang, and T. Buon. 2012. Trauma Counseling and Psychological Support in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In R. Hughes, C. Cooper, and A. Kinder (eds.), *International Handbook of Workplace Trauma Support, First Edition* (436–446). Chichester, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119943242.ch27>.

Size and coverage of the existing workplace wellness sector in Asia

In a recent research for the Global Wellness Institute, the authors have defined the workplace wellness market as “employer expenditures on programs, services, activities, and equipment, aimed at improving their employees’ health and wellness”.³¹ These expenditures typically seek to raise awareness, provide education, and offer incentives that encourage employees to adopt healthier lifestyles. Workplace wellness programs target a wide range of employee behaviors (e.g., lack of exercise, poor eating habits, smoking, and lack of sleep) and risk factors (e.g., chronic illness, obesity, addiction, depression, and stress). Programs can encompass a variety of services, products, and platforms, including health screening assessments; diagnostic testing; in-house amenities or subsidized memberships for fitness clubs and exercise classes; healthy food offerings at company cafeterias; wearable fitness trackers; health fairs, educational programming, and counseling services for wellness; and incentives for participation in wellness activities. While some companies may design and administer their own wellness programs, there is now a sizable industry of third-party service providers who can administer these programs for companies (e.g., Optum, Virgin Pulse, ComPsych Corporation, Bupa Wellness, ConneXions Asia, and WellteQ). Many private insurance companies also administer wellness programs for the companies whose employees they insure.

The workplace wellness market in Asia is estimated by the authors at \$9.3 billion in 2017, representing about 20% of global workplace wellness expenditures (\$47.5 billion). Asia’s workplace wellness expenditures grew by 5.1% annually from 2015 to 2017.³² Worker wellbeing is gaining attention in Asia, motivated by growing concerns about managing health care costs; improving employee morale, recruitment, and retention; and increasing productivity and competitiveness. A recent survey of office-based companies in the Asia and Pacific region found that about 60% of the companies surveyed either had or intended to start some type of workplace wellness program in the near future.³³

The current level of workplace wellness expenditures in Asia (and globally) is low when viewed from the perspective of employee coverage. The authors estimate that about 97.8 million workers in Asia benefit from some form of workplace wellness program, representing only 5.2% of all employed workers in the region. Globally, an estimated 9.8% of workers benefit from workplace wellness programs.³⁴ Across Asia, workplace wellness is still not a widespread concept, benefiting only a small slice of workers who mostly work for multinational corporations and in knowledge-intensive industries (e.g., finance, investment, consulting, information technology, high-tech, higher education, and creative industries), and those living in the region’s wealthiest countries/cities.

³¹ Global Wellness Institute. 2018. *Global Wellness Economy Monitor*. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/2018-global-wellness-economy-monitor/>; and Global Wellness Institute. 2016. *The Future of Wellness at Work*. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/the-future-of-wellness-at-work/>.

³² Global Wellness Institute (2018).

³³ CBRE Group. 2017. *Workplace Wellness gains traction in Asia Pacific*. <https://www.cbre.com.au/about/media-center/workplace-wellness-gains-traction-in-asia-pacific0>.

³⁴ Global Wellness Institute (2018).

Top Twenty Workplace Wellness Markets in Asia and the Pacific, 2017

	Number of Workers Covered (million)	Expenditures (US\$ million)
Japan	21.39	\$3,915.2
Republic of Korea	8.33	\$1,524.8
Australia	5.85	\$1,112.1
Taipei, China	3.47	\$634.6
People's Republic of China	33.11	\$496.7
Indonesia	2.54	\$222.6
Hong Kong, China	1.20	\$220.4
New Zealand	1.16	\$212.5
Singapore	1.02	\$186.5
India	9.21	\$184.2
Thailand	1.55	\$130.5
Viet Nam	1.47	\$119.9
Philippines	1.41	\$115.9
Malaysia	0.57	\$47.7
Bangladesh	2.03	\$40.6
Pakistan	1.81	\$36.3
Macau, China	0.12	\$20.1
Myanmar	0.91	\$18.3
Sri Lanka	0.22	\$17.6
Brunei Darussalam	0.05	\$7.5

Source: Global Wellness Institute (2018).

As workplace wellness programs and spending expand in Asia, work-related wellness challenges are also rampant and growing (as elaborated in section I). A 2018 AIA Vitality workplace survey in Australia; Hong Kong, China; Malaysia; and Thailand found that 51% of employees suffer from at least one dimension of work-related stress, 83% have at least one musculoskeletal condition, and health-related productivity loss ranged from 48 days to 78 days per year.³⁵ In a 2017 GSK Consumer Healthcare study, more than 67% of workers in the PRC, India, the Philippines, and Indonesia felt that their work environment caused their body pain, and more than 60% said their work environment caused them head pain—human suffering that also translates into significant productivity loss.³⁶ Workplace wellness concerns vary widely across countries and economic conditions. In wealthier countries, the issues typically revolve around preventable/chronic disease, mitigating stress, improving work-life balance, enhancing engagement, and improving workplace culture and management structures. In lower-income countries, a large share of the workforce suffers from dire and often life-threatening

³⁵ AIA Vitality. 2019. *Healthiest Workplace Survey 2018*. <https://healthiestworkplace.aia.com/regional/eng/>. (accessed 12 November 2019).

³⁶ GSK Consumer Healthcare. 2017. *GSK Global Pain Index 2017, Global Research Report*. <https://www.gsk.com/media/3814/global-pain-index-2017-report.pdf>.

issues related to exploitation, workplace safety/health threats, and the lack of living wages or a secure job—challenges that are not within the purview of typical workplace wellness programs.

III. Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Workplace Wellness

The limits and inadequacy of current workplace wellness approaches

As it exists today, the workplace wellness sector is limited and inadequate in addressing the major health and wellness issues faced by the global workforce. As elaborated in section I, a host of problems from workplace accidents, injuries, and deaths to stress, burnout, and disengagement have been on the rise across Asia and globally, alongside and unchecked by the growth of the workplace wellness sector and the broader wellness economy. Current workplace wellness approaches are insufficient and ineffective for a number of reasons.

Limited coverage. As mentioned in section II, the authors estimate that only 5.2% of all employed workers across Asia benefit from some kind of workplace wellness program or services (and an estimated 9.8% of workers globally).³⁷ Workplace wellness typically benefits only a small slice of workers who mostly work for multinational corporations and in knowledge-intensive industries (e.g., finance, investment, consulting, information technology, high-tech, higher education, and creative industries), or those living in the region's wealthiest countries/cities. Meanwhile, the majority of the world's workers are in contingent, part-time, temporary, irregular, informal, and unpaid work arrangements with a lack of health care and social protections, as well as lack of oversight for work-related health and safety risks.

Low participation rates. Among the workers who have access to workplace wellness, the levels of engagement and participation in these programs are typically low. A 2015 survey in the United States conducted by the Global Wellness Institute and Everyday Health found that 49% of workers said their employer offers a workplace wellness program, but only 31% actually participated in it. Other studies have shown participation rates ranging from 5% to 46% for specific wellness program components, and very limited employee use of EAPs (5%) to help cope with stress, substance abuse, and other issues.³⁸ A 2015 MetLife survey found slightly higher participation rates in the PRC (69%) and India (48%). However, the survey also found that, globally, employees in good health have wellness program participation rates three times higher than those in fair or poor health (who need these services the most).³⁹ The reasons for low participation are myriad, including that wellness offerings may not be well targeted to employee needs, or employees may not even know that they are available. There is also a very real and rising concern about employee privacy issues when employers have access to personal

³⁷ Global Wellness Institute (2018).

³⁸ Global Wellness Institute. 2016. *The Future of Wellness at Work*. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/the-future-of-wellness-at-work/>.

³⁹ Institute for Health and Productivity Management and MetLife. 2016. *Global Workplace Wellness: Healthy Employees, Healthy Business*. https://www.ihpm.org/pdf/IHPM_MetLife_wp_lores.pdf.

health data.⁴⁰ Some employers use incentives to boost employee participation, but these can be controversial or counterproductive when they are seen as coercive or punitive.⁴¹

No conclusive evidence on effectiveness. Many research studies have been conducted on whether workplace wellness programs have an impact on health outcomes or generate cost savings for employers, although most studies are based in the United States, and very few companies track any outcomes from their wellness programs at all. The authors cannot draw broad conclusions from existing studies because the findings are so varied. Some large companies with longstanding wellness programs, such as Johnson & Johnson⁴² and PepsiCo,⁴³ have documented positive results and cost savings in longitudinal studies, as have other meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and model simulations conducted and published by Harvard University,⁴⁴ the World Economic Forum,⁴⁵ the American Journal of Health Promotion,⁴⁶ and the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.⁴⁷ However, these studies are often guarded in their positive findings, and they highlight the significant methodological challenges when trying to measure outcomes (such as selection bias). Some high-profile studies that have had mixed or negative findings on wellness program impacts have been highly controversial among those with a stake in the industry (for example, a 2013 Rand study,⁴⁸ a 2015–2016 randomized control trial recently published in *Journal of the American Medical Association [JAMA]*,⁴⁹ and the University of Illinois Workplace Wellness study).⁵⁰ In short, research studies show that some programs are well designed and effectively implemented, while some are not; some program components yield stronger return on investment measurements than others; and some programs have strong impacts, while others are utter failures. Studies point toward certain program

⁴⁰ I. Ajunwa. 2017. Workplace Wellness Programs Could Be Putting Your Health Data at Risk. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2017/01/workplace-wellness-programs-could-be-putting-your-health-data-at-risk>; and D.W. Brin. 2016. *Wellness Programs Raise Privacy Concerns Over Health Data*. Society for Human Resource Management. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/technology/pages/wellness-programs-raise-privacy-concerns-over-health-data.aspx>.

⁴¹ Rand. 2015. Incentives for Workplace Wellness Programs. *Rand Research Brief*. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB9800/RR9842/RAND_RB9842.pdf; and J. Appleby. 2015. When Does Workplace Wellness Become Coercive? *Kaiser Health News*. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://khn.org/news/when-does-a-workplace-wellness-program-become-coercive-rather-than-voluntary/>.

⁴² J. Quelch and C. Knoop. 2014. *Johnson & Johnson: The Promotion of Wellness*. Harvard Business School/Harvard School of Public Health Case Study No. 9-514–112. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Publishing.

⁴³ J.P. Caloveras, H. Liu, et al. 2014. Managing manifest diseases, but not health risks, saved PepsiCo money over seven years. *Health Affairs*, 33(1), 124–131. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2013.0625>.

⁴⁴ Baicker, K., Cutler, D., and Song, Z. (2010, January). Workplace Wellness Programs Can Generate Savings. *Health Affairs*, 29(2), 304–311. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2009.0626>.

⁴⁵ World Economic Forum and Boston Consulting Group. 2010. *The New Discipline of Workplace Wellness: Enhancing Corporate Performance by Tackling Chronic Disease*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum. <http://www.bcg.com/documents/file40624.pdf>.

⁴⁶ S. Baxter et al. 2014. The relationship between return on investment and quality of study methodology in workplace health promotion programs. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 28(6), 347–363. <https://doi.org/10.4278/ajhp.130731-LIT-395>.

⁴⁷ R. Goetzel et al. 2014. Do Workplace Health Promotion (Wellness) Programs Work? *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 56(9), 927–934. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000000276>.

⁴⁸ S. Mattke et al. 2013. *Workplace Wellness Programs Study: Final Report*. Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation. http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR254.html.

⁴⁹ Z. Song and K. Baicker. 2019. Effect of a Workplace Wellness Program on Employee Health and Economic Outcomes: A Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA*, 321(15), 1491–1501. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2019.3307>.

⁵⁰ D. Jones et al. 2018. *What Do Workplace Wellness Programs Do? Evidence from the Illinois Workplace Wellness Study*. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(4), 1747–1791. https://www.nber.org/workplacewellness/s/IL_Wellness_Study_1.pdf.

features that can be more effective or can boost participation rates (these are addressed in the section below). For companies looking to draw a direct line from their wellness programs to health cost savings and the bottom line, it appears that programs focusing on targeted disease management interventions yield a greater return on investment than broader lifestyle management-focused programs.⁵¹

Siloed and reactive programs. Most employers offer a cross-section of separate programs, services, and benefits that address different aspects of employee wellness, including workplace wellness programs, EAPs, occupational safety and health programs, and workers' compensation and accident insurance. These programs usually operate in silos; they are not coordinated with each other and are disconnected from other employer-sponsored benefits and policies, such as compensation, health/medical benefits, paid time off, retirement, and child care benefits. Most of these programs are reactive (primarily designed to address problems that workers bring into the workplace), rather than preventing health and wellness issues proactively, much less truly enhancing employee wellbeing. Workplace wellness typically falls under the domain of human resources, as a necessary component of employee benefits packages, and is not central to company operations, management style, organizational culture, or mission.

Unsustainable solutions to systematic problems. Typical workplace wellness programs provide a suite of programs and services that address employees' general health and wellness issues related to lifestyle, health behaviors, and chronic disease. Services typically fall into three categories: (i) screenings to detect health risks, (ii) managing lifestyle and behaviors to reduce risks, and (iii) managing chronic conditions and diseases. In most countries, these employer-sponsored wellness services are simply supplementing or filling gaps in preventive care that is not well-provided or addressed at all by health care systems or insurers (whether public or private). Companies are motivated to provide these services because they can see the impact of rising unwellness and chronic disease on their bottom lines. In an era of corporate outsourcing of non-core functions, one must ask whether employers are the best channel for addressing preventive health, lifestyle and behavior change, and disease management services, or whether these issues should be the responsibility of companies at all. As they exist today, workplace wellness programs are largely a stopgap measure, and are not going to provide long-term, sustainable solutions to widespread systematic failures in health care and public policy.

Overemphasis on health problems outside the workplace. Employees bring many personal problems into the workplace, including chronic health issues, addictions, mental stress, financial problems, and family issues, and, certainly, these can have a negative impact on work. As mentioned above, most employer-sponsored workplace wellness programs focus on these types of "outside" issues, via offerings, such as health checkups, subsidized fitness memberships, EAPs, and financial planning. While it is laudable for companies to help workers address their health and personal issues, whether as a form of corporate social responsibility or as a business cost control measure, the ability of employers to measurably impact these widespread challenges may be limited, given the vast socioeconomic, societal, and environmental influences at play in people's health behaviors and outcomes.

⁵¹ Rand. 2014. Do Workplace Wellness Programs Save Employers Money? *Rand Research Brief*. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB9700/RB9744/RAND_RB9744.pdf.

On the other hand, very few workplace wellness programs acknowledge or address the fact that issues within the workplace also have an enormous impact on our personal health and wellness, an impact that is often negative. Hazardous and unhealthy working conditions are rampant in many industries, especially in developing countries, and current public and private sector policies are inadequate, given the alarmingly high level of work-related accidents, injuries, illnesses, and deaths in Asia and around the world (section I). In addition to physical risks, work can also create mental and emotional distress, such as the challenges of low wages, long working hours, the inability to unplug, lack of work-life balance, abusive work culture, or difficult relationships with bosses and coworkers. These work-related stressors can lead to physical and mental illnesses. Yet, these are not the focus of most workplace wellness programs, even though they are the wellness issues over which employers have the most leverage and control. When wellness is not a strategic focus or core value of most organizations, wellness initiatives are conducted in isolation from the day-to-day working environment; they are merely a “Band-Aid solution” and do not address the root of the problem.

A holistic framework for workplace wellness

Like it or not, our work and our wellness are locked in an interdependent relationship. We all bring our underlying state of wellness to work with us—our physical and mental health, family life and relationships, personal motivations, values, and experiences—and these factors affect our job performance. At the same time, what we do at work and how we work have a profound impact on our personal wellness, from our financial stability and social status, to our physical health and stress, and even our self-esteem and sense of purpose. Our personal wellness is optimized when both our working lives and personal lives are positive and mutually reinforcing. A comprehensive framework to improve workplace wellness should first look inward, to mitigate the unwellness that work and workplaces bring into the lives of workers, in addition to addressing the nonwork-related issues that may have an impact on workers’ health and wellbeing (and resulting job performance and productivity).

1. Ensure physically safe working conditions and healthy environments.

Everyone works within a specific physical environment or space, be it indoors, outdoors, on the road (in an airplane or vehicle), at home, in spaces provided by employers or clients, or in a combination of sites. Work also places many demands on our bodies—whether we sit at a desk all day or stand on our feet, whether we lift patients or heavy boxes, or whether we operate heavy equipment or handle dangerous chemicals. The physical environment and the physical demands of our work can greatly affect our health and wellbeing. Regardless of where we work, every worker has a basic human right to a safe and healthy working environment.⁵² Adherence to existing standards and regulations and application of safe and healthy practices should be the baselines for every employer. However, basic physical health and safety are not enough to meet the demands of the next economic era. Employers

⁵² ILO. 2009. *Health and life at work: A basic human right – World Day for Safety and Health at Work 2009*. Geneva, Switzerland: ILO. https://www.ilo.org/safework/WCMS_108590/lang--en/index.htm.

need to go further, proactively infusing health and wellness-enhancing features into physical work environments in order to encourage motivated, happy, and productive workers.

Reduce hazards and prioritize safe and healthy work conditions.

Every job or workplace brings with it different types of physical health hazards and risks; for example, nurses risking back injuries from lifting heavy patients; office workers with carpal tunnel syndrome; truck drivers facing road accidents; professional athletes suffering concussions; and factory workers dealing with hazardous chemicals, heavy equipment, or loud noises. Despite the proliferation of government regulations on workplace and occupational safety and health, work is unhealthy and unsafe for many workers across Asia. As noted earlier, an estimated 1.8 million people died from occupational injuries or work-related diseases in Asia in 2015 (accounting for over two-thirds of all work-related mortality globally). An additional 267 million persons suffered from nonfatal occupational accidents that resulted in at least 4 days absence from work in 2014.⁵³ Physical safety and health at work is a dual responsibility of both the public and private sectors.

- On the one hand, governments have a responsibility to monitor and enforce existing standards, while stepping up regulations where protections are lacking. For example, Singapore's strong enforcement of workplace safety and health policies has reduced work-related fatal injuries from 4.9 per 100,000 to 1.2 in 2017–2018. Recent measures aim to reduce this rate to 1.0 per 100,000 by 2028, in part by encouraging employers to take more ownership of safety, increasing transparency about injury and fatality rates, and empowering workers to speak up about risky situations.⁵⁴
- On the other hand, employers have a responsibility to adhere to government standards (and even exceed them) and must take basic safety standards seriously, such as fire and prevention and safety measures, means of egress, adequate ventilation and temperature control, and lead and asbestos levels, and more. Workplace safety must be treated as a corporate priority and communicated to all managers and line workers. Workers need to feel safe to speak up when they face a risky or unsafe work situation, even if it means missing production targets.
- Industry associations, labor unions, and nongovernment organizations can play an important advocacy role in informing policies that protect the health and safety of workers, especially as changing technologies and new modes of work in each occupation bring different risks and potential hazards.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, individual workers need to be informed about the risks they face in their job, and empowered to advocate for improvements.

⁵³ P. Hämäläinen, J. Takala, and T.B. Kiat. 2017. *Global Estimates of Occupational Accidents and Work-Related Illnesses 2017*. Singapore: Workplace Safety and Health Institute. <http://www.ichweb.org/site/images/news/pdf/Report%20Global%20Estimates%20of%20Occupational%20Accidents%20and%20Work-related%20Illnesses%202017%20rev1.pdf>.

⁵⁴ G.W. Hoe and C.K. Sing. 2019. Why Singapore's new approach to workplace safety and health matters (to you). *Today*. <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/why-singapores-new-approach-workplace-safety-and-health-matters-you>. Singapore's Ministry of Manpower and Workplace Safety and Health Council also provide extensive resources and case studies on best practices in Asia. See: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/workplace-safety-and-health/wsh-best-practices> and <https://www.wshc.sg/>.

⁵⁵ S. Li and M. Wang. 2017. International experience of co-governance in occupational safety. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 6(2), 170–186. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2017.1391622>; J.K. Park and T.T. Kjai. 2015. Occupational Safety and Health Activities Conducted across Countries in Asia. *Safety and Health at Work*, 6(2), 143–145.

Create healthy and wellness-enhancing work environments.

Scientists are only beginning to understand how synthetic and natural materials, light, sound, and other features in the built environment affect human health. Modern construction techniques, building materials, and products expose workers to numerous potentially harmful substances in their workplaces, such as polyvinyl chloride and phthalates, flame retardants, volatile organic compounds, antimicrobials, bisphenol A, and nanomaterials. Indoor air quality and “sick building syndrome” were identified as major concerns by the World Health Organization (WHO) over 30 years ago,⁵⁶ and yet these issues have not received adequate attention, and they continue to threaten the health of workers in offices and other buildings around the world. Ongoing and expanded research is needed in both the public and private sectors to understand and ameliorate these impacts, while policymakers need to keep up with the latest research and clinical studies in order to update building standards.

At a minimum, workplace built environments should not make their inhabitants sick. However, recent developments in architecture, management science, organizational psychology, and environmental science are providing new insights into how working environments can actually increase workers’ productivity, happiness, and wellness at work. For example, a study in the United Kingdom showed that the “high performance” office buildings can improve productivity by 12.5%, while the worst buildings can reduce productivity by 17.5%.⁵⁷ The environmental and sustainability movements have advanced design and construction techniques that enhance the wellness of both the planet and individuals, such as access to fresh air (windows that open or access to outdoor spaces); access to daylight and other natural elements indoors (windows with views or greenery and plants inside); thermal control and good air quality; and the use of environment-friendly, natural, healthy, and “toxin-free” materials. Major green building certifications, such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) and Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM), now include criteria related to indoor environments and occupant health and wellbeing.⁵⁸ In Japan, the government has worked with the Institute for Building Environment and Energy Conservation (IBEC) to develop a health and wellness certification for offices as part of the country’s Comprehensive Assessment System for Built Environment Efficiency (CASBEE) certification system with the first project

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2015.03.001>; and K. Kazutaka. 2012. Roles of Participatory Action-oriented Programs in Promoting Safety and Health at Work. *Safety and Health at Work*, 3(3), 155–165.

<https://doi.org/10.5491/SHAW.2012.3.3.155>.

⁵⁶ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. 1991. *Indoor Air Facts No. 4 (revised): Sick Building Syndrome*.

http://www2.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2014-08/documents/sick_building_factsheet.pdf; and World Health Organization (WHO). No date. *WHO guidelines for indoor air quality*. <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/environment-and-health/air-quality/policy/who-guidelines-for-indoor-air-quality> (accessed 6 November 2019).

⁵⁷ A. Leaman. 2000. The Productive Workplace: themes and variations. *Building Services Journal*.

<https://www.usablebuildings.co.uk/UsableBuildings/Unprotected/ProductivityBSJ2000paper.pdf>; A. Leaman and B.

Bordass. 2016. *Productivity in Buildings: The Killer Variables Twenty Years On*.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313553225_Productivity_in_Buildings_The_Killer_Variables; A. Leaman.

2005. *Productivity in Buildings: the Killer Variables Updated*.

<http://www.usablebuildings.co.uk/Pages/Unprotected/KVChicagoApr05.pdf>; and A. Leaman and B. Bordass. 1998. Probe 15: Productivity the killer variables. *Building Services Journal*, E19-E21.

<http://www.usablebuildings.co.uk/Probe/ProbePDFs/Probe15.pdf>.

⁵⁸ For more information: <https://tools.breeam.com/filelibrary/Briefing%20Papers/99427-BREEAM-Health---Wellbeing-Briefing.pdf> and <https://www.usgbc.org/articles/human-health-and-wellbeing-through-leed>.

evaluations taking place in 2019.⁵⁹ Over the last decade, new health-focused building certifications, such as WELL and Fitwel,⁶⁰ have also been introduced, which provide guidelines, road maps, and standards for companies to design wellness-enhancing built environments for their employees. To date, there are 16 Fitwel certified projects and 45 WELL certified projects across Asia (primarily in Australia and the PRC, as well as Taipei, China; Japan; India; the Philippines; Singapore; and Viet Nam).⁶¹ These certifications are still new and evolving, and more research is needed to validate the impact of various workplace environmental features on worker health, wellbeing, and productivity, and to prioritize the most effective approaches. Clearly, not every company has the resources to achieve these kinds of certifications or to create new, purpose-built wellness-enhancing campuses, but many of these improvements can be made incrementally and over time with more modest investments.

2. Promote healthy behaviors at work.

Health researchers have identified five major determinants of people's health (genetics, behavior, social circumstances, environmental and physical influences, and medical care) and recent research has placed heavy emphasis on the influences of our social and physical environment (that is, the conditions in which we are born, live, work, and age).⁶² Since many of us spend up to half our waking hours at work, the working environment (both physical and social) can have a profound influence on our lifestyles and health behaviors. As individuals, we are responsible for making good choices about how to live and take care of ourselves. However, our workplaces play an important role in supporting or hindering us in this personal endeavor.

Use design and amenities to drive healthy behaviors during the work day.

While employers may have little direct influence over how their employees behave at home or during their daily lives, they can and do have significant influence on employee behavior within the workplace. Many companies are making incremental changes in workplaces and workspaces to promote employee wellness and encourage healthy choices and behaviors. These include a variety of design features and amenities, such as ergonomic workstations and equipment, standing and treadmill desks, private spaces for personal needs (e.g., nap/meditation rooms, lactation rooms), cafeterias with healthy food options, on-site fitness facilities, bike sharing/parking, outdoor walking paths, rooftop gardens, accessible and attractive stairways, and other features, which help employees to be active, exercise, eat better, take breaks, meditate, be exposed to nature, and do other positive things for their personal wellness during the work day.

The technology and creative industries have spearheaded trends, such as open floor plans, unassigned desks, flexible and collaborative spaces, as well as campus-like environments with amenities like games, play equipment, and cafes and bars. Meanwhile, a new sector of flexible and coworking office

⁵⁹ Japan readies certification for healthier office buildings. *Nikkei Asian Review*. 15 August 2017. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-readies-certification-for-healthier-office-buildings2>; and CASBEE Wellness Office Evaluation Certification. *IBEC*. http://www.ibec.or.jp/CASBEE/certification/WO_certification.html.

⁶⁰ For more information: <https://www.fitwel.org/> and <http://www.wellcertified.com/>.

⁶¹ Authors' analysis of Fitwel and WELL online project databases as of November 2019. <https://www.fitwel.org/project-directory> and <https://www.wellcertified.com/directories/projects>.

⁶² L. McGovern, G. Miller, and P. Hughes-Cromwick. 2014. Health Policy Brief: The Relative Contributions of Multiple Determinants to Health Outcomes. *Health Affairs*. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hpb20140821.404487>.

space providers is proliferating across Asia (and globally). According to CBRE Research, the square footage of flex/coworking office space in Asia grew by 200% from 2015 to 2017,⁶³ and it is growing rapidly because these kinds of spaces serve several needs. On the one hand, they provide freelancers and startups with access to workspaces designed for collaboration, creativity, and flexibility, as well as extensive lifestyle/wellness-oriented amenities (things that otherwise might only be available in corporate-type jobs and workplaces). At the same time, these spaces are also increasingly popular among medium-sized to large-sized companies because they are an easy way to provide employees with such workspaces without having to curate or design these offerings for themselves. Whether these developments are just cost-cutting measures or the latest fads to attract the younger workers, the desire to use workspace design as a means to stimulate collaboration and creativity is here to stay.

However, employers must be careful to ensure that redesigned workspaces and amenities are not just superficial changes, but rather an intentional component of a company's culture and employees' needs and work styles. For example, wellness-focused amenities like on-site gyms or gardens are much more likely to affect health behaviors if employees are allowed and encouraged to utilize them during the work day. In Japan, many companies are starting to encourage workers to take nap breaks at work, supported by a health ministry recommendations emphasizing the importance of sleep and taking a 30-minute nap every afternoon, as well as the cultural concept of *inemuri* ("sleeping while present").⁶⁴ In several Asian countries (Japan; the PRC; and Taipei, China), workplace-based group exercise is popular, and even sometimes required. In Japan, more than 27 million workers across all industries—from banking to construction to factories—take mandatory exercise breaks during their work days to do a short workout routine together. This culturally based practice (rooted in the Japanese tradition of *kaizen* or "continuous improvement") has been around for decades, supported by the century-old *rajio taisō* ("radio calisthenics") programs that are broadcast nationally several times a day. In Beijing, the government reinstated mandatory exercise breaks at state-owned companies in 2010, also supported by radio-based programming, and sent 5,000 trained instructors into companies to teach workers the exercise routines. Governments and companies in other countries, including the United Kingdom and Sweden, are now looking to learn from and institute these kinds of practices.⁶⁵

⁶³ CBRE Research. 2018. *Rapid Proliferation of Flexible Space in APAC*. https://www.cbre.com/-/media/images/asia-pacific/2018/research/rsh_5543_apac_agile-workspace_infographic_16x9_09_rapid-proliferation-of-agile-space-in-apac.jpg; C. Foertsch. 2018. The State of Coworking Spaces in Asia. *DeskMag*. <http://www.deskmag.com/en/the-state-of-coworking-spaces-in-asia-market-report-survey-992>; and S. Suh-young. 2019. 8 of Asia's most beautiful luxury co-working spaces. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/tech-design/article/3011943/8-asias-most-beautiful-luxury-co-working-spaces>.

⁶⁴ J. McCurry. 2014. Japanese firms encourage their dozy workers to sleep on the job. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/18/japanese-firms-encourage-workers-sleep-on-job>; and M. Shibata. 2019. Why overtired Japan is turning to office siestas. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190809-why-overtired-japan-is-turning-to-office-siestas>.

⁶⁵ J. McCurry. 2019. Listen, bend and stretch: how Japan fell in love with exercise on the radio. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/20/japan-love-mass-radio-exercise-rajio-taiso>; J.M. Glionna. 2010. China's state-mandated lunge break. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-aug-31-la-fg-china-exercise-20100901-story.html>; C. Bas-Wohlert. 2018. Mandatory exercise at the office, Sweden's latest craze. *The Jakarta Post*. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2018/02/28/mandatory-exercise-at-the-office-swedens-latest-craze.html>; and Should exercise be compulsory at work? *British Broadcasting Corporation*. 5 April 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-39490607>.

Cultivate healthy relationships and encourage friendships among colleagues.

With a few exceptions, most of us work with people: customers, colleagues, managers, subordinates, and sometimes even our families. The quality of these interactions and relationships has a profound impact on our own mental wellness and that of the people around us. Advances in neuroscience and imaging technology and the rise of interdisciplinary studies in biological, social, behavioral, and management sciences have led to major breakthroughs in our understanding of the connections among human interactions, our emotions, our motor and cognitive abilities, and our physical health and mental resilience. Interactions that are characterized by kindness, respect, collegiality, openness, teamwork, and a shared purpose increase our sense of wellbeing.

Over many years of survey research on organizational performance and personal wellbeing, Gallup has identified having “a best friend at work” as one of the key traits for productive work groups and high employee retention.⁶⁶ We all need healthy relationships in our lives to be mentally and emotionally well. Because friendship is based on trust, its impact in a work setting is manifold. Research has shown that friendships within a workplace can increase collaboration, communication, and honest feedback; drive a sense of loyalty (i.e., the need to have your friend’s back and a commitment to shared success); reduce misunderstanding and friction; and help to increase retention.⁶⁷ Clearly, friendships at work can increase productivity and benefit employers, but the main beneficiaries are the people who get to work with others they can trust and respect and who care about their wellbeing. For example, Gallup observed that employees who reported having a best friend at work were 43% more likely to report having received praise or recognition for their work in the last 7 days, and were 37% more likely to report that someone at work encourages their development.⁶⁸

3. Cultivate a healthy work culture.

Many factors in our workplaces, from organizational culture to management styles to compensation and benefits, go far beyond the scope of traditional “wellness programs” and can be improved to ensure that the relationship between work and personal wellness is a positive one. Glassdoor.com’s research on companies that consistently rate as “best places to work” found that these companies have several common traits, including a well-defined mission that motivates employees, a culture of engaged employees, and a people-oriented culture that values employees.⁶⁹ Both research and anecdotal evidence suggest that the most effective employee wellness initiatives are implemented within the context of a broader organizational culture of wellness, which treats employees as key assets and proactively addresses all aspects of their wellbeing. Wellness-oriented work cultures must address and mitigate the stress and work-life balance issues that are major factors in employee’s mental and physical wellness, and may even help employees enhance their sense of purpose at work.

⁶⁶ Item 10: I Have a Best Friend at Work. *Gallup Business Journal*. 26 May 1999.
<http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/511/item-10-best-friend-work.aspx>.

⁶⁷ R. Friedman. 2014. *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace*. New York: Perigee Books.

⁶⁸ Item 10: I Have a Best Friend at Work. *Gallup Business Journal*. 26 May 1999.
<http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/511/item-10-best-friend-work.aspx>.

⁶⁹ Glassdoor. 2016. What Do All the 2017 Best Places to Work Have in Common? *Glassdoor.com blog*.
<https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/2017-best-places-work-common/>.

In addition, the best initiatives originate top–down from executive management and are often led by a wellness “evangelist” who is passionate about wellness and leads by example.⁷⁰

Recognize and mitigate overwork and stress.

Stress and work-life balance are universal concerns of workers and employers around the world. A Willis Towers Watson survey found that stress was the number one workforce risk faced by employers globally and the number two risk among employers in Asia.⁷¹ A growing number of companies are trying to address employee stress and its health impacts via their workplace wellness programs, typically offering classes (e.g., yoga, meditation/mindfulness, time management, and stress management), counseling, or perks and on-site amenities (e.g., nap pods, quiet rooms, free massages, and games/activities). To promote work-life balance, some employers may also offer options, such as part-time, flextime, and off-site work, as well as family leave, assistance/subsidies for childcare, and other services. These kinds of benefits are highly desired by most employees. However, the challenge is that these benefits are only useful if the company culture supports employees to take advantage of them. What is the use of lunchtime yoga or a free massage if workers have no time to take part? Can workers take paternity leave if it would affect their prospect for advancement? How does flextime help if workers are expected to answer emails late into the night?

Further, workplace wellness programs do little to address the work culture and organizational issues that are often the primary cause of employee stress: that employers are often making more demands than their employees can handle, that the 24/7 nature of work communications does not allow for rest and rejuvenation, and that work can relentlessly intrude on our lives in an unhealthy way. Some types of working arrangements that companies tout for their flexibility (e.g., gig workers for companies like Uber or Grab) can significantly increase stress for many workers (as elaborated in section II). Many managers are part of the problem, addicted to their devices and perpetuating a culture of manufactured urgency and the expectation of instantaneous responses. Executives, managers and supervisors, and individual workers can all play a role in balancing expectations, reshaping organizational cultures, and reorganizing work tasks and hierarchies in a way that allows for downtime and proactively prevents stress and burnout. In Japan, a country known for its entrenched culture of overwork, the government is attempting to address these issues through “work-style reform” legislation that caps overtime work hours and requires workers to take paid leave time each year.⁷² Some Japanese companies (e.g., Microsoft Japan, Fast Retailing/Uniqlo, Yahoo Japan, and NEC Corp.) are experimenting with shortened/flexible work weeks and finding that employees are both happier and more productive. In the Philippines (and other countries such as France), the government is

⁷⁰ An example of Aetna is at: How Aetna CEO brings health and healing to workplace. *CBS News*. 26 March 2015. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/aetna-ceo-mark-bertolini-healthy-workplace-healing-meditation-yoga/>.

⁷¹ Willis Towers Watson. 2016. *2015/2016 Staying@Work™ – Asia Findings*. <https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-ID/insights/2016/03/2015-2016-Staying-at-Work-Asia-findings>.

⁷² K. Paul. 2019. Microsoft Japan tested a four-day work week and productivity jumped by 40%. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/04/microsoft-japan-four-day-work-week-productivity>; M. Koizumi. 2019. Japanese companies warming up – slowly – to four-day workweek. *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/02/12/reference/japanese-companies-warming-slowly-four-day-workweek/> and D. Demetriou. 2019. New labour law puts limits on Japan’s overworking culture. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/04/02/new-labour-law-puts-limits-japans-overworking-culture/>.

pushing companies to address work-life balance with “right to disconnect” laws that prohibit electronic communications outside of regular work hours.⁷³

Integrate wellbeing into leadership.

Leaders have an outsized role in establishing the workplace culture, which in turn shapes social interactions at work. If the message from the top is that profit must be sustained and increased every quarter at all costs, human and even ethical considerations may be pushed aside. If a leader believes that human capital is the organization’s most important asset, and demonstrates this commitment through his/her actions and decisions, the message will filter down to all levels of the organization, influencing its culture and its employees’ relationships with one another. In fact, people yearn for positive role models and leadership at work. Studies have shown that, when managers are fair to their team members in an interpersonal way, team members become more committed and effective and will show more citizenship behavior.⁷⁴ Leading by example, managers can promote positive behaviors, such as fair praise, regular and constructive feedback, empathy and understanding, honesty, and openness.⁷⁵ When management fosters a culture of wellness at all levels, there are greater possibilities for harnessing human energies toward new innovations, more productive collaborations, and better partnerships that benefit the organization as a whole.

Align work with personal values, intrinsic motivations, and purpose.

Work is always going to be experienced and filtered through our individual values and motivations. Are my tasks interesting or boring? Does my job advance or thwart my ambitions? Do I feel valued or exploited? Am I growing as a person? Am I contributing something to the world? Do I like the people with whom I spend my days? Does my employer respect and support my life outside of work? Honest answers to these questions determine whether we are filled with a sense of joy or loaded with misery after a day of work.

For most employers, aligning work with employees’ personal values and intrinsic motivations may not be a foremost concern. Yet, if a worker is unmotivated, he/she will most likely become disengaged and unproductive. Indeed, businesses are taking heed, as leadership, culture, and employee engagement have become management buzzwords in recent years. Some organizations have deliberately abandoned the traditional, hierarchical management structure and are empowering employees to seek their passions, define their roles, elect their own leaders, perform their work with more autonomy and purpose, and even set their own compensation.⁷⁶ While many of these practices are still emerging,

⁷³ M. Vardeleon. 2017. Workers have right to ‘disconnect’ – DOLE. *The Manila Times*. <https://www.manilatimes.net/2017/02/01/news/latest-stories/workers-right-disconnect-dole/310057/>; and E.C. Collins et al. 2019. More Countries Consider Implementing a “Right to Disconnect.” *The National Law Review*. <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/more-countries-consider-implementing-right-to-disconnect>.

⁷⁴ T. Qiu, W. Qualls, J. Bohlmann, and D. Rupp. 2009. The Effect of Interactional Fairness on the Performance of Cross-Functional Product Development Teams: A Multilevel Mediated Model. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 26(2), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5885.2009.00344.x>.

⁷⁵ E. Seppälä. 2014. The hard data on being a nice boss. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2014/11/the-hard-data-on-being-a-nice-boss>.

⁷⁶ For some of the new organizational concepts and examples: F. Laloux. 2014. *Reinventing Organizations*. Brussels, Belgium: Nelson Parker; and J. Ritchit-Dunham and B. Pruitt. 2014. *Ecosynomics, The Science of Abundance*. Belchertown, Massachusetts: Vibrancy Publishing.

most organizations, whether they are for-profit or mission-driven, can do better in explicitly linking their objectives with employees' motivations and sense of purpose, such as articulating how customers' lives are made better or the impact of their work on the community.

Recognizing this intrinsic motivation, some business leaders have even begun to frame their business missions and visions in terms of customer, social, and community impacts, moving toward a purpose-driven mission rather than a profit-driven one. The concept of corporate social responsibility has been around for decades, and it broadly translates into practices that promote ethical business behavior, environmental sustainability, fair labor practices, and social impact in the community. In recent years, new business philosophies have emerged that expand and/or redirect a purely profit-seeking business model toward social good. For example, a new type of corporate entity, the "B Corp" or "For-Benefit Corporation," explicitly recognizes social benefits as a core corporate mission.⁷⁷ Some companies have adopted the *triple bottom line* to measure their performance using financial, social, and environmental metrics, while others have added "treating employees well" to create the quadruple bottom line measurement.⁷⁸ The concept of "net-positive" or "positive handprints"⁷⁹ has also emerged, which seeks to capture the intangible value of making a positive contribution to the world, rather than only minimizing the negative impacts of business. The spread of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting, the development of ESG guidelines, and the growth of socially responsible investing and impact investing are helping to encourage companies to consider their business practices and impacts.⁸⁰ These examples point to the many ways that business and organizational leaders can incorporate the notion of "purpose" in work as a source of motivation and wellness for their employees.

4. Support healthy habits outside work.

As elaborated above, typical workplace wellness programs provide a suite of programs and services that address employees' general health and wellness issues related to lifestyle, behavior, and disease management. These programs tend to be disconnected from what may be happening within the workplace, and they are filling widespread gaps in the provision of preventive health services. While employer provision of preventive health and lifestyle services will not fix the systematic failures of the world's health care systems, these programs are expected to grow in the near-term because companies can see the negative impact of chronic disease and rising health costs on their bottom lines. Research on workplace wellness programs points toward approaches that can make them more effective. For example, the most effective wellness programs provide tailored options and allow

⁷⁷ Fourth Sector Network. No date. *For-Benefit Corporations*. <http://www.fourthsector.net/learn/for-benefit-corporations> (accessed 6 November 2019).

⁷⁸ E.E. Lawler. 2014. The quadruple bottom line has come. *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/edwardlawler/2014/05/07/the-quadruple-bottom-line-its-time-has-come/>.

⁷⁹ G. Norris. 2015. *Handprint-Based NetPositive Assessment*. Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and SHINE. http://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/chge/files/handprint-based_netpositive_assessment.pdf; and NetPositive Project. <https://www.netpositiveproject.org/>.

⁸⁰ For more information on ESG in Asia and globally: CFA Institute and PRI. 2019. *ESG Integration in Asia Pacific: Markets, Practices, and Data*. <https://www.cfainstitute.org/-/media/documents/survey/esg-integration-apac.ashx>; A. Holt. 2019. Asian Companies Get Serious About ESG. *IR Magazine*. <https://www.irmagazine.com/reporting/asian-companies-get-serious-about-esg>; and R.G. Eccles and S. Klimenko. 2019. The Investor Revolution. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/05/the-investor-revolution>.

employees to choose what works for their individual, unique needs. With a growing recognition of how much our environments shape our behaviors, some companies are also extending programs to include families and address broader community factors that affect wellness.

Address diverse employee needs and cultural contexts.

A major shortcoming of typical wellness programs is that, too often, they are cookie-cutter or off-the-shelf packages that do not provide meaningful services for employees. In most wellness programs, a health risk assessment questionnaire or biometric screening tool is used as a starting point, to assess employee health risks. From there, employees may be channeled into an online educational program or seminar to address their individual health risks or issues, and often that is the full extent of the wellness program. Some companies may go a step further; for example, providing employees with lifestyle-related services or benefits to encourage healthy behaviors (e.g., subsidized gym memberships, free wearable trackers, “step challenges,” onsite immunization clinics or health fairs, nutrition counseling, and smoking cessation program) or enrolling employees in programs to manage chronic conditions or diseases (e.g., weight management program or competition, diabetes management, etc.).

These kinds of programs are most effective when they are tailored to the specific demographics, lifestyles, and needs of employees. Clearly, the health and wellness concerns of a 20-something tech worker would be very different than those of a 40-year-old single mother working in a retail environment, or a 50-plus factory worker. For companies operating across different regions and countries, or in multiethnic communities, it is also important to incorporate cultural sensitivities (such as to mental illness) and local wellness traditions (e.g., Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine), as well as awareness of unique health needs across different cultural and ethnic groups (such as local diet and disease prevalence), in order to engage employees in a meaningful way.⁸¹ Companies are increasingly relying on technology solutions to support customization and increase program flexibility. For example, instead of giving employees membership to a specific gym, companies can now utilize services like GymPass (the world’s largest corporate fitness platform), which gives employees unlimited a la carte access to thousands of gyms and fitness classes via an app. GymPass is currently working on entering the Asia market,⁸² where other providers include global firms like ClassPass and Asian firms like Singapore’s GuavaPass (recently acquired by ClassPass) and India’s FitPass. Other tech companies and apps are providing corporate wellness clients with customized, app-based services focusing on meditation, mindfulness, and mental wellness (such as Headspace, Calm, eMindful, and Singapore-based MindFi).

⁸¹ Global Wellness Institute. 2015. *2015 Roundtable Report, Redefining Workplace Wellness*. New York: Global Wellness Institute. <http://www.globalwellnessinstitute.org/re-defining-workplace-wellness-roundtable/>; and R. Sims. No date. A Failure to Communicate: How Cultural Incompetence Leaves Many Wellness Programs Incomplete. *Corporate Wellness Magazine*. <https://www.corporatewellnessmagazine.com/article/a-failure-to-communicate> (accessed 6 November 2019).

⁸² A. Mari. 2019. GymPass: The Growth Plans of a Brazilian Business Gone Global. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/angelicamarideoliveira/2019/09/04/gympass-the-growth-plans-of-a-brazilian-business-gone-global/#23f7da3d3ba4>.

Extend wellness benefits to families and community issues.

Behavioral science and psychology show that our household, socioeconomic, and physical environments have a massive influence on our lifestyles and behaviors.⁸³ Recognizing that delivering wellness services just to employees is not enough to influence lifestyle and behavior change, a growing number of companies are extending workplace wellness benefits to include family members (spouses and children). Including families in wellness programs can expand participation, improve outcomes, and can also help address health costs in places where employers are providing health insurance coverage for employees and their families.⁸⁴

While it is admirable when employers provide gym memberships, free health screenings, or yoga classes, these benefits are not particularly helpful if the most basic employee wellness issues are ignored. Employees' needs vary widely across locations, demographics, industries, and socioeconomic environments. In some developing countries, the most pressing health priority for workers could be clean air or safe drinking water in their communities, and perhaps not massage tables or Fitbits. It could be transportation and safety for female employees working night shifts, or childcare for single mothers, or it could be a matter of earning a living wage or improving work-life balance. Some of these issues may require creative solutions within the workplace, while others may require working with governments or local authorities. These types of programs are often pursued as part of corporate social responsibility initiatives, but they also have wide-ranging impacts on employee wellness and retention, as well as company productivity and bottom lines. For example, a study of the ILO on companies in developing countries that provide nutritious onsite meals or food vouchers for undernourished low-income employees found widespread positive impacts, including reduced illnesses and medical costs, reduced absenteeism, higher morale, and increased productivity.⁸⁵ Efforts to address the issues that are most important and appropriate for employees communicate a real sense of caring that slickly packaged wellness programs will not.

⁸³ S.E. Jackson, A. Steptoe, and J. Wardle. 2015. The Influence of Partner's Behavior on Health Behavior Change: The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 175(3), 385–392.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2014.7554>; M. Kelly and M. Barker. 2016. Why is changing health-related behavior so difficult? *Public Health*, 136, 109–116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2016.03.030>; B. Stulberg. 2014. The Key to Changing Individual Health Behaviors: Change the Environments That Give Rise to Them. *Harvard Public Health Review*, vol. 2. <http://harvardpublichealthreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/HPHRv2-Stulberg.pdf>; S. Kahan et al. 2014. *Health Behavior Change in Populations*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/health-behavior-change-populations>.

⁸⁴ D. Tobenkin. 2013. Wellness Agenda: Stay Well Together. *SHRM Magazine*. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0213-family-wellness-benefits.aspx>; V. Bolden-Barrett. 2017. Wellness programs involving employee spouses more likely to see engagement. *HR Dive Brief*. <https://www.hrdive.com/news/wellness-programs-involving-employee-spouses-more-likely-to-see-engagement/449127/>; and K. Moseley. 2017. Why employers should include spouses in well-being programs. *EBN Benefit News*. <https://www.benefitnews.com/opinion/why-employers-should-include-spouses-in-well-being-programs>.

⁸⁵ C. Wanjek. 2005. *Food at Work: Workplace Solutions for Malnutrition, Obesity and Chronic Diseases*. Geneva: International Labour Office. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_publ_9221170152_en.pdf.

IV. Workplace Wellness: A Business Case

As elaborated in section I, the impacts of an unwell workforce are enormous in terms of both economic costs and human suffering. It is relatively simple to quantify the monetary costs of a physically unwell workforce, since illness, injury, and chronic disease have direct, measurable impacts on health care spending, missed work days, lost wages, and productivity loss. For example, the global economic costs of work-related illness and injury have been estimated at between 1.8% and 6.0% of GDP across various countries, including 3.2% of Singapore’s GDP in 2011, and 4.8% of Australia’s GDP in 2008–2009.⁸⁶ Less tangible and quantifiable are the nonphysical aspects of workforce unwellness, such as financial stress and job insecurity, stress and burnout, and disengagement and disenfranchisement at work. Gallup has estimated that the economic costs of employee disengagement are about \$7 trillion in lost productivity globally, which represents over 8% of global GDP.⁸⁷

There is a strong business case to invest in the wellness of the workforce and workplace, especially in the context of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, whereby a range of new technologies are “fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human.”⁸⁸ Technology has already had wide-ranging impacts on work, productivity, and competitiveness. Not only are humans increasingly replaced by robots and computers for routine, computational, and repetitive tasks, even jobs in high-skilled professions such as law, medicine, and consulting are being threatened by rapidly advancing computing power and artificial intelligence. To compete with machines and add value, workers need to be creative, innovative, perceptive, intuitive, and adaptive. This requires workers to bring high levels of motivation and energy to work—qualities that most strongly manifest when an individual is healthy and intrinsically motivated, rather than lured by external rewards. In other words, organizations need workers with a high level of wellbeing—supported by a wellness-oriented work culture and environment—in order to survive and thrive in the future of work.

However, we do not need to look to the future for evidence. Already, there is a compelling business case that companies who care for and respect their employees are more competitive and successful in the marketplace.

Stock market performance. A study published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* showed that companies recognized by the C. Everett Koop National Health Awards for nurturing a culture of health, by specifically focusing on the wellbeing and safety of their workers, have outperformed the stock market by a factor of 3:1 from 2000 to 2014.⁸⁹ Companies that rate highly for their employee-focused cultures show similar results. For example, the Great Place to Work[®] Institute, which recognizes the 100 top companies in the United States for workplace culture, found that “great

⁸⁶ Takala, Hämäläinen, Saarela, et al (2014).

⁸⁷ J. Harter. 2017. GDP data from the International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Database*, July 2019 edition, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/01/weodata/index.aspx>.

⁸⁸ K. Schwab. 2016. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/about/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-by-klaus-schwab>.

⁸⁹ R. Goetzl et al. 2016. The Stock Performance of C. Everett Koop Award Winners Compared With the Standard & Poor’s 500 Index. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 58(1), 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000000632>.

workplaces” have stock market returns that were nearly three times higher than industry peers from 1998 to 2016.⁹⁰ Companies appearing on Glassdoor.com’s “best places to work” list (based on ratings derived directly from employee feedback) outperformed the S&P 500 by 115.6% from 2009 to 2014; conversely, companies with the lowest employee ratings on Glassdoor.com significantly underperformed the market.⁹¹ Notably, the few existing studies on the impact of employee wellness on stock market performance have been centered in the United States. One study in India found similarly positive results, with India’s “best companies to work for” outperforming key stock market indices by a factor of four from 2008 to 2016, yielding five times the return on an initial investment.⁹²

Key business performance metrics. A wealth of research has shown that employee engagement has a strong positive impact on companies’ bottom lines. Gallup, which has collected primary data and studied this topic for over 40 years, has conducted several large-scale, global meta-analyses that demonstrate a strong correlation between employee attitudes (satisfaction and engagement) and overall business outcomes. The latest 2016 study⁹³ aggregates data from 339 independent research studies (encompassing all available Gallup studies) across 230 organizations, including over 1.8 million employees in 73 countries, and it examines the relationship between employee engagement and nine business performance outcomes. Business units scoring in the top quartile for employee engagement outperformed those in the bottom quartile by 70% in safety incidents (fewer), 40% in quality defects (fewer), 41% in employee absenteeism (lower), 24%–59% in employee turnover (lower), 21% in profitability (higher), 20% in sales production (higher), and 10% in customer satisfaction (higher).

A separate study in the 2019 Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report has taken the same set of Gallup research data and conducted meta-analysis on the relationship between employee satisfaction and business outcomes.⁹⁴ It also found positive correlations between employee satisfaction with the organization as a place to work and key metrics such as customer satisfaction, productivity, and higher profitability, as well as a substantial negative correlation with staff turnover. While a large number of the studies included in the analysis were based in the United States, it also covered enterprises in a number of Asian economies, including Bangladesh; Cambodia; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Japan; Malaysia; Nepal; Pakistan; the PRC; the Philippines; the ROK; Singapore; Sri Lanka; Taipei, China; and Thailand. To look at differences between United States versus non-United States regions, the researchers conducted another meta-analysis by region and found evidence that employee

⁹⁰ Great Place to Work®. 2017. *Three Predictions for the Workplace Culture of the Future*.

https://www.greatplacetowork.com/images/reports/Fortune_100_Report_2017_FINAL.pdf; A. Edmans. 2011. Does the stock market fully value intangibles? Employee satisfaction and equity prices. *Journal of Financial Economics*, 101, 621–640. <http://faculty.london.edu/aedmans/Rowe.pdf>.

⁹¹ A. Chamberlain. 2015. *Does Company Culture Pay Off? Analyzing Stock Performance of “Best Places to Work” Companies*. Mill Valley, California: Glassdoor.com. https://research-content.glassdoor.com/app/uploads/sites/2/2015/05/GD_Report_1.pdf.

⁹² RSM India. 2017. *Study on Shareholder Returns of Great Workplaces—2017, Identified by Great Place To Work® Institute*. Mumbai: RSM Astute Consulting Group. https://www.rsm.global/india/sites/default/files/media/RSM%20India/Publications/2017/study_on_shareholder_returns_of_great_workplaces_-2017_-_by_rsm_india.pdf.

⁹³ J.K. Harter et al. 2016. *The Relationship Between Engagement at Work and Organizational Outcomes – 2016 Q12 Meta-Analysis: Ninth Edition*. Washington, DC: Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/reports/191489/q12-meta-analysis-report-2016.aspx>.

⁹⁴ C. Krekel et al. 2019. Employee Well-being, Productivity, and Firm Performance: Evidence and Case Studies. In Global Council for Happiness and Wellbeing, *Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report 2019*, 73–94. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/ghwbpr-2019/UAE/GHWPR19.pdf>.

satisfaction tends to be more important for performance outcomes in non-United States regions, with the exception of staff turnover, for which it is the opposite. Overall, 95% confidence intervals for United States and non-United States regions are highly overlapping, which the authors interpreted as a negligible degree of true regional differences in correlation.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ C. Krekel et al. 2019. Employee Well-being, Productivity, and Firm Performance: Evidence and Case Studies. In Global Council for Happiness and Wellbeing, *Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report 2019*, 73–94. New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/ghwbpr-2019/UAE/GHWPR19.pdf>.

V. Key Takeaways

Asia's workforce is increasingly unwell, and the region can scarcely afford it.

- Work-related illness, injuries, and deaths
- An aging workforce and the rise of chronic disease
- Job insecurity and financial stress
- Rampant mental stress and burnout
- Widespread workforce disengagement and disenfranchisement

The current workplace wellness market in Asia provides limited coverage.

- In 2017, Asia's workplace wellness market is estimated at \$9.3 billion (about 20% of global market).
- Only about 5.2% of all employed workers in Asia benefit from some form of workplace wellness program (and only 9.8% of workers globally).
- Across Asia, workplace wellness is still not a widespread concept, primarily benefiting those working for multinational corporations and in knowledge-intensive industries, and those living in the region's wealthiest countries/cities.

Current workplace wellness approaches are narrow and inadequate.

- Limited coverage, excluding most workers, especially those in contingent, part-time, and informal work arrangements
- Low participation rates among those who are offered wellness benefits
- No conclusive evidence on program effectiveness
- Siloed and reactive approach, focusing on fixing existing problems rather than preventing them
- Unsustainable solutions to systematic problems related to public health (e.g., lifestyles and behavior change, living environments, and managing chronic conditions)
- Over-emphasis on health problems outside the workplace, rather than problems caused by/in the workplace (such as physical dangers, rampant stress, and overwork).

An effective workplace wellness framework must be holistic and focus first on wellness challenges that arise within the workplace.

- Ensure physically safe working conditions and healthy environments.
- Promote healthy behaviors at work.
- Cultivate a healthy work culture.
- Support healthy habits outside work.

There is a strong business case for companies and society to invest in workplace wellness.

- Evidence from stock market performance
- Evidence from key business performance metrics (e.g., retention, profit, productivity, and customer satisfaction)