

Live Long, and Prosper

It's more than a Vulcan idiom from the well-known Star Trek franchise, it's an expression of support for both your business and the people within it.

In Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, Mister Spock famously laid down his life to save the crew of the Starship Enterprise when they found themselves in a tight and terminal spot. As you get your post-pandemic business back on track, you may not be called to do something quite so final or dramatic as this, but there are things you can sacrifice to safeguard the wellbeing of your staff.

This is important. In a recent Barclays report called, "Bouncing Back, how hospitality and leisure is gearing up to seize post-pandemic opportunities," staff wellness was of notable concern.

In the report, Edward Walsh, Group Financial Director at Coaching Inns said mental health and the impact of the return to work will be something his business will continue to monitor coming out of the current lockdown. Especially as it caught them by surprise after the last one.

"This time around," he said, "we're really going to monitor fatigue among the teams, because some of our employees haven't worked since October. What we found last summer was that people got tired quickly, because it's a high energy job, and they were suddenly working 50-hour weeks having not done it for a while. We're thinking about how we can implement some safeguards around that to make sure they are not burning themselves out."

Well, one way to burn someone out is by making them work a 50-hour week. Or more. And science backs this up. In fact, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 765,000 people died in 2016 due to stroke and heart disease related to long working hours.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the choice, people would rather work far less. Research from Cambridge University found that people only need to work eight hours a week to feel healthy and happy. The same study also found that working a standard 37-to-40-hour week brought no additional mental health benefits.

Whilst no one is going to advocate

an eight-hour working week, our current working patterns are throwbacks to the Industrial Revolution. In fact, back then, 12-to-16-hour shifts were common to maintain a factory's 24/7 output status. Things didn't reduce to a bog standard eight hours (partly based on Welsh activist Robert Owen and his 1817 slogan 'eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest') until about a century later.

Even on shifts, research shows that 12-hour sessions are bad, whilst eight-hour sessions are better. But still not that great. The Harvard Business review has already come out in favour of the six-hour working day. Sweden has been doing it since 2016. And for why? Because the research shows that it's good for not only improving staff wellness and morale, but also productivity.

In a standard eight-hour day, we are only productive for about for about three hours, according to the research. The rest of the time we tend to drift off or get stuck in interminable meetings. However, go down to six hours and we become more focussed. And, as we become more focussed, we become happier more productive.

Again, science says so. In a "no shit Sherlock" moment, researchers from Sanford University demonstrated that employees who are overworked are less productive than those who are not.

Another way to increase employee wellbeing and job satisfaction, whilst decreasing incidents of absence (or overworking) due to stress, is to factor in a four-day working week. In those countries and businesses that have already trialled them (including New Zealand and Japan) the results have been tremendously life-affirming for all-concerned.

So, why are people so keen to engage with a 50-hour week? For the answer to that, let us turn to the elephant in the room. Namely, wages.

Do you pay your staff enough? Come on now, do you? Before you answer that question, you might want to look at your

pre-COVID post-operating profits. There's minimum wage, for sure, even a living wage but, what about a flourishing wage?

In the Barclays report mentioned above, Walsh also said that "for obvious reasons, some staff are going to want to earn as much as possible – and our job is to protect their wellbeing."

Low wages are one of the biggest causes of stress for workers across all ages, cultures, and genders. Many studies have confirmed the link between money and wellbeing, which is why a universal basic income is cropping up more and more in conversation as a plan for the near future.

So shorter shifts, shorter working days, shorter working weeks and more money. Any and all of the above will improve wellbeing. And, as your staff return to work, you might want to bear some of this in mind. You are their captain, after all, and they are your crew. Part of your role is to look after them as much as you can, to put them first wherever possible.

You may think you are doing enough already but a recent report from on-demand mental healthcare provider Ginger found that whilst 96 percent of CEOs thought they were doing enough to support employee wellbeing, only 69 percent of employees agreed that they were.

And as a ship is only as good as its crew, you might want to rethink your wellbeing strategy before your ship flounders. Or loses a nacelle in the Mutara Nebula. After all, as Mister Spock famously said, "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one."

About the author

Daniel Fryer is a mental health and wellbeing expert and the founder of workplace wellness consultancy, How To Be. He is the author of *The Four Thoughts That F*ck You Up...And How To Fix Them*, published by Penguin Random House.