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How to successfully incorporate mental health and wellbeing into your strategy

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Right thinking

In this article, Simon and Radhika explore the state of mental health in Australia, highlighting the pivotal role workplaces can play in addressing mental health and wellbeing challenges.

Integrating mental health and wellbeing into the strategic planning process is essential. By incorporating employee health and wellbeing as a strategic initiative or pillar, organisations can mitigate evolving workforce risks and address current and emerging 'ripples' such as absenteeism, productivity and the costs associated with mental health claims. Moving beyond mere compliance to a more holistic view that includes understanding and mitigating workplace risks is crucial.

As an unknown Chinese philosopher once said – 'we live in interesting times.'

One of the more recent 'interesting' issues has been the extraordinary rise of mental health as a significant workplace issue. This issue has progressed to the point where the mental health of your workforce should now be part of the strategic plan.

The state of mental health in Australia

Why are we surprised? In the broader community, we have seen a steady increase in the prevalence

of diagnoses of anxiety and depression, and recent credible research conducted in Australia suggests that a significant number of young Australians identify as suffering from a mental health condition:

- » Black Dog Institute (2024) noted that **32%** of adolescents report having experienced extreme stress.
- » Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) noted that **42.9%** of Australians aged 16–85 had experienced a mental disorder in their life, while **38.8%** of those aged 16–24 had reported a 12-month disorder.

We are also now living in a world where some of the most recognised and trusted brands in Australia are mental health organisations such as Beyond Blue. More recently regulators are now introducing strict requirements in the domain of psychosocial risk¹ – a concept that was largely unrecognised 15 years ago. Many Australian businesses are also wrestling with the concept of legislating a ‘right to disconnect’, an idea that took root in Europe over a decade ago but is now part of the Australian legislative framework. Whichever way we look at this issue it has well and truly impacted organisations and in turn created a need to address the mental health and wellbeing of our people.

The role of workplaces in addressing mental health and wellbeing

Our work with our client organisations is clearly indicating that these issues are now playing out in a number of ways. Workers’ compensation data from Safe Work Australia now highlights that mental health claims are significantly escalating, increases in industrial issues linking mental health to safety concerns; and widespread adoption of terms such as ‘psychological safety’ has the potential to contribute to quasi-industrial campaigns and can be correlated with a reduction in leaders’ confidence to deal with these complex issues. In our experience, this is often connected with a genuine desire to make the workplace welcoming and inclusive in a way that enables people to bring their ‘whole self’ to work. Research data links absenteeism, productivity, turnover, and morale to the wellbeing of the workforce, creating a compelling business case to focus on employee mental health. Further, there is a growing recognition of the need to identify and mitigate particular occupational risks and hazards that have traditionally been seen as just ‘part of the job’. Recent high-profile cases send a clear message that this historical approach is no longer acceptable (e.g. [WorkSafe v CSV](#) ; [Kozarov v State of Victoria](#))

So – what does a contemporary workplace need to consider in order to address these evolving trends?



Integrating mental health and wellbeing into the strategic planning process

At Right Lane Consulting, we think that the starting point is to integrate mental health and wellbeing into an organisational strategic planning process. There are three things we suggest:

1. Set optimal mental health and wellbeing as a goal

During your next strategic planning discussion, set optimal mental health and wellbeing as a goal, and incorporate relevant measures and initiatives. This approach is not only efficient, but ensures that the mental health and wellbeing of the workforce is seen as an important factor in achieving the business strategy.

2. Focus on positive concepts

It is critical to avoid taking a solely compliance-based approach. Our take on contemporary and evidence based research as well as our direct experience in working with organisations to address this issue suggests that we are best served by a strategy that focuses on positive concepts such as wellbeing and mental health rather than deficit models that focus on ill health and disorder.

3. Take a holistic approach that supports prevention and intervention

It is important to take a holistic view based on the notion that an effective mental health strategy is largely focused on understanding and mitigating the specific workplace risks to worker health and wellbeing. It is equally important to provide support and post hoc interventions when team members are struggling with their wellbeing.

Most organisations now have some form of responsive counselling service – an EAP (employee assistance program) which has evolved rapidly over the last 10 years. Good EAP programs provide trend data and valuable insights into the workforce and its specific mental health and wellbeing issues. They have also diversified to provide a range of ancillary and at times proactive programs – from financial counselling to specialist support for workers with diverse cultures and backgrounds.

However, the integration of a clear preventive strategy into the overarching plan is less common.

Prevention has a number of key elements – do we have a clear understanding of our obligations and requirements in terms of the new compliance landscape?

1 Psychosocial risks are the result of work related hazards that have the potential to negatively effect the mental health and wellbeing of employees. The changing and evolving regulatory frameworks across Australia require workplaces to identify and manage psychosocial hazards and the risk of associated harm. Typically, hazards include 17 research based factors such as unreasonable job demands, low job control or fatigue. See https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-07/model_code_of_practice_-_managing_psychosocial_hazards_at_work.pdf

Have we examined our psychosocial risk data to accurately determine the most important roles and activities that may place our people in psychological harm's way?

The good news is that these risks are generally well known and most likely have incident or survey data that points to those that are most relevant. Regulators are now collecting and reporting on the most likely psychosocial risks that underpin mental health claims data – these include (unsurprisingly) bullying and harassment; occupational violence; exposure to emotionally charged or disturbing content, and of course, breakdowns in workplace relationships.

Right Lane Consulting's framework for considering mental health and wellbeing

Our framework identifies the enablers and elements to consider when incorporating mental health and wellbeing into your strategy. The core enabler which underpins the strategy is awareness of mental health and wellbeing within the organisation and accessibility to support. This forms a strong foundation for the four elements and four enablers of a good mental health strategy, as outlined below.

Mental health and wellbeing framework



Source: Right Lane Consulting. (2025). Informed by Safe Work Australia and the Mental Health Commission.

Legend

- **Outer ring** – enablers for a good strategy
- **Quadrants** – elements of a good strategy
- **Centre** – core enabler of strategy implementation

A component of an effective mental health and wellbeing strategy is the importance of supporting supervisors and middle managers to understand their role when it comes to staff wellbeing and mental health. Building confidence and

capability for this cohort is critical and underpins many of the other elements of the plan. Communicating the plan to all team members in a way that is engaging and accessible is also important.

Commitment to a preventative approach can be complex and inevitably requires focus on job/role design and collaborative approaches to pre-empting psychosocial risks rather than simply 'picking up the pieces' later. The benefits of this approach, however, are measurable and impactful with a growing library of case studies in the Australian context where a collaborative and consultative

approach has led to the reduction of hazards and better management of psychosocial risk. Positive flow-on effects include lower claim numbers and costs and improvements in employee engagement and morale.

Want to know more?

If you would like to discuss this article in more detail, please contact:



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Simon Brown-Greaves has over 40 years experience as an organisational psychologist. Most recently he spent 2 years as the inaugural Chief Mental Health Officer at Australia Post. Prior to this he spent 15 years leading FBG Group, a specialist mental health strategy advisory firm that was acquired in 2022 by the global APM Group. During his career, Simon has worked directly with boards and executive teams to develop and execute effective workforce mental health strategies across the public, private and for purpose sectors.



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Radhika has 9 years' experience in consulting, with an interest in organisational wellbeing and change. Her work includes improving organisational effectiveness, enabling high-performing teams, and culture change. She is also on the Right Lane Consulting People & Culture working group. Radhika holds a Masters Degree in Human Resource Management and Organisational Analysis from King's College London, CIPD Level 7, PROSCI certified change practitioner, and a Bachelor of Commerce degree (Accounting) from Monash University.

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About Right Lane Consulting

Right Lane Consulting is an ethical management consulting firm serving the purpose economy.

Our vision is to build a strong Australian purpose economy that delivers a fairer and more prosperous society.

We employ our distinctive ideas and processes, and our absolute commitment to delivery, to help clients we care about pursue their inspiring missions.

We work alongside clients who do great work in their sectors, and we are driven to create outcomes that truly make a difference.

Right Lane Consulting was established in 1997 to help private, not-for-profit and public sector clients to clarify and accelerate their future plans. Over the past 27 years, we have helped the executive teams and boards of around 500 organisations to define and adapt their direction and strategy, identify and clarify their priorities, align their efforts with their aspirations, get their major projects started and finished, and measure and improve their performance.

Right Lane Consulting became the first strategy consulting firm in Australia to be B Corp certified in 2015. Right Lane Consulting has since recertified as a B Corp in 2017 and 2021. Certified B Corporations meet higher standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability.

Taking this commitment one step further, in July 2022, we transitioned to majority foundation ownership – the first Australian consulting firm to adopt such a structure.

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Right Lane Consulting becomes the first Australian management consulting firm to become foundation owned.

In recent times there has been increasing public focus on the role played by professional services firms. Important questions have been raised about the value firms have delivered, particularly on projects involving the use of taxpayer funds. We are deeply conscious of our role in society, and we believe a conversation on the public value delivered by professional services is long overdue. To that end, Right Lane Consulting remains committed to its purpose of contributing to a better society by helping organisations that do good, do better. We are a proudly ethical consulting firm demonstrated by our foundation ownership model, the clients we choose to serve, our commitment to our low and pro bono program, and a service model that reflects our ability to keep our rates competitive and add value to our clients.

We back our model and believe it provides a way of doing consulting differently and better.