

University Senate President's Reflection - October 2021

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On Wellbeing and Engagement

For the past few decades, several investigators studied the relationship between wellbeing and work engagement. This research suggested that wellbeing and engagement tend to be highly correlated (when rates for one go up or down, the other follows in lockstep). For example, when an employee feels needed and valued tends to be more engaged and experiences a greater sense of wellbeing.

In 2020, however, engagement and wellbeing split from their usual partnership. Wellbeing plummeted, but employees remained highly engaged. According to a Gallup study conducted last year, employees pitched in because they were "united under a shared sense of purpose". Many businesses closed for good, others temporarily, and many individuals were just grateful to have jobs, even as their sense of wellbeing was threatened. They showed incredible resilience. Unfortunately, high levels of resilience can only be maintained for so long before it gives way to burnout.

We live in times of high stress and uncertainty, burnout is rampant, suicidality at all-times high, anxiety and depression are at epidemic levels. As COVID-19 marches through 2021 and perhaps into 2022, its unpredictability continues to keep everyone on their toes. But employers need to approach the new normal of the modern-day workplace with thought and care.

Some faculty and staff may not be ready to let go of the work-life balance they discovered through flexible work conditions. They may not want to return to spending long hours commuting to and from work. They may welcome the trust and independence that comes with remote work and be eager to prove that they deserve it.

Others, however, may thirst for the structure and the company of working in an office, in a clinic or in a classroom. They may find it difficult to uncouple from work at home, or they may prefer in-person team projects or building opportunities than teleconferencing.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and employers need to study what led to the high levels of engagement in 2020.

Remote workers, for example, experienced very high levels of stress and anxiety, but they also happened to be the most engaged. Work infiltrated their personal lives just as much as it provided a life raft to stay focused amid COVID-19's constantly shifting reality.

Having said all of this, I would be remiss if I did not mention that several major topics for awareness, engagement and action happened this month: National Depression and Mental Health Screening month, Health Literacy month, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Awareness month and Bullying Prevention month.

In addition to that, Mental Illness Awareness Week ran from October 3rd through October 10th, and included several related events:

- Oct. 5th: National Day of Prayer for Mental Illness Recovery and Understanding;
- Oct. 7th: National Depression Screening Day;
- Oct. 10th: World Mental Health Day (a World Health Organization declared official day).

I believe paying attention to these special topics is very-very important for all of us, today more than ever. Let's continue to build wellbeing and resilience together.