



Corporate Wellness 2.0: Enhancing Workplace Wellness During Covid-19

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Summary of the Impact

- In 2020, the World Health Organization indicated that anxiety & depression cost the global economy \$1 trillion USD each year in lost productivity.
- In Hong Kong, a 2020 survey by CMHA revealed that 1 in 4 employees reported experiencing mental health issues during Covid-19.
- These figures are alarming, as current research links mental health issues such as workplace anxiety with negative work outcomes, including lower job performance, counterproductive work behaviors, & even unethical behaviors.
- Due in large part to the global pandemic arising in 2020, companies were suddenly faced with a crisis surrounding the mental health of their workforce: *How do companies prioritize workplace wellness to support their key assets?*
- To address these challenges surrounding mental health & workplace wellness, Dr. Cheng's engagement in a series of KE activities was designed to enhance corporate wellness in companies during the pandemic.
- KE activities achieved significant impact in the following areas:
 - Transforming corporate wellness by designing & assessing mental health & wellness
 - Providing organizations with customized programmes to promote mental health & wellness, build resilience, & harness work anxiety to enhance productivity
 - Championing workplace wellness during Covid-19 at the corporate (top-down) & employee levels (bottom-up)
 - Promoting understanding & awareness of mental health at all levels of the corporate hierarchy, in particular reducing the stigma & normalizing conversations on mental health at work

Underpinning Research (or Teaching & Learning)

- Teaching & learning activities in TPg & MBA programmes at HKU contributed to the creation of knowledge of workplace wellness. Dr. Cheng recently proposed & developed a new TPg course in the MGM programme on *Workplace Wellness* to address a pressing need brought about by the pandemic, where mental health & employee wellness has risen to the top of organizations' priority. This new course will be offered in 2021-22.
- Dr. Cheng is a frequent contributor of published articles based on years of extensive research focused on workplace wellness, including a business case on leveraging workplace anxiety for *Harvard Business Review*.
- With this underpinning research, the KE initiatives were primarily focused on recent HKU work including teaching & learning activities as well as current research. These include:
 - Corporate wellness: How leaders play a key role in fostering workplace wellness
 - Leading through a pandemic: Leading through anxiety during VUCA times
 - Transforming work anxiety: How to leverage anxiety to enhance productivity
 - The transformative power of resilience: Building resilient teams & organizations
 - Mindful organizations: The impact of mindfulness on work-related outcomes
 - Sleep & wellness: How a good night's sleep fosters daily proactivity at work
 - Mental health blueprint: Developing corporate systems focused on wellness

Underpinning Research (or Teaching & Learning)

- Teaching & learning and underpinning research started in 2013. Dr. Cheng developed her expertise through the teaching & learning in TPG & executive education programmes at HKU. Dr. Cheng's research described above, published research, business cases, white papers, & dissemination of research in media contributed to her being an active promoter & champion of corporate wellness in the broader community & society, in various regions locally & internationally.
- Examples of teaching & learning and underpinning research:
- MBA core course *Executive Leadership*: Focuses on teaching managers & aspiring leaders how to develop values-based leadership – empathetic leadership that fosters corporate wellness, builds resilience, & supports the mental health & well-being of the company & people within
- Proposed & developed MGM course *Workplace Wellness*: Designed to teach aspiring leaders how to develop & sustain corporate strategy focused on mental health & employee wellness
- Co-authored white paper: *Designing an Effective Workplace Mental Well-Being Strategy: Mental Health Blueprint 2020* with Neurum Digital Behavioural Health in response to societal needs surrounding corporate wellness prompted by Covid-19. The objective of the *Mental Health Blueprint* is to educate & train executives how to implement wellness-forward strategy

Underpinning Research (or Teaching & Learning)

- Cont'd
- Peer-reviewed paper accepted for presentation at international conference Academy of Management in August 2021: *Sleep Well, Be Proactive: A Within-Person Model of Sleep Quality, Optimism, and Proactive Behavior*. This paper proposes & empirically demonstrates that an essential nightly personal habit promotes daily proactive work behaviors
- Current teaching & learning activities as well as current research is an extension of Dr. Cheng's theoretical work on leveraging a bright side of workplace anxiety: *Understanding the Dark and Bright Sides of Anxiety: A Theory of Workplace Anxiety*, published in *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2018); development of a workplace anxiety assessment tool, the *Workplace Anxiety Scale*, published in *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2016)
- Current teaching & learning activities, & current research is an extension of Dr. Cheng's *Harvard Business Review* case on leveraging workplace anxiety (2018)
- Currently examining factors that promote the positive impact of workplace anxiety across the UK, US, HK, and China to impact corporate wellness as Principal Investigator of a multi-year competitive grant General Research Fund (#15508318): *Worrying the Day Away: A Model of How Daily Workplace Anxiety Enhances Employee Productivity* (HK\$431,993), 2019-21

Underpinning Research (or Teaching & Learning)

- This teaching & research is the first to position mental health constructs such as workplace anxiety as a work-relevant experience that carries *benefits* for employee productivity. This is in direct contrast to decades of research demonstrating that work-related anxiety is detrimental to employee productivity.
- Implications of this research suggests that:
 - Employees can learn how to harness work anxiety to work *for* them;
 - Leaders should invest in training to leverage benefits of workplace anxiety
- This research changes the conversation from one where workplace anxiety should be driven out of the workplace to one where workplace anxiety can be channelled into enhancing productivity, reducing the stigma associated with mental health and experiences of work-related anxiety

Underpinning Research (or Teaching & Learning)

Significance of research, teaching & learning

- The significance of Dr. Cheng's teaching & learning & related research directly addressed a fundamental need of corporates during Covid-19, focused on enhancing corporate wellness during in companies during the pandemic.
- Stemming from a global pandemic in 2020, companies were suddenly confronted with a crisis surrounding the mental health of their workforce.
- While corporate wellness became a key priority for senior executives, understanding & implementation were poorly understood.
- A key question surrounded: *How do companies prioritize workplace wellness to support their key assets?*

Engagement

Dr. Cheng's engagement in KE activities has promoted corporate and community understanding and awareness on mental health and wellness. These engagements have changed the way organizations operated during and post-Covid-19.

Impact covers 4 critical elements:

1. Creating & implementing wellness frameworks & rigorous measurement tools to assess mental health & workplace wellness
2. Creating & implementing customized training programmes & protocols to alleviate workplace anxiety & leverage its positive effects
3. Influencing organizational decision-makers – top-down & bottom-up
4. Corporate engagement drive to widely promote awareness & understanding of mental health to companies at all levels – employees, managers, senior executives, C-suite executives

Engagement

Innovativeness of the engagement approach

Dr. Cheng's KE engagement approach was innovative due to its holistic approach that leveraged numerous channels of communication:

- Both top-down and bottom-up engagement strategies
- Incorporation of various methods of engagement, including knowledge sharing, knowledge exchange, development of assessment & training tools, application of & training in developed assessment tools
- Roundtable discussions with organizational change-makers to secure buy-in, commitment, accountability, & ownership
- Corporate engagements through delivered presentations, industry association talks, workshops, learning labs
- Written communication via white paper broadly disseminated to corporate executives which was then shared on internal intranet to employees
- Podcast speaker on wellness platforms with public access via Spotify, Apple, & Google
- Teaching aspiring leaders through higher education and executive teaching

Impacts Achieved

Beneficiaries:

- Numerous corporates, MNEs, & organizations with corporate wellness interests locally & internationally that benefitted from delivered workshops, corporate training, white papers, podcast.
- Senior executives who developed new knowledge, understanding, & awareness of how to build a corporate strategy focused on workplace wellness, both during & post-pandemic.
- Over 100,000 employees who attended workshops, participated in trainings, listened to podcast, read white paper, developed new understanding of mental health & workplace wellness & practical strategies for harnessing their work-related anxiety to boost performance, as well as strategies for managing work-related anxiety.

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

1. Creating & implementing wellness frameworks and rigorous measurement tools to assess mental health & workplace wellness:

- Developed a resilience framework & trained over 400 junior & senior managers, senior executives, & C-suite executives to apply this framework to foster organizational & team resilience in a large HK telecommunications company (April 2021); this company subsequently produced a *Reflection Booklet* shared with all 5,500 members based on positive impact of this sharing
- Developed an initial index to measure *How Human is Your Workplace* with Human at Work, workshopped during the MBA Executive Leadership course. This work is ongoing & projected to impact tens of thousands through broad media & corporate channel distribution.
- Developed a measure of workplace anxiety based on past research, applied in training programmes in various companies to a combined total of over 900 employees between 2020-2021

"We found strong reference in Dr. Cheng's Mental Health Blueprint 2020 white paper targeted to corporates, on how to design an effective workplace well-being strategy in response to corporate wellness needs triggered by COVID-19. Over the past 6 months, X company engaged Dr. Cheng in a series of knowledge exchange activities...objective was to educate ...understanding of what mental health is, how to address mental health challenges on an individual, team and organization level, and how to appropriately and effectively support team members at the managerial level...Dr. Cheng trained us on applying and implementing her RISE framework – a managerial leadership tool to develop resilience within individual teams and, collectively at the organizational level. The framework was effective due to its memorable acronym "RISE" and practical step-by-step guide...response and feedback from this workshop were very positive and indicative of its impact in helping leaders help their respective teams...We are continuing our collaborative discussions together on how to further champion workplace wellness at X company, through a series of engagements that incorporate training and interventions." – Group CEO

"It has brought to the attention of our leadership team that awareness of mental wellness should be raised among our leaders and Talents, in particular during pandemic when we have changed the way we communicate and engage with each other. Bonnie's support to us has come at the perfect time as her sharing educated our Talents to be more aware of personal mental status, and the practical tips she offered not only help our Talents, but the families of our Talents because of the ripple effect of one's mental health." – Chief Purpose Officer

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

2. Creating & implementing customized training programmes & protocols to alleviate workplace anxiety & leverage its positive effects:

- Delivered corporate training to 183 staff (60% of company) at large technology company (May-June 2020)
- Non-supervisory employees (84%), Assistant Managers (12%), Senior Managers & Directors (4%)
- Assessed & tracked wellness indicators using Dr. Cheng's workplace anxiety assessment tool & promoted mindfulness as a strategy for leveraging benefits of workplace anxiety on proactivity
 - Mindfulness enhanced positive impact of workplace anxiety on daily proactive behaviors via proactive planning ($\beta = .21, p < .05$)
 - Post-training levels of workplace anxiety decreased ($M = 2.40; SD = .78$) as compared with pre-training levels ($M = 2.58; SD = .83$)

“Based on Dr. Cheng’s teaching...and research on various aspects of workplace wellness...we sought Dr. Cheng’s expertise in developing a Corporate Wellness training program. This was critical to improving Corporate Wellness of X company, particularly during the period of the global pandemic in 2020. Dr. Cheng’s research on helping companies and leaders improve the wellness of their workforce was pivotal in training X company staff and senior leaders to better manage mental health issues related to workplace anxiety, in terms of raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues, and training staff to learn strategies to harness the power of work-related anxiety to benefit their daily productivity...Based on Dr. Cheng’s engagement, X company has seen significant improvement in staff workplace anxiety, wellness and enthusiasm for mental health topics. Informal comments and discussions with staff reveal newly acquired strategies that are implemented on a daily basis at employees’ daily work. Moreover, X company is committed to continuing dedication to prioritizing employee wellness...We are currently in discussion with Dr. Cheng to implement further training and offering to staff to prioritize mental health and corporate wellness.” – Managing Director

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

2. Creating & implementing customized training programmes & protocols to alleviate workplace anxiety & leverage its positive effects:

- Delivered several corporate trainings to large MedTech company. 110 participants across four medical companies participated in one training: Non-supervisory employees (49.0%), managers (45.5%), senior managers (5.5%)
- In a separate training, over 600 employees in 111 medical distribution firms across mainland China participated, with 645 pairs of matched employee-employers (beginning June 2019).
- Adopted Dr. Cheng's workplace anxiety assessment tool to measure employees' baseline level of workplace anxiety
 - Workplace anxiety significantly improved learning ($\beta = .070$, $p < .05$) & problem prevention ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$)
 - Vigor significantly improved performance ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), creativity ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$), & proactivity ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$)
 - Sleep quality significantly improved performance ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) & proactivity ($\beta = .07$, $p < .01$)
 - Projected 5-8% improvement in overall engagement score & reduction in sick leave by 3-5%

"Dr. Cheng's teaching and research on corporate wellness has been particularly timely and relevant during the past year as organizations around the world were scrambling to cope with Covid-19. Leaders were struggling to help provide their employees with mental health support and prioritize wellness in their business...As a result of this training intervention program which helped staff learn strategies to translate their workplace anxiety to improve work-related outcomes, this has enabled us to achieve significant wellness improvements...due to the results of Dr. Cheng's workplace wellness initiative, we are in the process of making further changes in order to better support our employees' wellness journey. Dr. Cheng has also played a vital role in raising awareness of mental health and educating my staff, including junior and senior associates, and managerial-level executives, in the importance of prioritizing corporate wellness...I would project that, over the long-term, we would see 5-8% improvement in overall engagement score and reduce sick leave by 3-5%."
– Vice President and General Manager

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

2. Creating & implementing customized training programmes & protocols to alleviate workplace anxiety & leverage its positive effects:

- Developed & implemented a mindfulness training intervention, powered by the Neurum Health app, at the start of the pandemic
- Objective: Providing employees, managers, & senior executives with a targeted strategy to manage their daily & ongoing mental health
- Consistently accessed by 120,000 active users of the app at least once a day on average per user
- Project is ongoing & longitudinal, with projected long-term impact to be significant
- Thus far, there have been positive health & wellbeing improvements in mental health levels, notably stress & anxiety (60.8% improvements)

“Based on Dr. Cheng’s teaching and research, we have partnered to develop and implement a mindfulness training intervention, powered by the Neurum Health app, with the objective of providing employees, managers, and senior executives with a targeted strategy to manage their daily and ongoing mental health. We launched this training at the beginning of the pandemic as a response to our discussions with corporate executives who were actively requesting approaches to help their workforce manage their mental health during this difficult period.” - CEO

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

3. Influencing organizational decision-makers – top-down & bottom-up:

- Frequent contributor at monthly Board Wellness Roundtable discussions (starting in 2021), organized by Whole Business Wellness Limited
- Invited participants include CEOs & INEDs of large MNEs based in HK & UK
- Objective is to develop solutions at the corporate level for addressing company & broader society's focus on mental health
- During roundtable discussions, Dr. Cheng presents research on corporate wellness strategies (e.g., corporate mindfulness training initiatives) & facilitates a discussion on how to move towards a positive mental health culture as part of business strategy
- Roundtable discussions with organizational decision-makers facilitate securing buy-in, commitment, accountability, & ownership

“Our roundtable discussions thus far have centered around Dr. Cheng’s teaching and research on making a business case for workplace mindfulness...This has enabled us to collectively achieve strategic impact at the board level. Dr. Cheng’s teaching and research has played a key role in influencing organizational decision-makers to take action at the corporate level to support the well-being of their workforce. The business case for workplace wellness must start from the top, and Dr. Cheng has certainly made an impactful case for corporate wellness to board members from our roundtable discussions. Several members of our board have initiated knowledge exchange with Dr. Cheng that is specific to their respective companies, which would not have been achieved without her contributions to the board roundtable.” – Founder & Director

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

3. Influencing organizational decision-makers – top-down & bottom-up:

- Co-authored white paper in December 2020, entitled *Designing an Effective Workplace Mental Well-Being Strategy: Mental Health Blueprint 2020*
- Widely shared with corporate executives of MNEs. Senior executives further distributed the white paper with their workforce
- Posted to professional channels such as LinkedIn
- Shared with all 120,000 users of the Neurum Health platform, an AI-powered wellness app dedicated to supporting the mental health of the corporate workforce
- Interest & impact of the white paper garnered multidisciplinary support from different departments, particularly Heads of Diversity & Inclusion, Mental Health Sponsors, & Head of Human Resources at both local & regional levels in building corporate strategy

“The white paper was a much needed blueprint that accrued the buy-in necessary from relevant stakeholder; it moved the conversation from “awareness” raising to commitment and “engagement”. This is a big step forward in building a sustainable wellbeing strategy, one that ensures health and wellness is not one-size-fits-all and resources are not one-off. The interest and impact of the white paper garnered multidisciplinary support from different departments, particularly Heads of Diversity and Inclusion, Mental Health Sponsors, and Head of Human Resources at both the local and regional levels in building their strategy.” - CEO

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

4. Corporate engagement drive to widely promote awareness & understanding of mental health to companies at all levels – employees, managers, senior executives, C-suite:

- In 2020-2021, delivered workshops to a combined total of approximately 800 participants from APAC regions including: HK, mainland China, Indonesia, & SE Asia
- Profile of participants: employees, managers, senior executives, and C-suite executives
- Companies include: Technology MNE, insurance MNE, telecommunications company based in HK
- Topics included:
 - *Workplace Anxiety: How to Harness its Benefits* (January 2020; October 2020)
 - *Workplace Anxiety: Transform it to Enhance Your Productivity* (March 2021)
 - *Work Heart, Play Heart 101: How to Lead Teams with Heart* (April 2021)
- Delivered a workshop to Managing Directors, HR Directors, & senior executives of a large technology company during a Senior Team Meeting (December 2020), providing recommendations for corporate action on workplace wellness

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

4. Corporate engagement drive to widely promote awareness & understanding of mental health to companies at all levels – employees, managers, senior executives, C-suite:

- Invited as feature speaker on the *Have You Eaten?* wellness podcast, dedicated to behavioral health and wellness (September 2020)
- Knowledge sharing included:
 - (a) how workplace mental health is related to business metrics
 - (b) how corporates should design a mental health strategy at all levels
 - (c) what is being done to address afflictions
- This podcast is widely available & open to public on platforms such as Spotify, Apple, & Google
- Widely distributed within corporate intranets, reached minimum 90,000 listeners across corporate workforces; distributed to 120,00 users of Neurum Health app
- Broadly distributed on professional user channels such as LinkedIn
- Comments from organizational decision-makers have been positive in terms of raising awareness & prioritizing wellness at the business level & providing actionable strategies

“Dr. Cheng discussed topics related to workplace mental health, how it is related to business metrics, how we should design our mental health strategy at all levels, and what is being done to address mental health afflictions. These are relevant to C-suite leaders, particularly in thinking around measurable impact of wellness initiatives.” - CEO

Impacts Achieved

Nature and extent of the impact; evidence of impact:

4. Corporate engagement drive to widely promote awareness & understanding of mental health to companies at all levels – employees, managers, senior executives, C-suite:

- Delivered a workshop on corporate wellness to approximately 300 employees, supervisors, senior management, & directors of a technology MNE during Staff Communication meeting (January 2020).
- Invited to serve as expert panel member on *Reinventing Mental Well-Being at Work through Empathy* in a corporate wellness design workshop with MAKE Studios (March 2021). The workshop explored ways to build traction for mental wellness in the corporate context, within constraints of corporate work cultures & environments.
- Invited to provide a series of training and deliver public discourse and workshops on corporate wellness open to the general public across local and international audiences for the GBA MedTech Association, an association dedicated to shaping the future of healthcare in the GBA regions (Q3, 2021).

Impacts Achieved

In recognition of transforming corporate wellness, Dr. Cheng was nominated & named top 5% of *Women in Wellness 2020: Corporate Wellness* HK by Liv magazine – HK's magazine dedicated to wellness with a circulation of ~14,000 regular readers & wellness industry leaders per month (April 2021)



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Women of Wellness 2021

In the years since we launched Liv Magazine, we've been amazed by the continuing evolution of Hong Kong's wellness industry. Through protests, pandemics and beyond, the resilience of the industry shows that more people than ever are waking up to the importance of wellbeing in our everyday lives. For this, we have women to thank. Female founders, specialists and entrepreneurs form the backbone of this city's wellness scene, and if it weren't for their inspirational messages, grit and bravery, Hong Kong's wellness landscape would be very different.

In tribute to these amazing ladies, we asked our community to nominate who they think should be named Hong Kong's Women of Wellness. We were bowled over by the response – more than 1,800 nominations in the space of 10 days – and from there we read through every nomination to come up with a final list of 100 women who have been recognised by their peers in the community as leaders in wellbeing.

Women of Wellness: Corporate Wellbeing

Liv Magazine April 29, 2021

34 Shares

With the line between work and home more blurred than ever, companies are stepping up their game to ensure their employees are well looked after. Here's a few of the women prioritising wellbeing in the workplace in our concrete jungle.

Dr. Bonnie Hayden Cheng, HKU Business School



As an Associate Professor of Management and MBA Program Director at HKU Business School, Bonnie works with CEOs to build corporate wellness into their businesses. She is also Chief Resilience Officer of Human at Work, an organisation helping leaders and companies to successfully transform their business strategies.

**Recipient of 2021 Award:
Women of Wellness – Corporate Wellness**