

Healthy Place to Work – A Holistic Approach To All Our Futures



It's probably fair to say that Dublin-based John Ryan and his Belfast-based business partner Peter Morris couldn't have picked a much better time to launch their Healthy Place To Work concept on a worldwide basis.

One of the undisputed results of the Covid-19 pandemic will be that the future of work, ways of working and workplaces will be changed...and changed forever.

Put simply, Healthy Place to Work is a global standard for workplace health certification in the same vein as global standards covering areas like quality, training and the environment. But it's a concept that goes way further than a form-filling exercise that leads to a framed certificate down the line.

Instead, it looks at just about every aspect of working practices, the working environment and employee wellbeing.

John Ryan, who came up with the original idea for Healthy Place to Work, has teamed up with TJ Byrne and ex-BT senior executive Peter Morris to launch the business from Northern Ireland.

"2020 has shown the importance of health more than ever before and underlines how business needs to focus resources where they are needed most in order to thrive," says Ryan. "This means looking at a strategic level at how the health of employees impacts directly on business. Doing that will enable more companies to recover from Covid."

Ryan tells the story of how Healthy Place to Work came about and of the influences that lie behind it.

Ryan was CEO of the Great Place To Work Institute in the Republic of Ireland for 10 years so is well used to workplace standards and certifying organisations.

"In 2014 I was at a conference in the US and came across Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer of Stanford University. He talked about how workplaces are killing people but no one cares. At the time, I thought it was a bit overstated. But he went on to demonstrate just how much ill health is caused by workplace problems – stress, bullying, overworked, underworked and lots of other issues.

"Work is precarious. Your boss can come in any day and tell you that you're no longer needed. That adds a horrible uncertainty

to some people's lives. In some countries, they actually have a word meaning death by overwork."

If Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer's presentation sowed the seed of Healthy Place to Work, American Israeli sociologist Aaron Antonovsky's work helped to drive it forward. Antonovsky is best known for his work on the relationship between stress, health and wellbeing – known as salutogenesis.

"His approach was that health doesn't mean an absence of disease," says John Ryan. "His view was that we must equip and resource ourselves for when things go wrong. We must proactively understand the factors that make us healthy and equip and resource ourselves to be ready and prepared for when things go wrong."

Along with a team of colleagues, Ryan started to build a model with the research and academic findings in mind. But he started with one basic premise. He quotes the 1999 film *The Sixth Sense* in which Bruce Willis plays a child psychologist whose patient (Haley Joel Osment) can talk to the dead. "I see dead people," is

one of the child's opening lines.

"In a way, and without being flippant, I can see dead people too in a manner of speaking," Ryan adds. "I've been in a lot of workplace where I've seen people with their eyes glazed over, with no interest in the work they're doing. They hate what they're doing, they hate the company, they hate the leadership and it hugely affects their lives.

"Compare and contrast that with someone who is doing a job they enjoy and who gets real satisfaction from it. So work and the job you choose is one of the biggest health decisions you'll make in your life. Make the right calls and it will make a huge difference to your life, and your resilience, going forward.

"So we look at whether the people we're assessing are aligned to the organisations they work for. It's called purpose and it's one of the main pillars of what we do."

Then there's the question of mental resilience. There are too many bland generalities around on mental health, says Ryan. "We needed to be clear that mental health is a spectrum, its not binary that you are either mentally healthy or not. People need to recognise when they are struggling and understand the steps they need to take and the things they need to do to get back on track."

The organisation tests for self efficacy – defined by psychologist Albert Bandura as one's belief

in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish tasks – and for optimism and a range of other elements.

"We've found a lot of pessimism over change and how change threatens jobs, particularly in the public sector," he comments. "It's important that people believe that they can learn, grow, develop and change within their working environment. Lifelong learning is critically important.

"It's about giving people responsibility for coming to work ready to go, for being able to adapt to change. But the organisation has to match people's personal resources with organisational resources. It also has to apply balance."

He quotes examples of workplaces where staff are overwhelmed by the amount of work facing them, but others where the opposite applies and workers show signs of being bored.

The health service right now is a perfect example.

"Pressure is important to drive our performance but again balance is vital. When it tips over into negative pressure, you stop performing at your best."

The pandemic, he says, has had a huge effect on people missing human face to face interactions and the connections that we crave as human beings.

"The last piece of the jigsaw





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for us is the physical health piece - ranging across factors like sleep, exercise, diet and - of real importance going forward - whether the actual workplace is safe for those who work there. "So we're coming back to organisations with a set of findings that illustrate the health and wellbeing of their people. Now, more than ever, that is hugely important. It's just not enough to send everyone a bowl of fruit and organise online yoga sessions. "The organisation has to change so that it's able to support its people to be healthier. It needs to look at everything it does through the lens of health, from the board downwards. It's about looking at every aspect of what you do and how you do it." But does all of this mean a major commitment for businesses? John Ryan says no. "We do all the hard work," he adds. "We ask for your input, of course, but we run the survey and we come back with the data. Then we'll work

with the company as they come up with a plan for the future. "Here's the bottom line. It's impossible to be a healthy person if you're working in an unhealthy organisation. And it's impossible to be a healthy organisation if you're full of unhealthy people. Get both right and you get sustainable high performance and that's what we're aiming for. But it's everybody's responsibility to help the organisation get there. "It's less about commitments and time pressures and much more about a philosophy." Hughes Insurance, the US-owned business headquartered in Newtownards, was the first NI company to sign up for the Healthy Place to Work programme. "They're facing the same challenges as everyone else is around working from home for their 260 employees. And one of the first questions they asked was how much time commitment this would require from them. "We were able to allay their fears by reassuring them that we'd do

most of the heavy lifting. Now that we're into the process, they're really engaged and interested in what it's going to tell them about the company they're running. "We take every company on a journey with us. We appreciate that some might be a bit afraid of taking the first step. Our message is that they'll see the benefits quickly and they'll see them clearly. Then they can change the whole dynamic of their organisation." Everybody, says John Ryan, is talking about how the post-Covid workplace will look. "There's a reason why good workplaces work. Bring people together and you can get interaction, creativity, ideas and energy. I think we're going to see more hybrid arrangements but I also think employers are going to want to see people back in the workplace, at least for some of the time." Healthy Place to Work spans every part of the private sector economy, but, according to Ryan, it also applies to the public sector, where its ethos and objectives are just as relevant.

Peter Morris sees a future several months down the line where Healthy Place to Work will have started to build a community of like-minded employers. The concept has already been endorsed by Business In The Community here in Northern Ireland. "This isn't about health promotion and it's not about an ad hoc approach. This is fundamentally different, heavily researched and successfully piloted. It's a different and very effective way of looking in depth at the health of the organisation. "For organisations who embrace this when they are asked how their people are people are doing, they'll be able to tell and tell accurately. Hopefully the answer will be that they are healthy."

Eye

For all the information on Healthy Place To Work, visit www.healthyplacetowork.com

CASE STUDY

VERSION 1

About

Version 1 delivers IT services and solutions. Their customers include top global banks, many FTSE 100 listed companies in the Financial Services, Utilities and Commercial sectors as well as Public Sector organisations across local and central government. Founded in Ireland in 1996, Version 1 has grown to a 1350+ strong team across Ireland, the UK and India.

Their My Wellbeing Model was launched in late 2018- A holistic health and wellbeing framework. The Healthy Place to Work survey results and Healthy Place Development Plan enabled Version 1 to strategically base their health initiatives around the needs of their employees, going beyond a focus of 'event' to examining their ways of working, leadership styles and incorporating health into everything they do. Communication and transparency were key to their success; leadership support being key, with their CEO and senior management team promoting wellbeing initiatives through roadshows, monthly CEO updates and quarterly briefings. Health and Wellbeing was integrated as a core module of their managers training programme (Strength in Balance). The workshops involved reviewing the My Wellbeing model and wellbeing strategy, as well as exploring what managers could do to allow people to stay on top of their wellbeing. Over 160 managers have participated in the wellbeing module.

2017

There was no denying that consistent high performance and a fast, hard-working environment comes with its challenges. Which is often encapsulated in the quote "Version 1 is a great place to work but not an easy place to work". At this time their health initiatives were singular events. With significant growth in Version 1 and further growth planned, they needed a health strategy that allowed their employees to be able to bring their "A" game in order to deliver excellence to their customers. To achieve this they needed to;

- Develop a health strategy that aligned to the overall company strategy
- To have leadership buy-in
- Enhanced communication

2018

Overall Health Score 2018 - 68%

Version 1 began their Healthy Place to Work journey and developed their health and wellbeing strategy, to allow their employees to thrive, be resilient, empowered and engaged, further embedding wellbeing into their already well-established culture of trust and empowerment.

2020

Overall Health Score - 79%

A digital approach to health and wellbeing was further embedded. Working with a diverse workforce, across multiple locations in different time zones, they needed to ensure that everyone received the same information, in the same way, at the same time, allowing everyone across the organisation to have the same experience. 42 company-wide health and wellbeing specific events were conducted in 2020. Another key focus for 2020 was related to the Purpose pillar, with recognition being central to this. They launched their Digital Excellence Awards - with over 126 submissions, exceeding their total award submissions of 2018 and 2019 combined. They also launched their new CallOut Platform - enabling peer to peer reward and recognition. Overall allowing them to improve their ways of working from practices to policies, creating a sense of belonging for all their employees.

Key Stats

PARTICIPATION IN HEALTH AND WELLBEING SPECIFIC EVENTS

Participation rates have increased significantly since 2018. In 2018 Version 1 had 820 engagements in wellbeing related initiatives, in 2019 - 2,036 engagements and 2020 - 4,200 engagements! Key to this has been the digital approach to wellbeing and utilising HPTW feedback, enabling Version 1 to have a far better reach to employees.

HEADCOUNT

2017 - 1081
2018 - 1240
2019 - 1250
2020 - 1377

REVENUE

2017 - €104m
2018 - €116m
2019 - €130m
2020 - €140m

Key question improvement - Taking everything into account, I would say this is a healthy place to work
2018 - 67%
2019 - 72%
2020 - 87%

2019

Overall health Score 2019 - 72%

Version 1 launched their Health and Wellbeing champion network to drive initiatives and create local events based off HPTW results. Quarterly meetings were held to discuss HPTW survey and audit results and create actions for areas of improvement. HPTW results and follow up initiatives were communicated company-wide for transparency. All initiatives and events were communicated through their dedicated weekly newsletter and employee experience calendar. A new employee experience team was created to lead Health & Wellbeing, allowing for further in-depth analysis of their HPTW results and supporting managers and champions in creating follow up actions.