



Workplace Well-being  
Insights from 2019 CIHF Roundtable



Cornell  
Institute for  
Healthy Futures

***Healthy Futures***

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#### Healthy Futures

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## Workplace Well-being

### Insights from 2019 CIHF Roundtable

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Roundtable chaired by:

Heather Kolakowski, SHA '00

Associate Director of Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures; Lecturer, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Mary Tabacchi

Professor Emerita, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

The Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures (CIHF) held a roundtable on October 28 to explore the best practices for improving workplace well-being across a wide range of settings. A group of 20 industry leaders representing corporations, health care organizations, hospitality companies, and universities attended the conference at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

Addressing workplace well-being is unfolding before a backdrop of unfortunate statistics. Obesity rates for adults in the United States continue to climb, with nearly 40 percent of Americans aged 20 and over categorized as obese. The prevalence of diabetes and cardiovascular disease is increasing. At the same time, mental health issues among young adults, and suicidal thoughts among adults of all ages are also on the rise.

These trends have a significant impact in the workplace, resulting in lost productivity from both absenteeism and presenteeism. Companies, nonprofit organizations, and higher education institutions,

however, are tackling these issues by offering comprehensive wellness programs that encourage employees to adopt healthy eating habits, exercise during the workday as well as manage stress and anxiety; increasingly, wellness practitioners encourage methods for a sustainable work-life balance.

The roundtable opened with a discussion about current research on workplace well-being and recent developments of wellness programs in various industries. Attendees then focused on the opportunities and challenges for embracing change and the strategies that could introduce these practices in the work environment.

## Industry Trends and Recent Research of Workplace Well-Being

**W**ell-being requires more than fitness and nutrition. Cornell's wellness program, for example, focuses on helping employees attain seven dimensions of well-being that consider: relationships within and beyond the workplace, mental, physical, cultural, environmental, and financial health.

Wellness and fitness specialist, Keri Johnson, asserted that "We need to have all aspects in some kind of symbiosis in order for us to achieve that upper level of well-being." Johnson is part of Cornell Wellness, which serves staff, faculty, retirees as well as their spouses and partners.

According to Johnson, investing in health and wellness programs offers the university three primary benefits: it reduces employee health risks, decreases healthcare costs, and improves employee productivity.

A study conducted at Cornell University tracked employees who used the fitness center or attended a group fitness class on campus; results showed that those who participated most often — more than 156 times a year — had lower medical expenses, fewer acute admittances into an emergency room or hospital, and less spending annually on prescriptions. Even



**Ying Hua:** "Gyms have become popular in corporate buildings, but only a small percentage of the workforce actively uses them."

employees who used the fitness center or attended a group class fewer than 10 times per year showed similar benefits, Johnson said.

Johnson also shared that employees who participated in a wellness program reported they felt more productive on job-related tasks, they felt more positive about Cornell, and they felt empowered when balancing work and their personal lives; additionally, they experienced an increase in overall happiness.

In the private sector, providing wellness programs not only saves money in healthcare costs, but it can also boost revenue. SAS, the world's largest privately held software company, has found that wellness programs are critical to the company's bottom line.

"We know that how we treat our employees transfers into how employees treat customers," said Natalie Osborn, the director of marketing for SAS, headquartered in Cary, North Carolina. "We know that in treating employees well, it's not only the right thing to do, but it's also great for business."

The workplace culture at SAS is based on three core principles: meaningful work, empowerment, and an innovative work environment. An example of SAS's approach to



workplace well-being is its stance on volunteer work; at SAS, employees are given paid time to work on projects with local nonprofits.

Another key employee benefit at SAS is its onsite healthcare center, which is open 10 hours a day. The company receives more than twice the return on its investment in the center; Osborn revealed that for every \$1 the company spent on the center in 2017, it received \$2.08 back.

“We believe that happy and healthy employees lead better lives,” Osborn said. “They’re more well-rounded, and they’re our greatest assets at SAS.”

Beyond wellness programs, an additional factor that contributes to a sense of workplace well-being is the design of the office space itself. While workplace design once focused primarily on the physical aspects of the space – such as energy consumption – the emphasis has recently shifted to creating an environment centered on the needs of the people working within the space, said Ying Hua, an associate professor in the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell.

“Gyms have become popular in corporate buildings, but only a small percentage of the workforce actively uses them” Hua said. This



**Michelle Railton:** “The movement and recovery programs are provided to help employees develop sustainable habits, build skills and confidence, and connect with people at work and beyond.”

has contributed to a change in architectural design from promoting activity to preventing inactivity in the workplace.

Hua contended that “An associated benefit with people moving around is actually about interaction and collaboration because the workplace has now become more a place for people to meet and work together instead of just doing individual work.”

One barrier that may prevent employees from being more active in the workplace is the lack of prominent placement of staircases. On Cornell’s campus, for example, a study of 12 academic and administrative buildings showed that layout and design have an impact on people’s willingness to take the stairs.

“We have to have the layout elements ready for people to easily walk the stairs,” Hua said. “And there’s also a benefit of saving energy related to elevator use.”

Another factor that is critical to employee well-being is access to nature and biophilic design. However, despite the benefits of exposing employees to nature in the workplace the practice is not universally supported by architects. Hua said student-led research at Cornell is focusing on developing a set of design guidelines that would encourage architects to incorporate elements of nature in their projects, particularly in the early phases of design.

## Workplace Well-Being: Best Practices

**M**ental health continues to be an often overlooked aspect of fitness; robust workplace wellness programs must embrace a holistic approach to assisting employee health needs. Nevertheless, as Heather Kolakowski – co-chair of the roundtable and a lecturer in Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration – pointed out, tackling this issue is hindered by the stigma that continues to be associated with mental health problems.

According to Kerry Howell, director of Cornell Wellness, the number of staff and faculty members at Cornell who are being treated for mental health issues is rising. About 60 percent of the staff and faculty now receive psychological services or medication for depression and anxiety. The increasing number of employees seeking help is partly due to the growing openness about mental health issues on campus, Howell said. Frequent communication about mental wellness will normalize what is, in fact, a common human condition.

“At any point throughout our lives, all of us will at some point have something that is going to be mentally taxing,” Howell said. “All of us will experience some form of this along the spectrum.”

One initiative Cornell Health has offered is a notice and respond program presented by the Cornell Interactive Theatre Ensemble (CITE), which offers role-playing about how employees can intervene to help a colleague struggling with mental health issues. Howell argued there is a growing anxiety being felt due, in part, to distressing headlines on national issues. Howell maintains that a community approach to mental wellbeing – enlisting colleagues to help one another – will aid anxious and depressed employees.

The notice and respond strategy has also been adopted in the private sector. The Breakers Palm Beach, a 538-room luxury resort in Florida, for example, has built awareness of mental health issues by launching an initiative called “mental health first aid,” which encourages employees to get help for a colleague who may be struggling with stress or anxiety.

“The whole concept of why it’s called first aid is that you will recognize it and you will assist until the professionals intervene or arrive,” said Tricia Taylor, executive vice president and general manager at the Breakers. “Just like physical first aid, you are not the paramedic, you are not the EMT, but you can call 911 and do some basic first aid and CPR and some life-



**Kerry Howell:** “At any point throughout our lives, all of us will at some point have something that is going to be mentally taxing,”

saving skills until the experts intervene.”

In keeping with the Breakers, Natalie Osborn shared the fact that at SAS employees can schedule an appointment with a social worker at the company’s health care center during work hours. The company also approaches mental health issues by looking at every point of stress in employees’ lives and addressing each issue with programs, Osborn said.

“If it’s figuring out where you’re going to put your mom who needs assisted living, all of those things we have services and support for, so that overall we can strengthen and lift that quality of life and coping skills,” Osborn said.

One of the most recognized companies for workplace wellness programs is tech giant, Google. Founded in 1998, Google now employs 114,000 people worldwide. Google’s Real Estate and Workplace Services (REWS) oversees programs offered globally in five areas: transportation, health and performance, food, guest services, events and amenities, and sustainability.

The largest program is the company’s food service, which includes more than 224 cafes and more than 1,100 micro-kitchens globally. Google

serves more than 178,000 free meals per day to 118,000 people at its locations worldwide.

Michelle Railton, health and performance innovation manager at Google, said the company offers free meals to improve productivity and performance, to support Google's community culture, to help company leaders achieve team goals, and to attract and retain happy and healthy top talent.

Another perk of its wellness program is access to onsite fitness centers, which are available at 45 Google locations. Railton, who earned a master of management in hospitality from Cornell in 2010, stated "Having that access, that convenience is really important. We do want to have that ease."

Like many onsite fitness centers, however, these facilities only reach up to half of the employees. As alternatives, Googlers can take one of 5,400 group exercise classes offered at the company, attend a personal training session, or have a massage at one of 94 locations. These "movement and recovery" programs are provided to help employees develop sustainable habits, build skills and confidence, and connect with people at work and beyond, Railton said.

Railton asserted, "Social isolation is the biggest



**Sean Nicholson:** "The typical U.S. employer loses eight days of worker productivity per year due to poor health, which translates into an average cost of \$2,600 per worker annually"

challenge we see for our Googlers. It's about connecting them with activities that matter to them at the workplace and their communities, but it's also about connecting them with each other and with members of their circle, their partners, or even citywide."

Google has used design thinking to innovate and create new initiatives in its employee wellness programs. One example is a refocusing of its lifestyle perks and concierge services from providing discounts for cultural events or onsite haircuts to enabling meaningful experiences that matter to employees.

During the process of revamping the program, Google gave employees mini white boards to write what they thought leading a full life meant to them. "Shockingly no one said a great fitness center, a private massage," Railton said. "They said, 'Spending quality time with my children, doing work that really matters to me, making a difference in the world.' "

After reviewing the responses, Google changed the emphasis of the program to focus on employee benefits such as: providing summer camps for children and opportunities for employees to connect with their community.

## Challenges and Opportunities for Workplace Well-Being

Companies like Google offer wellness programs because of the substantial costs that can accrue from unhealthy employees. Those costs stem from three primary sources: medical expenses, absenteeism, and presenteeism (diminished productivity while at work).

Sean Nicholson, director of the Sloan Program in Healthcare Administration at Cornell, stressed that chief financial officers tend to fixate on medical costs and remain skeptical about whether there is a return on investment for programs aimed at preventing absenteeism and presenteeism. Yet, research shows that medical care and pharmaceutical expenses



only account for 30 percent of the full cost of employees' poor health, with the rest resulting from lost productivity due to absenteeism and presenteeism.

The typical U.S. employer loses eight days of worker productivity per year due to poor health, which translates into an average cost of \$2,600 per worker annually, Nicholson said. The research highlights that presenteeism accounts for 78 percent of the total cost, while absenteeism accounts for the remaining 22 percent.

The condition that results in the highest health-related costs is depression, followed by obesity, arthritis, back and neck pain, and anxiety, said Nicholson.

Despite the costs associated with workers' poor health, only 51 percent of U.S. companies offer some type of wellness program to their employees, according to a 2019 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The most common type of programs employers provide are lifestyle coaching, smoking cessation, and weight loss.

Nicholson argued that companies that invest in wellness programs, however, save \$6 for every \$1 they spend on comprehensive workplace wellness. Nevertheless, many employers remain skeptical that wellness programs work as well as advertised.



**Tricia Taylor:** "Improving employee satisfaction results in higher retention and productivity level"

"Most things that are getting a six-times return, you just keep rolling them out and out and out until eventually you get diminished returns," Nicholson said. "Either we're still getting the measurement wrong — we're attributing too much in savings to these programs — or I think there's just underinvestment by employers, because employers shouldn't be leaving that much money on the table if the returns are really that high."

The healthcare industry experienced productivity losses from absenteeism is hospitals. Cayuga Medical Center in Ithaca, for example, has an employee shortage that has impacted the workload of its nurses and nurse's aides, said Dr. Martin Stallone, president and CEO of Cayuga Medical Center and Cayuga Health System.

"For front-line healthcare workers, it can be almost maddening to have to take care of people whom you would want to out of respect for your profession, but you feel unable to care for as much as you would want," said Dr. Stallone, who has a bachelor's degree in biology from Cornell.

The hospital has addressed the stress levels its staff faces by providing a range of health and wellness programs, including subsidized massages, therapeutic yoga classes, and professional counseling.

Hospital employees receive a 50 percent subsidy off the membership rate at three local gyms, if they commit to exercising 24 times in a three-month period. The hospital is able to provide this benefit because it co-owns the gym and does not have pay market costs for membership, Dr. Stallone said.

"I think if we say that we care about people's health and wellness because they're instrumental for our company, they feel better about working there, and then the normal noxious stimuli are not perceived as so much pain," Dr. Stallone said. "The exact same stimulus, whether it's emotional or physical depending on your mental



state, is going to be perceived differently.”

In the hospitality industry, the focus on service extends beyond how guests are treated to how employees are supported through programs that contributes to their well-being. For example, at the Breakers Palm Beach, improving employee satisfaction results in higher retention and productivity levels, said Taylor, the resort’s executive vice president and general manager.

“Hotels and restaurants are used to decades of being told the customer is always right, the customer comes first, the customer is king – all those mantras that still exist,” said Taylor, a 1995 graduate of Cornell’s Hotel School. “We really do put our team first; even our guests and our club members know this. It’s very simple but it proves powerful because it all drives itself, it fuels itself, and it has momentum.”

The resort launched its employee wellness program in 2005, after hiring the Human Performance Institute, a company based in Orlando, to develop it. All team members have participated in the educational program, which includes four dimensions: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

The focus on the staff at the Breakers has ingrained a positive attitude in the workplace culture. In a 2019 survey, 93 percent of the 2,226 team members rated the Breakers as a great place to work. Among the top reasons employees listed for their satisfaction was management’s support of their overall well-being and the wellness activities that have had a positive impact on the staff.

Another measurement of employee satisfaction at the resort is a retention rate of 80 percent, which is considered high for the industry. “We’re not immune from the labor shortage,” said Taylor, adding that the hotel hires 400 to 500 employees a year. “But so much of the answer lies in retaining the people who should be retained. You’re not going to retain them if you’re not focused on well-being.”



**Heather Kolakowski:** “Tackling the issue of mental health is hindered by the stigma that continues to be associated with mental health problems.”

## Next Steps

**R**oundtable participants pointed out that training and education are also critical to employee well-being. In particular, tuition reimbursement is a benefit that can encourage staff members to invest in continuing education.

“Whether education growth is different from wellness growth, it didn’t seem to come into our discussion today,” said Nagesh Gavirneni, a professor of operations management at the Johnson Graduate School of Management. He questioned whether educational benefits are part of wellness growth or whether they should be considered distinct from health concerns.

Several companies represented at the roundtable said they offer tuition reimbursement, including the Breakers, Google, and SAS. At Google, education ties into well-being through a program in which mentors coach employees on wellness habits, Railton said.

Another key factor that companies need to focus on is financial well-being. At the Breakers, the lowest hourly wage is \$15, paid primarily to its groundskeepers and landscapers. “You can’t

have healthy, happy, productive employees with the financial stress,” Taylor said. “A living wage fuels everything, and it makes it work.”

Concluding the roundtable, Kolakowski, the associate director of CIHF, thanked the speakers for sharing new ideas on workplace wellness that participants could apply in their own organizations. “Collectively we can help each other out, and lift everyone up thinking of a healthier future,” she said.

*For additional information on CIHF programs, please contact the institute at [CIHF@cornell.edu](mailto:CIHF@cornell.edu).*



**Natalie Osborn:** “How we treat our employees transfers into how employees treat customers”







# Agenda

## Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures

Innovating Across Health, Hospitality, and Design

2019 Roundtable: Workplace Well-being

Sunday, October 27 2019

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6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. Welcome Reception

Roundtable Co-Chairs:

Heather Kolakowski, SHA '00

Associate Director of Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures; Lecturer, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Mary Tabacchi

Professor Emerita, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

Monday, October 28 2019

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7:30 a.m. - 8:00 a.m. Networking Breakfast and Registration

8:00 a.m. - 8:20 a.m. Welcome and Introductions

**AM Session 1**      **Industry Trends and Recent Research of Workplace Well-being**

8:20 a.m. - 9:05 a.m. Creating a Culture of Well-being, Keri Johnson, Wellness and Fitness Specialist, Cornell Wellness

9:05 a.m. - 9:35 a.m. Well-being at SAS: Modifying Programs to the Changing Needs of Our Workforce, Natalie Osborn, Director, Marketing SAS

9:35 a.m. - 10:00 a.m. Design for Future Work Style: Support for Occupant Well-being as a New Performance Mandate, Ying Hua, Associate Professor/Director of Undergraduate Studies, Design + Environmental Analysis

10:00 a.m. - 10:25 a.m. Networking Break



**AM Session 2**      **Workplace Well-being Best Practices**

- 10:25 a.m. - 11:25 a.m. New and Exciting Practices in Workplace Well-being, Panel Discussion moderated by Heather Kolakowski, Associate Director, CIHF
- 11:25 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. Workplace Well-being at Google, Michelle Railton, Health and Performance Innovation Manager, Google
- 12:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m. Lunch and Networking Break

**PM Session**      **Challenges and Opportunities for Workplace Well-being**

- 1:30 p.m. - 2:15 p.m. Research on the Value to an Employer of a Healthy Worker, Sean Nicholson, Director of the Sloan Program in Health Administration
- 2:15 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. Workplace Well-being at Cayuga Medical Center, Dr. Marty Stallone, President and CEO, Cayuga Medical Center and Cayuga Health System
- 3:00 p.m. - 3:50 p.m. Making a Difference in Employees' Lives, Tricia Taylor, Executive Vice President & General Manager, The Breakers Palm Beach
- 3:50 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. Closing Remarks

## Roundtable Co-Chairs

Heather Kolakowski, SHA '00  
Associate Director of Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures; Lecturer, School of Hotel Administration, Cornell SC Johnson College of Business

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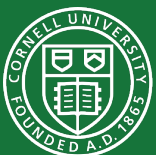
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*Innovating across health, hospitality, and design to create a...*



# HEALTHY FUTURE



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