

# Britain's economy is crumbling under the weight of long-term sickness, it is time we fixed it

*COVID-19 brought about wholesale changes in working habits and introduced seismic changes in the relationship between employers and employees. The pandemic has placed the health and wellbeing of the workforce at the forefront of businesses' minds and looking forward, can be a catalyst for long overdue change across a variety of sectors.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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Businesses now recognise that the long-term health of their workforce is crucial to efficiency, performance, and the wider economy and are starting to come to terms with the concept of employee health as a strategic business priority.

Ill health has for too long blighted the British economy, holding it back from realising the full potential of a large and multi-skilled workforce and acting as a substantial hurdle in unlocking the full economic potential of the UK. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) estimates that the UK loses a staggering 131 million working days a year due to ill-health, costing the nation £180B.

This challenge predates the pandemic, however, and the impact of it cannot be understated. Data from the Office for National statistics shows that those suffering from long-term illnesses surpassed the two-million-mark pre-pandemic, ballooning further since to record levels.

Current economic uncertainty and the rising cost-of-living have also contributed to record levels of employee burnout. Now, more than ever, businesses have a clear case for prioritising the mental and physical health and wellbeing of their workforce, and for the Government to make it a cornerstone of long-term economic policy.

A priority not just for the economy but for individual companies should now be for business leaders to proactively ensure a sizeable chunk of their investment in employees is directed towards high-impact, evidence-based health and wellbeing interventions. As things stand, approaches and investment intent differ across sectors, regions, and size of businesses. With the evolving future of work, employee needs, and expectations are showing radical shifts. The UK is staring down the barrel at a public health crisis that has been fuelled by soaring cost-of-living.

While the short-term economic outlook looks challenging, this is a fantastic opportunity for businesses to step into the breach, and proactively work to enhance the health of their employees, a step that will go a long way in supporting public health infrastructure and enhance the economic resilience of the nation. Business-led health interventions, targeted investments to support the long-term health of employees, and taking a proactive role in local communities as 'anchor institutions' that can help businesses have a positive impact on employee health and at the same time boost business performance.

A well-developed and targeted employee health and wellbeing programme can be hugely beneficial for SMEs, with research suggesting that 60% of SMES acknowledged that providing health benefits had a high impact supporting productivity. However, these programmes have typically been in the large corporate arena mainly due to the budget constraints of SMEs. Saving on staff wellbeing is counterintuitive, since boosting happiness and improving health increases productivity. With most of the working population of the UK employed by SMEs (SMEs

employ 16 million people and account for three-fifths of the employment and around half of turnover in the UK private sector), the future of UK economy is highly dependent on the productivity of these companies.

SMEs can often create highly customised and effective health benefits programmes, often using smaller budgets by prioritising the following: Investing in proper leadership and line management training for managers to support staff and develop their potential; Creating an inclusive workplace culture built on trust and communication while eradicating toxic norms and behaviour; Ensuring there is a work life balance and adjusting flexible working policies to enhance wellbeing; Facilitating conversations about difficult or taboo topics (such as mental health, substance abuse and financial issues)

Ongoing dialogue with employees is a great way for SMEs to understand the efficacy of their health and benefits offering, and often make quicker course-corrections that help employees get the best out of their health and wellbeing offer.

This is where Business for Health's pioneering new Work Health Index (WHI), developed in partnership with the CBI, can play a crucial role, helping benchmark private sector health provision across the economy. The WHI will give all businesses the opportunity to diagnose the strength of their health offering and compare it against peers with a key outcome being that it will help businesses understand their competitiveness and enhance their employee value proposition. Over the longer term, it is designed to help businesses create sustainable and healthier work environments, and support better health outcomes, two aspects that are critical to increasing business productivity, fighting off the current economic downturn and supporting public health infrastructure.

As has been recognised in the climate and zero carbon debates, what is good for the planet and its people is also good for shareholders and

business owners. With their direct influence over the lives of millions of employees, the potential positive outcomes of promoting health and well-being more effectively in the workplace are enormous. The scale of the challenge is large, but with the right tools and plans, businesses can lead the way forward to healthier economic stability for the country.

In conclusion, it is vital to understand that businesses have a significant role to play in public health, as employers, as providers of healthy goods and services, and ultimately as drivers of healthy local economies. Businesses are shifting the dial on climate, and amidst local and global economic uncertainty, it is critical that they do the same on health—especially with health and climate interlinked to drive growth.

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