Proliferating New Age Digital Technologies to Boost Mental Health and Wellbeing

The transformation of mental wellbeing in times of COVID-19 using automation, artificial intelligence, analytics, and a balanced way of life can improve end user experience, well-being, and productivity helping HR organizations and ourselves solve critical day-to-day issues.

The resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore three areas of wellbeing: physical, mental and social. In the early 1970s, wellness was thought of as a lack of illness, the absence of symptoms of disease indicated that we were well. Today, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellness as "a state of composite physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely as absence of any disease or infirmity." When we blend wellness with today's digital technologies such as automation (RPA), artificial intelligence (AI), and augmented reality (AR), the potential results are both extensive and exciting.

Mental wellness, a relatively underplayed concept, has been brought to the fore amid recent emerging statistics in the organizational context[1] :

- 79% of employees have experienced **stress** at work during the last 12 months.

- 45% of employees have considered leaving a job due to the **stress** it has created.

- Employees who participated in **social or community activities regularly saw a** ~20% increase in their productivity[2].

- ~49% of employees[3] think their line managers would be unable to relate to them even if they spoke to them about a mental issue.

A significant collection of organizations have realized this burgeoning importance of ensuring mental wellness for their employees, prompted in part by the importance of these statistics:

- 72%[4] of employees **want to see their employers** advocate for mental health and well-being in the workplace.

- $7-10 million[5] is the amount **absenteeism costs employers per salaried employee** annually; this cost jumps to $3,600 for each hourly employee.

- Studies[6] estimate that every **$1 spent** on improving treatment for common mental disorders **generates a return of $3-5 in improved health and productivity, i.e. a 3X-5X return**.

- 400 million[7] **is the number of workdays lost** globally each year due to depression alone.

Understanding mental health with a typical user journey

Now let's relate the concept of mental health with a typical user journey – Mr. X., an employee with multiple layered characteristics – as we attempt to solve his issues by marrying psychology (mental wellness) and technology (digital) in Figure 1, titled "User Journey of Mr. X."
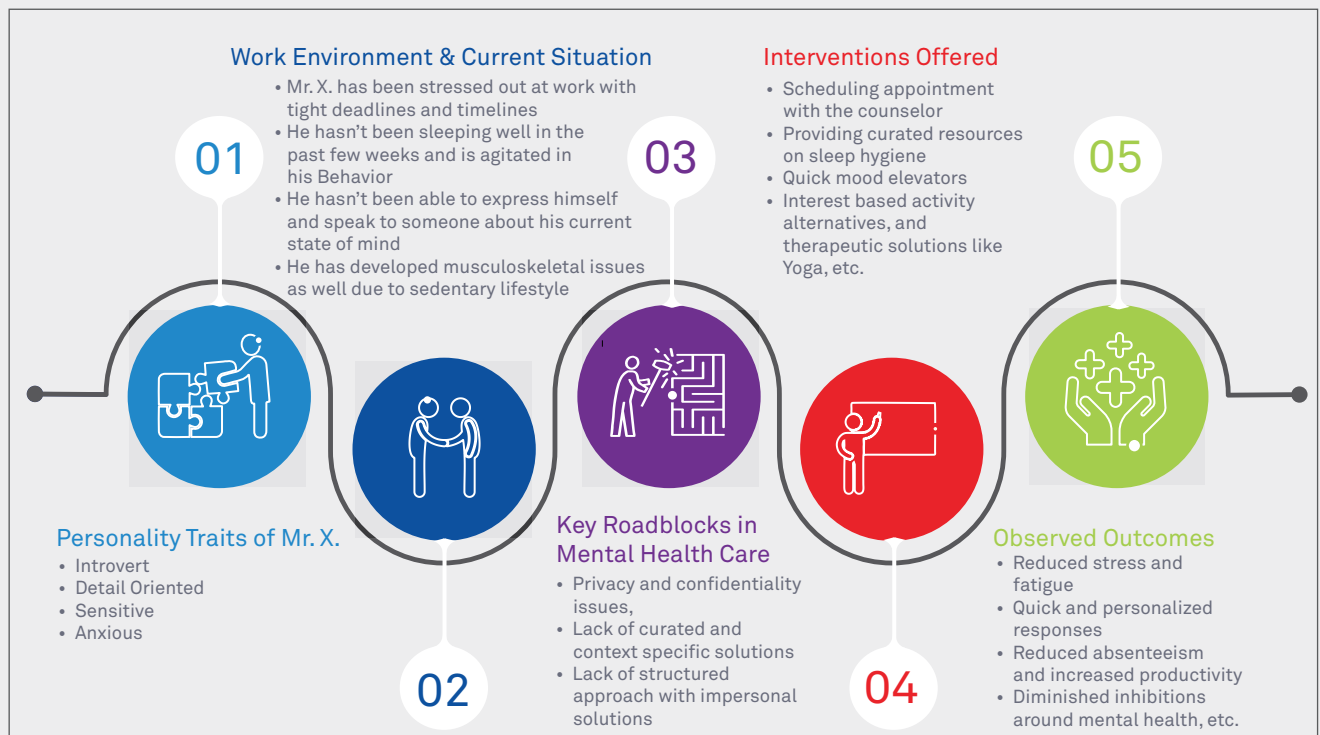
Work Environment & Current Situation
- Mr. X. has been stressed out at work with tight deadlines and timelines
- He hasn't been sleeping well in the past few weeks and is agitated in his Behavior
- He hasn't been able to express himself and speak to someone about his current state of mind
- He has developed musculoskeletal issues as well due to sedentary lifestyle

Interventions Offered
- Scheduling appointment with the counselor
- Providing curated resources on sleep hygiene
- Quick mood elevators
- Interest based activity alternatives, and therapeutic solutions like Yoga, etc.

01

03

05

Personality Traits of Mr. X.
- Introvert
- Detail Oriented
- Sensitive
- Anxious

Key Roadblocks in Mental Health Care
- Privacy and confidentiality issues,
- Lack of curated and context specific solutions
- Lack of structured approach with impersonal solutions

Observed Outcomes
- Reduced stress and fatigue
- Quick and personalized responses
- Reduced absenteeism and increased productivity
- Diminished inhibitions around mental health, etc.

02

04

Figure 1: User Journey of Mr. X.

Major roadblocks to accessing mental health and wellbeing solutions at the workplace

According to an internal survey conducted by organizations[8], some of the top challenges faced by employees like Mr. X. include:

25% of the respondents mentioned that they did not have easy access to a consolidated wellbeing calendar.

20% of respondents did not know who to reach out to in the event of a mental health issue.

20% of respondents felt they were unable to quantify the benefits of wellbeing activities.

15% of respondents felt they did not have access to wellness resources.

10% of respondents felt they were not proactively being reached out to.

The remaining 10% of respondents had other reasons, such as inhibitions in reaching out to a counselor or having no interest in improving their mental well-being.

Using technology to transform the 'new normal' by addressing challenges:

Can technology solve problems and bring transformation to become the new normal? The answer is probably an emphatic "Yes" because today technology can aim to solve some of the problems that we would face regularly, illustrated with Figure 2, "What-If scenario based modeling"

How can the power of digital technologies assist further?

The health and wellness industry, already a booming $4.5 trillion[9] business globally has seen a mushrooming of online sessions for improving mental state today that cost anywhere between $30 and $60 per hour[10] , and considering the COVID-19 pandemic we have been a part of, the future holds immense potential as some of the following areas of application begin to emerge:

Analysis of behavioral patterns:
Technology can be used to correlate an employee's well-being profile with their performance pattern and draw inferences if there is a significant shift or change that should become a cause of concern and suggest curative measures even before it is visible or identified by managers.

Sentiment analysis:
With the help of a few open-ended questionnaires, technology can be applied to analyze the tone and context of replies given by the employees using NLP (Natural Language Processing) and Machine Learning algorithms. If the analysis detects any signs of aggression or detestation, it can trigger an alert to the Counselors, HR stakeholders, and line managers as a potential risk in the organization.

Interest profiling:
Technology can help build an employee's social media persona by studying the types of various media handles that they frequently use and their interests on trending topics. Based on the analysis, curated and personalized well-being offerings for each employee can be recommended. In case there is a sudden change in their social behavior – for example, a change in their types of posts or if they follow extremist groups or fanaticism sites – there can be mechanisms in place that can trigger an alert to the right stakeholders.

Facial expressions & speech analysis:
Technology application can be engaged in studying and analyzing facial expressions to identify if an individual is feeling anxious or is under stress. For example, too many eye movements, voice modulation intonation, speech tempo, or repeated use of certain words can indicate that a person is feeling anxious or is experiencing a dilemma.

Figure 2: What-If scenario based modelling

The seven "What if employees…" items around the diagram:

- **01** Look at elevating their mood via options such as puzzles, exercises, quotes, games etc.?
- **02** Be guided towards specific columns and publications at the earliest upon any symptoms they would notice?
- **03** Get enrolled in clubs aligning common goals of like minded individuals to improve their mental well being?
- **04** Proactively execute stress-level Assessments?
- **05** Focus on healthy eating habits, exercise & ergonomics, sleep patterns, motivate self by positive thinking?
- **06** Could meet their counselors virtually?
- **07** Proactively be suggested of work-pause breaks at regular intervals to ensure relax muscles?

People, process, and technology coming together: A perfect combo?

In an organizational context, the HR, strategy, or digital department is at the forefront of solving employee and customer challenges. A combination of people (right SMEs), processes (mapping a streamlined workflow), and technology (what solves when and how) is undoubtedly a critical factor for success. Let us look at the various elements that could work in this combo. Figure 3: The Framework.

A human touch	Process	Technology
Conversational suite that makes the employees feel heard and acts as a bridge between them and the counsellors	Availability of personalised care anytime, anywhere. Wellness Bot can help curate a modular wellness regimen typified for particular projects/ team	Technology that can process information from upstream and downstream and aid in the process simplification
Acts as the first level of screening by proactively identifying patterns in mood/ behavior over time	Provide a constant feedback loop that helps customize wellbeing programs. Bot delivers insights from responses & data points to help teams/ counselors	Technology in the form of Bots that use NLP and NLU can be employed
Private and personalized, so employees can seek help with the same level of comfort as with a counsellor	Benchmarking studies helping with baseline stress levels of different teams	24/7/365 availability with flexibility to host it in-premise and cloud both
Provides behavioural change nudges in small steps and meaningful outcomes	Streamlined scheduling and calendar of the wellbeing programs	Seamless integration with already running programs and delivery channels. Can easily be integrated with other channels like MS Team, Skype etc.
Improve Performance of Employees (Time Spent on Wellness Activities, Stress - Levels, Admin Productivity & Performance (on a queue - wise basis)	Instant, consistent, and coherent solutions that provide line managers effective tools to foster heightened team productivity and satisfaction	Interactions with users are fully secured. Captures unstructured data and creates wellness insights
Array of clinically proven, context driven self-care exercises customized to age/ gender/ geography/ etc.	Curated individual solutions with the overall organizational program/ strategy	

Figure 3: The Framework

What would the combination of people, process, and technology lead to?

Deploying technology to solve mental challenges could lead to indicative benefits[11] such as:

- ~15-20% higher productivity/performance.

- Covering 100% of associates and determining their stress levels at least in the organizational context.

- 24/7 availability of virtual psychologists that can reduce stress levels by ~20%.

- ~5-10% lower attrition and unplanned shrinkages.

- Integration of the scalable across processes, because BOT can take multiple input formats.

All of these instances eventually lead to happy and satisfied employees that deliver both on the personal as well as organizational front. Organizations now are able to reduce their overall expenditure on employee health while affecting the overall organization brand and Net promoter/customer/stakeholder score (NPS/ CSAT).

This can also lead to higher employee morale, greater focus of employees from tactical to strategic tasks, and continuous improvement in growth trajectories.

In summary, especially since COVID-19 became a global crisis earlier this year, the success of organizations largely depends on the mental well-being of employees as they help clients and stakeholders navigate these turbulent times. Employees and employers must continue to have their heart in the right place to ensure growth during and after the COVID-19 era to help themselves and their customers flourish.

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