

Supporting Employee Wellbeing and Resilience During a Global Health Crisis

A case study summary of several executive roundtable discussions hosted by **meQuilibrium**

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A Global Crisis Emerges

When the Covid-19 pandemic emerged in 2020, organizations all over the world were forced to quickly respond. Almost overnight, they were faced with a new reality that created unfamiliar, uncomfortable and sometimes frightening work situations.

To control the spread of the virus, governments around the world closed down many non-essential business operations. The goal was to help people self-isolate to slow the spread of Covid-19. However, this brought along a raft of workforce challenges, even when operations could be maintained via remote work technologies. Meanwhile, essential businesses—meaning hospitals, grocery stores, electrical plants, some manufacturing facilities and more—had to figure out how to safely staff these essential physical workplaces.



About meQuilibrium

meQuilibrium is the engagement, performance, and wellbeing solution that harnesses behavioral psychology, AI, predictive analytics and neuroscience to help innovative businesses build workforce potential. By unlocking the power of resilient people and teams, its customers more successfully navigate turbulent of times. Powered by data-driven insights, its solution uses a clinically-validated assessment and robust benchmarking to measure resilience and create personalized upskilling programs, while providing employers with unique cognitive risk and behavioral health data about their workforce.

A partial list of the many challenges these organizations needed to address includes:

- ▶ challenges in coping with remote work technologies
- ▶ employee loneliness, stress and sometimes various other mental health issues
- ▶ the need for many employees to be a caregiver for children or other family members even while continuing to work at home
- ▶ struggles with the fear of being on the front lines while the virus raged
- ▶ layoffs or furloughs due to the inevitable economic slowdown
- ▶ feelings of anxiety due to both health and economic uncertainties
- ▶ organizational logistics
- ▶ questions about how best to support and manage employees
- ▶ difficulties coordinating schedules of essential workers
- ▶ redesigning workspaces to maximize social distancing

Employers also needed to stay as agile and resilient as possible because, in the face of the pandemic, new and difficult-to-predict issues regularly arose. In some cases, the only answer was to continue to do the best they could until the long-term crisis passed.

During the first several months of the crisis, meQuilibrium hosted a series of executive roundtables with customer companies to discuss the challenges and share ideas on how to meet those challenges. As an organization devoted to assessing and enhancing employee wellbeing and engagement, meQuilibrium invited an impressive group of senior-level HR, benefits, talent, and wellbeing leaders from its extensive Fortune 500 customer base. These professionals understood that the pandemic was causing difficulties that could not be solved overnight and would last for months, if not longer.

As one of the roundtable participants put it, their organization understood that “it’s going to be a long-term marathon, not a sprint.”

Four Key Steps to Coping with the Crisis

The roundtables focused on the topics of protecting employee wellbeing even while maintaining business operations as well as possible. When discussions were distilled, we found that there are at least four key steps needed to cope with the complex crisis:

- 1 **Acquire** accurate information about the challenges employees are facing
- 2 **Analyze** and make sense of the information to form a clearer picture of what is happening
- 3 **Formulate** new plans and policies for helping employees and stabilizing organizations
- 4 **Implement** those plans, policies, tactics and strategies, helping the workforce and the organization as a whole become more resilient and successful

This case study discusses how a variety of organizations have approached these four key steps.



Step One: Urgently Seek Clarity on Employee Wellbeing

When faced with a complex set of challenges, one of first things organizations require is a clear picture of what is happening. This picture is made up of accurate and understandable information.

In response to the pandemic, among the most important pieces of information was the wellbeing of employees, both physical and mental. Many questions needed answering. How are employees feeling? In which areas do they need the most employer assistance? How are these issues affecting their wellbeing and their work?



During the roundtable, Jan Bruce, CEO at meQuilibrium, shared data from meQuilibrium's Mood Coach feature, which gives users personalized emotional support and cognitive skill building recommendations and provides aggregated data to help employers learn about employee mental wellbeing and engagement. Reporting on the data in mid-April, Bruce informed the roundtable members of some disturbing developments among customer companies. First, she reported that the percentage of employees reporting high and extreme stress was up about

30% from the year before, a major spike upwards given that such data tends to be relatively stable over time. Bruce noted, “There are always people that are expressing high stress but we’ve never seen so many people expressing extreme and high stress.” She also noted that employees newly entering the meQuilibrium system were, compared with baseline data from previous employees entering meQuilibrium system, displaying “higher vulnerabilities in the area of their ability to manage their stress and their ability to control their emotions.”

Stress was not, of course, the only issue to report on. Bruce noted that risk of anxiety, burnout, depression and other metrics were also higher, representing heightened risk factors.

Dr. Andrew Shatté, Ph.D., Chief Knowledge Officer and Co-founder at meQuilibrium, further explained that issues such as employees’ “emotion control” is linked with other critical work-related factors. When he looked at those who do well in emotion control versus those who do not, he found that those who showed less control also had a higher tendency toward impaired productivity, lower job satisfaction, and high rates of clinical depression. meQuilibrium’s data also showed that many employees were expressing financial worries. That is, they were worried about being able to properly do their jobs amid the pandemic and also about being able to retain their jobs and earn enough money to care for their families and maintain their lives.

In short, customer organizations are able to use meQuilibrium to seek and gain in-depth clarity into critical employee issues related to their wellbeing.

Step Two: Analyze and Interpret Information to Gain Perspective

The second step in protecting employees' wellbeing is analyzing accurate and timely data to gain a useful perspective. Data by itself is only a raw material. It is the proper analysis and interpretation of this data that helps organizations make better decisions.



Every organization must ultimately make sense of its own data, of course, because every organization has unique capabilities, culture and circumstances. This is why organizations need leaders with great analytical and decision-making skills.

Even so, most successful organizations seek and utilize external expert opinions. Sometimes these opinions focus on data interpretation. For example, Dr. Shatté pointed out that employees who score in certain ways on meQuilibrium assessments are also much more likely to quit their jobs.

At other times, experts can help provide organizations with “bigger picture” interpretations. For example, Dr. Shatté lent his expert perspective by noting the Covid-19 crisis “represents a perfect storm of fear” for humanity. First, he noted, infectious diseases and mass contagions have always haunted and endangered people dating back to our pre-history. In this sense, the virus “represents one of those old fears” and so winds up “really pushing all our buttons from the get-go.”

Second, because such viruses are virtually invisible to us, it raises “a lot of our issues around control and our ability to control our circumstances.” People feel uncertainty and a loss of control.

Third, it requires actions that make people uncomfortable, such as working from home even while coping with competing responsibilities, such as homeschooling children, managing pets, finding quiet places to work, etc. Telecommuting and remote work have been slow trends for decades, but now the virus is forcing workplace change “at a far more rapid rate than we’re comfortable with.”

Leveraging such analytical perspectives can help organizations see their challenges in a new light. This, in turn, leads to better strategic thinking and planning.

Step Three: Plan and Strategize

Even as early as mid-April, 2020, many roundtable participants noted that their organizations were beginning to plan for when employees returned to work. Although every employer has unique challenges, all roundtable members wanted to develop plans and strategies with employee mental and physical wellbeing in mind. Various possible strategies were discussed. For example, should they plan to allow employees to opt out of returning to the physical workspace? Where and when would this be logistically feasible? If they took such a step, how could they make sure that employees were not penalized for such decisions during the performance review process later on?

Participants discussed a wide range of current and possible strategies, but virtually all strategies were based on the information and perspectives gleaned from the previous steps of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Moreover, all strategies were predicated based on employee challenges, engagement, emotions and overall wellbeing.



Step Four: Take Action and Effectively Implement

The executive roundtable participants discussed so many tactics and strategies that there is no way to include them all in a single case study. However, in the remainder of this paper, we discuss nine different approaches to coping with recent changes.

1) Assess to Gain Insights

Assessments are integral to determining the needs, attitudes and wellbeing of employees. For example, a benefits manager described using the meQuilibrium data to identify when employee burnout was high. In response, her organization gave employees additional days off, effectively shutting down the company for more days than originally planned for the July 4th holiday. She further noted:

We've ... implemented in our new hire orientation, which we have each week, a mental health segment and a requirement of completion of the meQ assessment. So all new hires will receive that link in order to complete their assessment. During their first week, we have a pilot program that we are proposing for our commercial team, which is about 3,500 employees. And the idea is that everybody completes the assessment ... And then as a result of that information, we look at how we can promote content, have training sessions, presentations, and then we'll evaluate at the three month and the six month mark in terms of their assessment to see if we're doing our job. We are also building out an entire wellbeing work stream with squads ... in order to support our different teams across the organization, based on the meQ data that we will be receiving. And because I'm getting a ton of requests around mental health presentations, I'm requiring everybody to complete the meQ assessment before I agree to present any mental health information and that just is embedding it within each of our invites and all of our email communications.



2) Build Resilience Competencies

Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficulties and come out in a better place. Organizational resiliency is especially critical when the world is faced by a global pandemic. The concept was mentioned again and again during the various executive roundtables, with the ultimate goal of boosting employee and, therefore, organizational resiliency.

A work-life solutions director described her organization's efforts:

To really promote resilience and managing stress, we created an interesting program called 'meQ Moments' with our meQ team to really drive people to take small actions and focusing on the fact that small actions do really make a difference. So we started a four week cycle ... [E]ach week we promote a different topic. And then we are engaging and transitioning to returning to work and recognize that people will have some avid stress, similar to what [your organizations] are dealing with as they go back into the office ... We're just initiating the work streams to tackle all those issues.

The concept of resilience is key to the meQuilibrium approach to measuring and improving employee wellbeing. Dr. Shatté of meQuilibrium explained, "As soon as Covid-19 came along we at meQuilibrium put our heads together to come up with a meQ Covid-19 response. And we wanted to think about what are going to be the resilience needs and how will they change over time and how can we use our past experiences to start to map that out."

One key to inculcating greater resilience is sharing related success stories. Jan Bruce of meQuilibrium noted that, "we all together want to heighten this role of storytelling around resilience."



3) Empower and Educate Managers

Various roundtable participants stated that they are focusing on educating managers on how to better help the people reporting to them during this crisis. Erik Sossa, Vice President, Global Benefits & Wellness at PepsiCo, stated his organization was spending a lot of time and energy trying to empower, educate, motivate and train frontline managers to respond better. His organization is using a variety of methods, such as video lessons and regular tips, to help such managers respond better to today's management challenges.

Along similar lines, Melanie Foley, Executive Vice President, Chief Talent and Enterprise Services Officer at Liberty Mutual Insurance, stated, "We've been really focused on check-ins with managers and really helping our managers first build their skills before they go and have conversations with their employees. We've done manager resources on how to lead virtually. We've been doubling down on empathetic leadership." For example, managers can do regular check-ins just to gauge how employees are doing rather than to check in on the progress of their work objectives.

Laura Young, VP, Benefits and Wellness at Goldman Sachs, discussed their training program:

We recognize that some of our workforce may have challenges navigating work and personal lives. We are encouraging managers to have conversations with their people to understand their needs. We also want to ensure our managers can identify if someone is really struggling, and therefore have rolled out training to assist them in identifying cues related to burnout, anxiety or even depression. With most of our workforce working remotely, managers need to be aware of more subtle cues than before, such as relying on change in communication style, tone or pattern. Additionally, employees may raise specific issues with them directly. This course provides managers with suggestions on how to respond, and informs them on where to direct people for assistance. Of course, we highlight meQuilibrium as a resource for our people. Additionally, we're also looking to include some personal stories on our firm's internal website as we know our people tend to digest a lot of their information about the firm from there. The intent is to highlight available mental health resources and also ask a few individuals if they are willing to share their stories. So we're hoping that all of that comes together to normalize the conversation around mental health and shows a comprehensive picture of how the firm supports our people.

Jan Bruce of meQuilibrium noted that managers represent an opportunity because "they're our pipeline in many ways to all of our employees... we have to help them and give them the resources so that they can be armed and prepared so they can understand what people are going through and how to help them."

4) Leverage Top Leaders



More senior leaders also play a large role in enhancing employee wellbeing. A wellbeing and health promotion professional stated, “The focus on wellbeing has never been more significant at the organization. The desire of leadership to be articulating our values around that has come out even more so ... The Lead[er] of Comp and Benefits as well as Leadership and Learning have authored a paper ... on emotional and mental wellbeing.”

One roundtable member stated, “We’re looking at some of the aspects of meQ that could help us with the development of leaders and upper level leaders, especially when it comes to emotional intelligence, growth mindset and empathy from a leadership standpoint.”

5) Emphasize Wellbeing, Safety and Self Care



Another issue that arose time and again was of the concept of self-care. This is an especially important issue at a time when there is a global health crisis as well as massive workplace changes. Dr. Shatté noted it was expected that during the early stages of the crisis that “self-care would drop away.” After all, it was a time of enormous change when

there was much to do. During busy and stressful times, employees—including managers—often think that they can solve their work-life balance difficulties by not sleeping. Dr. Shatté noted that if a person is below the mean on sleep, there is only a 15% chance that they will be above the mean on resilience.

People need to make the time to care for themselves. If they do not, they will not be as capable of adapting to change. Employers not only need to emphasize self-care but also provide information and coaching about how to achieve it.

6) Focus on Communication

Some participating organizations were able to take advantage of the expertise of Dr. Shatté by having him explain key wellbeing concepts to employees. A benefits director reported:

May was Emotional Wellbeing Month. We spent the entire month at least two or three communications every week talking about different dimensions. Had great response from our workforce on that including promoting Andrew's webinar towards the end of the month. And we haven't even formally yet cascaded meQ across the entire footprint. I think we had 50 or so people get on and register. Andrew, you did a nice job promoting that. So we appreciate that and looking forward to sort of rolling it out probably the next couple of weeks.



Such webinars are just one possible component of communication initiatives. Newsletters are another. One roundtable member stated they collect “the top tips that people are doing and share them in a newsletter ... We had one come out today. At the end of this week we’ll have a [company specific] or news story about this topic as part of what we do.”

Surveys may be another vehicle. Melanie Foley of Liberty Mutual Insurance, stated that “every week we go out with a pulse [survey] ... and we’re tracking employee sentiment on many things and seeing how it changes and seeing how it differs by region.”

A roundtable member further explained :

There's a whole group focused on leaders, and we have incorporated mental health messages in all of the communications on leadership side. And our EAP manager in conjunction with Leadership Edge created a podcast on worry and anxiety and what to what to tell people, how to help people.

7) Consider Culture



Culture is key to employee resilience. Jan Bruce noted, “What I’m hearing is that there is an opportunity that we’re all seeing right now to—not to reshape the culture entirely—but embed this sense of wellbeing and emotional wellbeing into an important cornerstone in the company’s culture.”

Various members of the roundtables described some of their initiatives aimed at this sort of culture change. One roundtable participant spoke of how they launched the meQuilibrium service in conjunction with May Mental Health Awareness Month. This organization began shifting more into “finding meaning” and, as a group, focusing on how best to move forward during the pandemic.

Another roundtable participant described how her organization focused on two things:

One is what the company and employees are doing for others. And then also, from a wellness perspective, we're really focusing on what employees can do to help others if they aren't already. So just trying to help them shift to that external focus rather than that internal focus. And then also focusing on the positives that come out of Covid-19. So around environmental, pollution, animals, sea life, all of that.

Some are hoping to use today’s changes as an opportunity to impact their culture by making them more positive, empathetic, focused on wellbeing, and more resilient “so that we can come out of this in a much more agile state,” stated Jan Bruce.

For example, Erik Sossa of PepsiCo noted that for the last two years their CEO had been pushing the organizational culture to react even more quickly to changes. Sossa stated:

We need to be quicker, we need to be leaner, we need to make decisions faster and the crisis shows that we can. So, he's sort of like saying, let's not return to that when we go back. ... So build some resiliency in our return plans and bring forward some learnings of things that we may have needed a little bit of a nudge to push through to bring those forward.

One roundtable member noted that her organization is likely to “come out of this a different company in terms of remote workers.”

Another made the connection between culture and employee benefits:

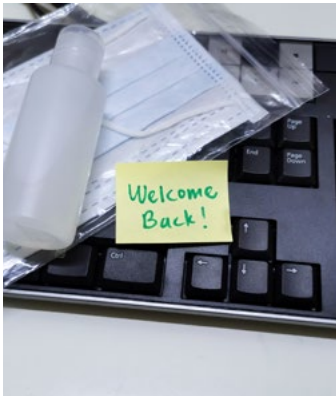
[The organization set up sessions to] evaluate the experience of our colleagues around ... what they need from our culture, our leaders, one another, and the kind of supports and the kind of conversations we need to address in in our benefit design as well as culture. So I am excited about that. We sometimes get caught in the whack-a-mole and this period has been certainly one of those. I am super excited that I could mention to Jan that meQuilibrium keeps appearing in our conversations with senior leadership now, and I'm excited because it's been a little bit Sisyphean for us, and we feel like we've made a breakthrough.

Some also noted that the recent events related to the racial inequality protests have been motivating their organizations to take another look at corporate cultural issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Erik Sossa of PepsiCo said:

How do we address the source of the implicit, the systemic, the institutional, the behavioral, the unconscious, subconscious bias that led us to this, how do we get upstream on this? And recognizing that we PepsiCo can't do it alone, but we also can't afford not to be part of a broader solution.



8) Carefully Think Through How to Get Back to Work



Some roundtable members noted that they were being careful about when to allow employees back into the physical workspace. One roundtable participant, the global head of compensation and benefits, stated that his organization “decided because we’re working reasonably effectively [with remote work techniques], we’re actually not going to come back to work anytime soon; so, I’d be surprised if we’re at 30% or 40% by the end of the year.”

Other organizations, especially those with manufacturing facilities, felt the pressure to resume plant operations even while doing their utmost to protect employees. Erik Sossa of PepsiCo, stated, “We have all the protocols for a symptom tracking and contact tracing, to some extent.” The challenge has been to determine exactly what type of testing strategy to use.

9) Offer Appropriate Benefits and Other Employee Resources

One issue that came up several times was the role of employee offerings. meQuilibrium CEO Jan Bruce noted that meQuilibrium not only provides its own educational resources to aid employees but also can refer users to other services that employers provide. She explained:

We are actually able to refer people based on their risk factors to whatever services you have available throughout the world to support them. And so in that way we can be an engine for you driving across everything from behavioral health support, EAP support, but also L&D and diversity and inclusion. If we see it in our data and you have auxiliary services to support it, we can get people there.

One roundtable member explained, “We launched a new EAP a year and a half ago and we saw an increase of 900% and right now we have our EAP and meQuilibrium balancing each other. So within meQ, it feeds you to the EAP. And within EAP, they remind every participant to use meQ every day. So I think it’s a partnership.”

Some were concerned that there hadn't been an uptick in EAP usage since the start of the crisis, but another roundtable participant said her organization had success by changing the programming and branding around their EAP: "We switched our programming around EAP probably about two years ago and changed [the name] ... And so we've seen a very strong uptick in EAP as well, even though people don't know it is 'EAP' anymore."

The pandemic has also made HR initiatives, such as leave programs, more prominent. Another participant stated: "We're looking at this situation as an opportunity, and there are number of conversations that we're progressing around shifting our whole perspective and programs and policies around creating more family leave, parental leave, more care leave as well for employees and doing all of this on a global basis, which before was a harder conversation for us. Now it's actually opened the door up in many things ... Wellbeing and resiliency has become a very important focus for our leadership, perhaps much more so than ever was before."

Employers sometimes focus on specific issues related to stress and family-related issues. Another roundtable participant stated,

We have an infrastructure in place where if someone is experiencing domestic violence, we have a whole team and a whole process to support that person. So we highlighted what that process is when people don't know about it, if you're not in that situation, having to use it, you don't even know about it. And then another topic we focused on was elder care. So for people who have are caregivers whether the person is living with them or they're in an assisted living or a nursing home, that is another very, very stressful topic and issue for people. And parenting, as we know that particularly right now ... people are both working and their teacher to their small children, for people who have small children. I commend them. So I'm on a lot of meetings with a colleague who literally her daughter has a desk right next to her.

Generally speaking, participants foresaw the need for helpful resources throughout the pandemic. One roundtable member noted, "I think we're just going to be in this transition phase for a very long time. And I think that's going to make our employees really uncomfortable for a long time and we just need to help them manage that. And right now I feel like, personally, my number one priority is I need to meet with as many people as I can to make sure they know about our, our tools and resources, because still a lot of our team members don't know about them."

Next Steps

Nearly every organization has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, though each faces a unique set of challenges. While there is no simple fix, employers can ask these questions to help pinpoint areas that need improvement:

- ▶ What does your organizational data indicate about the wellbeing of employees? Do you have the information necessary to make those determinations?
- ▶ Does your organization have the proper perspective and knowledge to analyze employee-related data correctly? That is, do you understand the data well enough to make good interpretations and decisions?
- ▶ Have you formulated workable plans and strategies to help your employees deal with the various challenges they face at work?
- ▶ Based on plans and strategies, has your organization taken actions such as the following?
 - ▶ Assess data to gain insights about employee wellbeing
 - ▶ Build and develop greater resilience competencies among employees
 - ▶ Empower and educate managers so they can help employees become more resilient, engaged and healthy
 - ▶ Develop and leverage senior leaders' abilities to articulate key values that provide support, enhance confidence, and increase employee wellbeing
 - ▶ Teach and emphasize safety and self care
 - ▶ Craft and cultivate initiatives that communicate information that employees find useful and reassuring
 - ▶ Take the opportunities to nurture a supportive culture that adapts to new challenges
 - ▶ Think carefully about how to best and most safely bring employees back into physical workspaces
 - ▶ Offer employees the resources they need such as new tools, technologies, training, support and benefits

Conclusion

We have been going through an unprecedented global workplace shift during which resilience and adaptation have become key to organizational success. Ensuring employees are safe and happy is of high importance. This report has outlined a variety of common problems faced by organizations as well as some possible solutions that may lead to greater employee wellbeing as well as overall organizational success.

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