

An upgrade for wellbeing

*Under the theme of 'Growth and Inclusive Prosperity', last year's Forum challenged attendees to create a 'social ecology' of organisations that enable value creation, entrepreneurship and innovative behaviours. To that list, we might add wellbeing, or – as **Julia Hobsbawm OBE** frames it – 'social health', a networks-based approach to improving human lives within the workplace. Here, she explains how this presents an intuitive source of care for our most basic and most complex needs*

Social health is a fast-growing force for sanity amid the most hostile landscape the working world has known for a century, **Julia Hobsbawm** tells **Matt Packer**

Last year's Drucker Forum was in the curious position of looking one year ahead to this year's 10th anniversary of the global financial crisis. While the trauma that flowed from the events of 2008 has, in many respects, yet to fully subside, Julia Hobsbawm points out that seeds of hope were sown during one of the earliest efforts to understand what had happened.

"Joseph E Stiglitz chaired two commissions in the wake of the initial flash-points," she says. "In 2009, a landmark report from one of those commissions specifically urged us to rethink the whole framework of evaluating gross domestic product as the sole yardstick of economic strength and, for balance, reintroduce measurements of 'social capital'. Social health is a theory I've developed very much on the shoulders of giants at the World Bank – including Stiglitz – who, around 20 years ago, first identified social capital as a metric of equal value to those we use to gauge economic performance."

Defining wellness

By the time Hobsbawm appeared at the 2017 Forum, she had elucidated her theory in her acclaimed book *Fully Connected: Social Health in an Age of Overload*. With her concept fully formed in those pages, the time was ripe to lead the Forum's attendees towards its central tenets. "My starting point was the wellness market," she says. "I invited people in the audience to raise their hands if they'd

ever bought a pair of trainers, and pretty much every hand in the room went up. Then I asked them if they'd ever bought a vitamin: similar response. And then, whether they'd ever counted a calorie – again, lots of hands. And I congratulated them on being part of what is, according to the Global Wellness Institute, a \$3.7 trillion industry."

She explains: "What fascinates me about that statistic is that it shows just how far and fast we can move on particular issues when we involve culture. A large part of that industry – namely, the apparel market – is behaviour-driven, focused upon styles and how we display our fitness. But at the same time, that \$3.7tn figure also highlights an enormous gap – because there's so much more to measure within, and around, the sector than dollar value. One of the most interesting things about the wellness industry is that it is really only 70 years old. Its origins are rooted in changes that the world was asked to make around physical health after the second world war, with the advent of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Upon its inception in 1948, the WHO published an official definition of health, which stated: 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.' Even though the world is very different to the world of 1948, the WHO's definition remains the same.

"The gap I identified relates to the definition's inclusion of social wellbeing.

In the past 70 years, we've devised a range of metrics-based systems to manage our physical and mental health. We know, for example, that the three dominant factors behind physical health are i) nutrition and hydration, ii) exercise and iii) sleep. And we know that the same applies to mental health – although we could argue that stress levels and professional, early intervention are also crucial factors there. So, my question to the Forum was: could we not have a similar set of metrics around wellbeing, under the banner of social health? And I define that as a relationship between three principles that, together, I call the KNOT: i) a functional flow of Knowledge; ii) well-managed NetwOrks and iii) realistic Timeframes.”

Muscular approach

In Hobsbawm's assessment, the imperatives to plug into social health are urgent. “Look at the costs of globally stagnant productivity,” she says. “Look at the costs of stress levels and a lack of wellbeing at work. Some 12.5 million working days are lost in the UK every year, equating to more than £2.5 billion of missing revenue; 60% of all working days lost across the EU are attributed to stress. So we have a heavy-duty cause-and-effect ratio. New technologies are hardly helping. I'm not 'anti' technology, as such – clearly, it is easing and driving disruption and change in a number of key markets. But its net effect within the arena of the workplace has been to reduce productivity and increase stress.

She notes: “Typically, the factors behind workplace stress fall into a bucket of organisational behaviour and management-related issues – for example: ‘My manager's given me a set of impossible deadlines’, or ‘The pressure to perform without the correct assistance is enormous.’ So I've become very interested in health as a metaphor. We seem to have lost sight of how to link productivity and economic performance to wellbeing. And with that in mind, we must update

and upgrade our behaviours – and our measurements.”

What of how numerous workers in recent years have sought solace in mindfulness? “I regard the mindfulness movement's success at work as an important outlier,” Hobsbawm says, “but by no means the end of the journey. I'm a fan – but frankly, the idea that it's going to solve the calamitous complexity with which we are all now surrounded is wishful thinking. Mindfulness is about shifting towards totally different ways of viewing and managing change. But social health is a much more muscular, policy-based, corporate and economic approach to delivering leaner, more agile, more engaged and more effective workforces, comprised of people who are fit for purpose.”

Going mainstream

Since Hobsbawm addressed last year's Forum, there have been encouraging signs that her message is catching on. In March, Cass Business School appointed her as honorary visiting professor of workplace social health – an entirely new role – providing her thesis with an instant educational platform. In a similar development, she notes, “Arianna Huffington asked me to become editor-at-large of the social health section on her wellbeing resource, Thrive Global. So these ideas, which are very much in the spirit of Drucker, are becoming more mainstream. In addition, I continue to sit on the board of the Workforce Institute Europe. As well as building up further research, I'm being asked to develop social health implementation plans for organisations that are eager to have solutions in place.”

Hobsbawm is also campaigning for the WHO to amend its definition of health in a way that corresponds to the demands and challenges of 21st-century life. “Wellbeing needs a reboot,” she says. “And if we drill down further into the themes behind my KNOT principles, there are three main areas for leaders to tackle...”

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1 Too much information

“We are drowning in a form of ‘infobesity’. Companies need to build much more sophisticated strategies and teams to address not just knowledge deficit – but knowledge *surfeit*. So they must start to ask questions to distinguish between a) the knowledge they have that is fundamentally applicable to short-term performance and market intelligence, versus b) the knowledge required for longer-term reskilling of the workforce and taking part in the collaborative, collating and sharing economy. In tandem with infobesity, of course, there is also a crisis of trust in truth and believable information, characterised by the clash between experienced, trained experts and more instinct-based populists.”

2 Networks aren't working

“Following my extensive research of around 80 years' worth of the social science around networks – from the original sociogram all the way up to behavioural economics – it is abundantly clear to me that there are serious issues with how companies implement network strategies among their own staff. They are focusing far too much on networking, and not enough on networks. Evidence indicates that siloed networks based around special interests are nothing like as productive or effective as cross-platform, cross-gender, cross-age, interdenominational, diverse networks. So conducting a strategic audit and assessment around networks is critical.”

3 Unreal time

“The elephant in the room for business – particularly among managers – is that timeframes and timelines are completely



out of synch with reality. Quarterly results are meaningless to the humans that have to live sustainable lives within organisations where, in addition to fulfilling their roles, they must also spend time building relationships, putting down roots of knowledge and adjusting their work habits to more agile modes. A major driver behind the type of stress that blights performance and spawns presenteeism is concern over timeframes. So my mantra – which is a bit simplistic, but deliberately so – is: treat your calendar, diary or schedule like your body. Don't let anything go in it that you yourself wouldn't choose to digest.”

What moves the needle?

That point on scheduling feels particularly apposite for a corporate world in which Tesla's maverick chief executive Elon Musk recently insisted that he has no choice but to work 120-hour long weeks. It would be remiss of this journal not to seek Hobsbawm's views on the example that Musk has been setting. She says: “In the same way that mindfulness is an outlier of various systemic changes that will probably culminate in a wider aware-

ness of social health, Musk will come to be seen as the poster child for the moment where we finally grew weary of techno-evangelism. And, indeed, the whole idea that the workaholicism of Silicon Valley is the answer. So in that sense, I think he's a hugely symbolic figure.”

Hobsbawm continues: “For me, social health is all about reframing what we do, how we do it, when we do it and with whom we do it, in order to make sense of what I regard as the most hostile landscape the working world has known for a century. Right? It's about asking, ‘What really moves the needle?’ It's about being totally different in our thinking and behaviours. And interestingly, I think that one of the best examples of social health in the public sphere in recent times was an event in which Musk was denied a leading role: the Tham Luang Nang Non cave rescue that retrieved the Wild Boars junior football team.”

She explains: “Musk was left to carp from the sidelines with his rigid, toy submarine that wouldn't have gone around the tunnel. But if we turn to the real rescue operation, all the core ingredients of social health as I define it – ie, knowledge, networks and time – were in evidence. At incredibly short notice, the team had

to amass very complicated information about rainfall, rock formations and oxygen levels. It assembled a network of 10,000 people over 10 days, ranging from mountaineers through to the military, through to mindfulness experts – mindfulness actually played a key role in keeping the boys calm – all against a backdrop of time.

“They operated not to some made-up schedule, but to a real one, which was: ‘We have to get the boys out before the oxygen runs out and the rain comes down.’ And they did it. It was a wonderful, beautiful example of social health in action.”

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