**PRESS RELEASE**

Employee assistance and workplace wellbeing

**24 October, 2012:** Human capital is at the heart of any successful organisation. People not only provide services, but bring creativity and innovation into the workplace. Unlike structural capital, however, people can decide to move on at any time, unless companies find ways to make them want to stay.

Hatch Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Specialist **Carrol Roberts-Harrison** says that one such way is to offer opportunities for the improvement of health status and general wellbeing. Research shows that employee health directly impacts employee work behaviour, work attendance, and job performance. It follows that encouraging healthy lifestyles will therefore result in a contented and more productive workforce.

“Whilst it is said that employee wellbeing is still a relatively new concept in South Africa, a growing number of employers are adopting measures aimed at promoting health and wellness among their employees. This is reflected in the fact that approximately 110 companies recently participated in the 2012 Discovery Healthy Company Index Survey. These employers understand that they can influence several aspects of the employees’ physical and psychological wellbeing in ways which can improve productivity, commitment and attendance,” explains Roberts-Harrison.

By addressing issues such as the working environment, work-life balance, healthy living and nutritional education, an organisation can improve the wellbeing of its workforce. In doing so, they will promote a culture that encourages individuals to flourish, productivity to increase, a sense of loyalty to be propagated, and a reduction in absence to become apparent. Ultimately, a healthier workforce makes for a healthier bottom line.

In creating a salubrious environment, employee wellbeing should appear in the top tier of business priorities – embracing the idea that healthy people are essential to overall strategy. “It is important to note that little lasting value can be achieved without enthusiastic leadership support,” stresses Roberts-Harrison.

Building a healthy organisational culture involves both the physical work structure and the employees’ perception of that work environment, which can be defined as the physical characteristics of the workplace. These include health and safety policies, noise levels, lighting, air quality and ergonomically adapted equipment and furniture, not underestimating the importance of healthy eating options, smoke-free policies and opportunities for physical activity.

Intrinsically, there are four keys to wellbeing: physical, social, financial, and mental and emotional wellbeing. If all of these are integrated, a healthy work environment is most likely to be sustainable.

The diagram below identifies some of the benefits to be derived from enabling a healthier workforce:

**Business Benefits of a Healthy Workforce**

“Ultimately, healthy employees are more committed, and committed employees are healthier. Healthy employees – whose physical and psychological wellbeing is good – will ostensibly demonstrate higher levels of commitment than those who are less healthy. Committed employees are more likely to identify with the values of their organisation, be proud to work for it, and want to exert effort on its behalf. They tend to work harder and are more willing to give ‘discretionary effort’. In addition, they are significantly less likely to resign, and they generally have lower sickness absence,” explains Roberts-Harrison.

When it comes to higher productivity, there are a number of aspects of job performance which are demonstrably better if employees are healthy – both physically and psychologically. These include: energy levels and concentration, decision-making, coping with pressure, uncertainty, critical feedback and change, completion of tasks, reliability and resilience.

All things considered, resilience is probably one of the best indicators of employee health, and a desirable characteristic within any organisation. The healthier employees are, the more resilient and better able they will be to cope with the changes, uncertainty and ambiguity; which are now commonplace in many organisations.

“Intensification of work has increased, partly due to the growth in the use of communication technology, which has expedited the movement of data and made time and deadline pressures more acute. The complexity and pace of life inside and outside of work has intensified too. ‘Work/life’ balance is more difficult to achieve, especially for those with childcare or eldercare responsibilities. Complex work travel arrangements and fragmented family structures add to the pressure,” explains Roberts-Harrison.

What’s more, another factor to consider is the growth in the incidence of mental health problems among the working population. For those employees susceptible to depression and anxiety because of financial, marital or other health problems such as chronic conditions, a psychologically unhealthy workplace can be a dangerous place.

“All said and done, programmes implemented too quickly are apt to vanish as quickly as they appear. New programmes should not be sprung on employees all at once. Small, gradual changes will foster a health-sustaining culture, whereas big, sweeping changes are often met with resistance, thwarting all effort,” says Roberts-Harrison.

Treating employees with respect and care is not just the right thing to do, it’s also good business. An organisation’s culture conveys the level of this respect via its programmes, policies, compensation, benefits and practices. Wellbeing programmes have the potential to contribute to such a culture, but should be created with employees’ needs and interests in mind.

Generally speaking, there is an expectation that employees will be flexible, agile, and cope with changes to roles, organisational structures, and strategy. Currently, there is much evidence that concerns over job insecurity is rife, and that employees crave stability at work above all else.

“With layoffs and slowdowns still a reality, it is more important than ever to maintain a positive work environment for employees who may be left carrying the workload of two or more individuals, or who may be feeling anxiety about fewer projects coming down the pipeline. The caring employer, who demonstrates that employee wellbeing is taken seriously, is most likely to attract the best candidates and – if they deliver on the promise – lose fewer staff to competitors. This is the softer side of business at its best,” concludes Roberts-Harrison.

***Ends.***

**Notes to the Editor**
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**About Hatch**
Hatch supplies process and business consulting, information technology, engineering, and project and construction management to the mining, metallurgical, energy and infrastructure industries.

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