



Mental Health: The Bot Therapist Will See You Now

Research suggests the majority of workers would prefer robot counselors, but experts around the globe agree a blended approach will work best

Eight out of 10 workers would prefer a robot therapist over a human one, according to recent research by Oracle. The global study, which surveyed 12,000 people, also found that 76 percent of employees think their company should be doing more to support the mental health of its workforce.

“A happy employee is a productive employee,” according to the famous business maxim. It is for this reason that business leaders have to invest in and engage with their staff now

more than ever. Retaining a positive company culture and team morale is trickier today because of the enforced shift to working from home, but the cost of failing to support employees is huge.

If not properly managed, top talent could leave for competitors and the expense of job churn and new-hire training far exceeds the cost of engaging with staff and being proactive about their well-being. The latter approach will not only reap rewards in the short term – employees need an arm around them in these uncertain times – but will also ensure lasting value.

The Oracle findings are no surprise to Vijay Bhat, an India-based leadership coach and Founder of the online coaching start-up Cancer Awakens. He advocates for a “high-tech and high-touch approach” when it comes to mental health and believes both are needed because “the human psyche is layered and complex.”

“I suspect that people prefer talking to chatbots for two reasons: instant access and neutrality. This makes them feel ‘safer’ than talking to someone who may be ‘judging’ them, based on their own biases.”



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Annie Meharg
Chief Commercial Officer
Kooth



Mr Bhat urges business leaders to be bold and invest in innovative solutions because he believes that technology “is excellent for diagnosis and even dialogue.” He also argues, however, that the “synthesis and recommendations” should come from a trained, human professional who can use their intuition to discern individual nuances.

Similarly not shocked by the Oracle statistics is Brendan Street, Professional Head of Emotional Wellbeing at Nuffield Health in the UK. His insight is especially revealing, though – and potentially worrisome for business leaders.

He points to a 2018 Legal & General survey that shows that just 4 percent of workers who had experienced depression felt able to talk to their manager or superior about it. Interestingly, the same research also showed that 78 percent of employers believed their employees would be comfortable discussing such problems at work. “There is a huge disconnect,” says Mr Street.

Greater willingness to support mental health and workplace well-being

So, have things changed in the three years since the Legal & General research was published? Workplace well-being has certainly been a trend recently, and there were signs that organizations were “starting to care more about mental health” before the coronavirus pandemic, reveals Allison English, Deputy Chief Economic Officer at UK-based Leesman – publisher of the Leesman Index, which is considered the world’s foremost employee workplace experience assessment benchmark.

Now, as mental health issues are on the rise around the world – in large part due to the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic – organizations know they need to do more to support their staff, whether they are working from the office or remotely. In 2020, mental health support skyrocketed to the forefront of the agenda for business leaders, but, as Ms English adds, technology solutions alone are unlikely to succeed as “different employees need different things.”

With mental health becoming more of a priority for employers, many business leaders are reaching for technologies like chatbots, robotic counselors and digital applications as a convenient and effective route to workplace well-being. But can technology alone guarantee better mental health for all of a business’ workforce?

Data doctors: well-being win-win outcome with technology

All over the world, bold business leaders are committing to innovative mental health technology solutions and beginning to realize the data opportunities and lasting value they provide for both employees and employers.

Given the rise of the mental health crisis, technology can also be useful for filling in gaps where there simply aren't enough therapists to go around, suggests Annie Meharg, Chief Commercial Officer of digital mental health service provider Kooth. "There are only so many qualified therapists," she says. "The US and UK have a lot of therapists, but then if you look at countries that are quite new to therapy – like Southeast Asia, where therapy is becoming much bigger – [technology] can help us plug that gap, as well as to give people the support that they need."

Her company blends technology with qualified human practitioners, providing a range of therapies and peer-to-peer support for 6.5 million people in the UK. The aggregated employee data the employer receives not only enables a review of specific issues impacting their workforce but also provides an opportunity to consider their entire well-being strategy.



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Rui Duarte Brandão
Chief Executive Officer
Zenklub



The most obvious advantage of digital mental health services is that they can provide support at any time of the day, or night, anywhere in the world – so long as the user has an internet connection. Ms Meharg acknowledges, though, that relying on technology is not enough. She asks: "What happens when you need more? That's the conundrum for employers."

This point is developed by Rui Duarte Brandão, Chief Executive Officer of Brazilian digital health platform Zenklub, which he co-founded in early 2016. "Technology is relevant when it comes to scaling, data gathering, and [the] democratization of financial and geographical access to emotional health professionals," he says. "Human beings are dynamic, creative, thoughtful about problems that are difficult to solve, and empathetic – things that a machine cannot be." Mr Brandão stresses that organizations must "blend health professionals and technology" to serve employees with the best mental health support.

Viewpoints from Crowe

Nicola Badenhorst, Director and Organisational Psychologist, Crowe DNA (South Africa)



“At Crowe DNA, we advise clients on all facets of human capital management so that businesses can achieve optimal performance through their employees. As organizational psychologists, we study and assess individual, group, and organizational dynamics in the workplace and then aim to apply and integrate the research findings with best practice solutions to solve problems thereby enhancing the well-being and performance of organizations. We incorporate technology in everything that we do and, while there is no silver bullet that can solve the mental health crisis, deploying the right technology to engage, train, assess and measure performance can mean the

difference between success and failure. Ultimately, workplace health is a leadership issue, and change of mindsets towards addressing employee mental health must start at the top. Leaders will always play a critical role in creating the type of environment that promotes mental and emotional well-being. As the world around us changes, so too must leaders change in order to lead and motivate teams effectively in this new era. How well leaders respond to the current crisis will come down to three factors: their own capabilities as leaders, the quality of the digital tools available to them, and the leadership courage needed to make the right decision to invest significantly in the tools and programs needed to care for people.”

Pesh Framjee, Global Heads of Non-Profits, Crowe UK



On managing uncertainty: “Many of the usual approaches for managing uncertainty can be useful in times of crisis. However, responses and actions cannot be based only on predefined response plans that were drawn up before the crisis. The only certainty is that there will be even more change in the future and that this will continue to impact in a number of ways; many of which will be new and unprecedented. This means that while the immediate

need may be issues such as protecting people and ensuring survival of the organization, there is also a need to consider both the near term as organizations develop coping and stabilisation strategies, as well as longer-term strategies to optimise their position post-recovery. Productivity gains can be achieved by focusing on the key goals, the critical processes and the key activities that have been selected to deliver the goals. But there is

more to it than processes and culture, and behaviour is important. Leaders need to ensure that they are supporting their teams and that they are empowered. True empowerment requires an enabling environment and this means that leaders need to ensure that those that they are trying to empower have the core competencies, relevant tools, methodologies and policies that must support both accountability and devolved decision making. The correct balance will be achieved only when individuals or teams have a clear understanding of responsibilities, the authority necessary to fulfil these responsibilities and the accountability for the consequences of what they have done or failed to do.”

Jane Hoff, Associate Director of Human Resources, Crowe LLP (USA)



“Providing access to both human contact and services through technology ensures we are considering the needs and preferences of all of our people. Additionally, we have robust resources on our internal intranet via our ‘well-being portal’. This provides access to a wide variety of healthcare resources.”

Tony Klaich, Technology, Media and Telecommunications Industry Vertical Leader, Crowe LLP (USA)



“At Crowe, privacy and protecting people’s data is vitally important. Engaging with staff opens up a big database of experiences. You’re capturing data, while protecting sensitive data, so you can start to analyze what’s going on in bigger spheres and help tease out themes. Moreover, this openness can help the industry provide better care and understand things better, versus a bunch of individual practitioners that aren’t able to view the wider picture.”

Arvind Krishnamurthy, PhD, Enterprise Process Optimization Leader, Crowe LLP (USA)



“In the long-term, robots are definitely not a substitute for a qualified and experienced human therapist. While there are immense benefits of using robot therapists for short-term guidance and emergency, a human therapist should take charge of a long-term prognosis. The human professional can benefit from the prior data and analysis gleaned by robot therapists, rather than having robot therapists handle end-to-end healthcare.”

Beware the digital divide: no one-size-fits-all solution

Darcy Gruttadaro, Director of the Center for Workplace Mental Health at the American Psychiatric Association (APA), agrees that while technology is a tool that should be offered to workers as part of employee benefits, there will still be people who prefer to connect with a human mental health professional.

“It may depend on the industry, or the severity of the condition, or the age and gender of the employee when it comes to using technology – these are all variables at play as to whether employees engage with technology,” she says.

Conversely, for some organizations, the culture may not allow employees to feel psychologically safe to discuss a mental health concern with their manager. “They may fear that to do so would put their job in jeopardy or lead to a manager losing confidence in their performance,” continues Ms Gruttadaro.

She advises employers to ask staff about their preferences when it comes to the use of technology and mental health. She also warns that organizations should be aware of the digital divide that exists in people’s ability to access and effectively use technology.

Chatbots are improving, though, says Brandon Staglin, President of One Mind, an American not-for-profit organization that supports brain health research. He points to a recent review of Woebot by One Mind PsyberGuide, for example, which praises the chatbot’s “evidence-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) content, its lighthearted conversational style and its engaging push notifications.”

The review notes a randomized controlled trial that showed Woebot is effective in decreasing depression in young adults. Since Woebot's language is geared for adolescents and young adults, it could be helpful for companies with many Generation-Z and Millennial staff, suggests Mr Staglin.

Robot therapists: provide anonymity and don't judge

Wherever you stand on the bot-therapist debate, it's clear that doing nothing, and ignoring the growing global mental health crisis, is not a good option. As outlined earlier, the business cost of failing to support the well-being and mental health of staff far outweighs the investment required to keep people engaged, motivated and productive. Business leaders need to increase their investment in both technology and human solutions to better support the mental health and well-being of their staff – and themselves.

Encouraging people to talk to either human or machine, and being proactive – seeking to prevent issues before having to cure them – will reap rewards, both in terms of attracting and retaining top talent and keeping the workforce motivated and productive. Failure to engage in this increasingly important area will have a damaging effect on individuals and organizations alike.

Expert Tips: Coping With Uncertainty

Smart businesses care for and support their staff. Here, UK-based Brendan Street, Professional Head of Emotional Wellbeing at Nuffield Health, offers five expert tips business leaders can share with employees – and even heed themselves – on how to cope with uncertainty, which, if left unmanaged, could lead to feelings of stress, low mood, and depression.

Switch Off

In uncertain times, checking the news is common. We're searching for answers and we feel like news updates will provide them. But for many of us, watching the television news channels and endlessly scrolling through social media only fuels feelings of anxiety. We're bombarded with bad, negative news and angry opinions – this takes its toll on our mental health. While it's important to stay updated with the news that impacts us, we need to know when to take a step back. Check a trusted news site once in the morning and again in the evening to catch any important updates, but try to avoid your phone and switch off the TV for the rest of the day.

Start healthier habits

In times of turbulence, we need to feel like we have some control over our lives. While there are many things we can't change, creating a routine shows us it's not all up in the air. Start creating healthier habits: setting your alarm for the same time each morning, going for daily walks, and cooking a nice dinner each night, for example. You could even prepare meals in bulk at the weekend, so you know they're ready. Not only does exercise help relieve feelings of stress by giving us a mood-lifting dopamine spike, but enjoying a nutritious diet, drinking plenty of water, and getting enough sleep also help to balance our brain's chemicals to give us much-needed mental clarity.

Focus on your breath

When we become stressed, our bodies go into fight-or-flight mode, which can lead to sensations like increased heart rate and faster breathing. As we feel these sensations coming on, simple breathing exercises can help us to stay in control. Close your eyes and focus on your breath. Take long, slow inhalations through your nose, hold for a few seconds comfortably and then exhale out through your mouth. Not only will this take your mind off of the uncomfortable feelings, but research also suggests around six exhalations a minute can trigger a relaxation response, which helps alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Challenge unhelpful thinking

Resilience refers to our ability to learn from and recover from periods of stress. It's completely normal to worry about the unknown, but to cope with regular changes and uncertainties we need to learn to take them in our stride. Try to understand your common unhelpful thought patterns. When you feel stressed or anxious, write down the trigger, associated thoughts, and the mood you experienced. Also note how the situation turned out. Often, we read back through our experiences and learn that, while our thoughts may focus on the worst-case scenario, things rarely turn out that way.

Experiment with small changes

Consider ways you can make small adjustments to activities you otherwise feel confident about. This may include switching up your usual running route or volunteering to help with a new task at work. You'll start to learn that you can cope with uncertain outcomes and that allowing yourself to release some control doesn't always have to be a trigger for stress and anxiety.

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