

Traditionally, companies have invested a great deal in buying the latest technology to stay up to date and competitive. Similarly, it has been expected that the management of staff expertise would include investment in further training and hiring of new staff with particular skills.

This is, of course, a huge cost to business, but one seen as essential. What has previously been overlooked has been any consideration of how to better manage the staff's existing mental capital. If your company has a number of talented individuals hired for their particular expertise, who are not working to their capacity, this is a huge waste of human talent and a missed opportunity to accelerate their potential – and therefore the growth of the company.

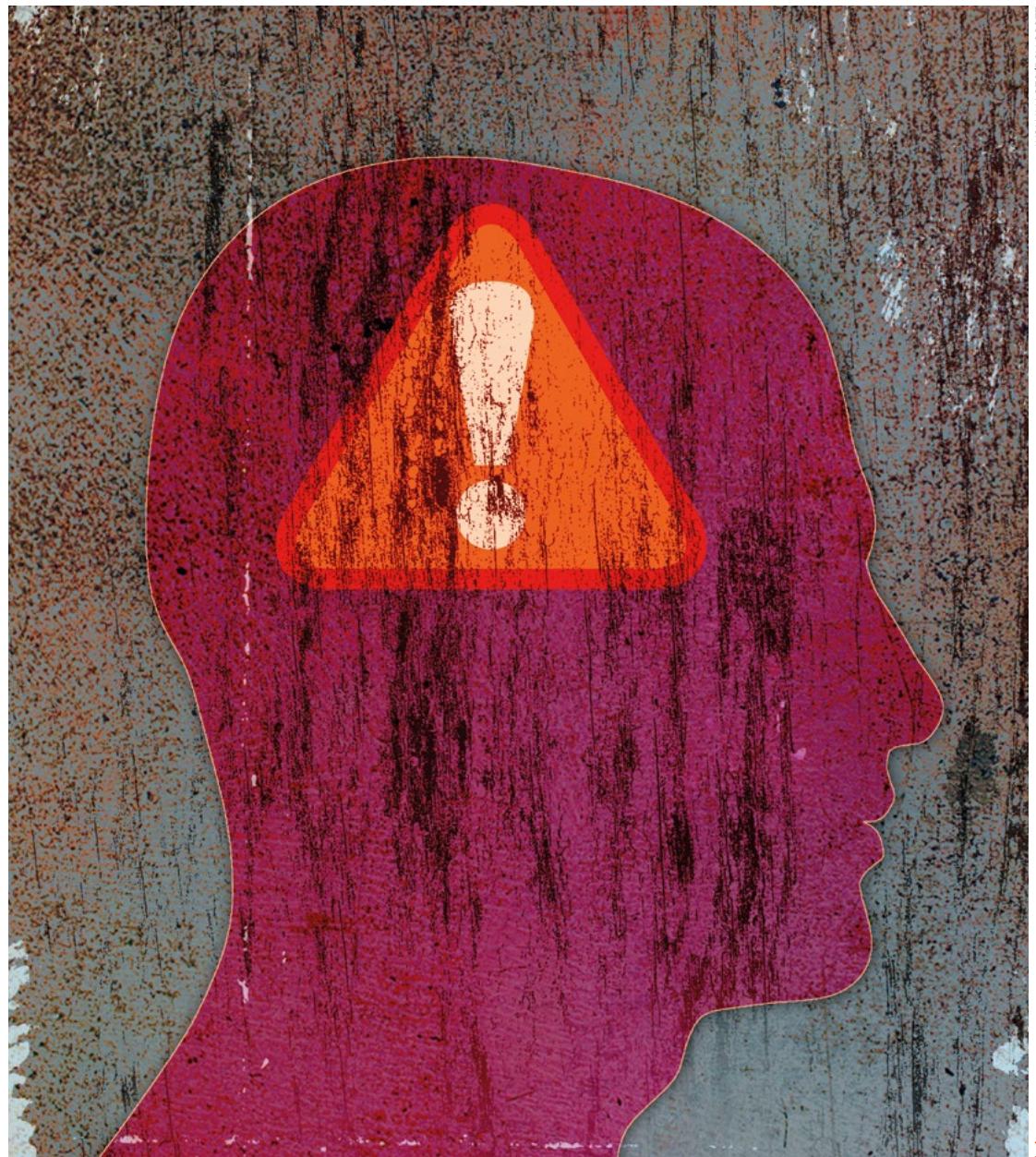
The view has been that the soft stuff – how people are managed within the workplace – was somehow less relevant or important to business than technical knowledge. This view might have been applicable in the industrial era, but it has no place in the modern workplace.

The human species has been so remarkably successful because of both our ability to adapt to change in our environment and our ability to connect with each other. We are social beings, hardwired to flourish through working and living with others. It is our relationships that matter above everything else – the relationships we have with our family and friends, our acquaintances and work colleagues.

In business, relationships with customers are only one facet of the social web of connection we enjoy. Our future success and happiness as individuals and organisations depends on our ability to form, nurture and maintain our relationships.

Attention: brains at work

BUSINESSES ARE WAKING UP TO THE IDEA THAT OUR MENTAL CAPITAL NEEDS A HEALTHY WORKING ENVIRONMENT IF THEY ARE TO THRIVE. DR JENNY BROCKIS EXPLAINS HOW BRAINS ARE OUR OWN PERSONAL ASSET CLASS



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The companies that understand the importance of this will be the ones that will grow through the development of a culture that is brain friendly, a culture that values and respects all brains at work.

Today, the pace of change and the introduction of new ideas and technology is so fast, it can be difficult to find the time to absorb and assimilate what could be most useful to us before the next round of advances and upgrades arrive on our doorstep. Which is why it can sometimes be tempting to keep the door closed, hunker down and hope everyone will leave you alone until you are ready to come up and draw breath.

Choosing to invest in the mental capital and wellbeing of every staff member is the obvious path to responsible organisational health. The *Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing* project, produced by the Government Office for Science in London, concludes:

If we are to prosper and thrive in our changing society and in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world, both our mental and material resources will be vital. Encouraging and enabling everyone to realise their potential throughout their lives will be crucial for our future prosperity and wellbeing... An individual's mental capital and mental wellbeing crucially affect their path through life. Moreover, they are vitally important for the healthy functioning of families, communities and society. Together, they fundamentally affect behaviour, social cohesion, social inclusion and our prosperity.

What is implied is that, as individuals, we can expect to take greater responsibility for our own health and wellbeing, as well as ensuring that our

needs and agendas are being appropriately taken care of in our lives and at work. From an organisation's viewpoint, this is about developing greater inclusivity, responsiveness and openness to conversations around performance and development.

So what is 'mental capital'?

The Foresight Group defines it as the combination of cognitive ability (mental flexibility and efficiency) and emotional intelligence (dealing effectively with stress, resilience and social skills). It defines 'mental wellbeing' as a dynamic state in which an individual can develop their potential, build strong and positive relationships, and contribute to the community.

Mental capital implies a value base, which ties in nicely with the idea that brains matter and that growing brains to work at their best makes perfect economic sense.

Growing healthy workplaces leads to high performance

"Organisational health," writes Patrick Lencioni in his book *The Advantage*, "will one day surpass all other disciplines in business as the greatest opportunity for improvement and competitive advantage." He defines organisational health as the integration of management, operations, strategy and culture. Sure, business needs strategy, marketing, finance and technology, but it also needs to deal with those people issues poisoning so many workplaces:

- Bullying;
- Micromanagement;
- Poor communication or, worse still, lack of communication;
- Confusion around expectation;
- Silo mentality;
- Change resistance;

- Lack of trust;
- Lack of relatedness;
- Lack of collaboration;
- Lack of innovation; and
- Lack of effective leadership.

There is a lot of 'sickness' in many of today's workplaces, which ultimately leads to a loss of integrity and organisational health.

Lencioni is right. Restoring organisational health has to start with going back to the basics of creating a healthy brain capable of consistently thinking well, with less effort, even when under pressure. People today live and work under an incredible amount of pressure. Having to juggle multiple, often complex, tasks with the perception of time poverty stresses us out. This in turn can compromise mental performance.

Organisational health is about making sure that:

- You feel you have the capability to do your work and do it well;
- You can enjoy what you spend so much of your time doing; and
- You feel you have enough time and energy at the end of the day to devote to those things that give you pleasure and mean most to you.

Media business commentators, such as Alan Kohler in Australia, love to discuss the reasons why various businesses are or are not performing well. A commentator will note the links between profit margins, profit forecasts and ASX performance, but until fairly recently, there has been little research into which specific elements of human behaviour contribute to high performance.

A study published by the Society for Knowledge Economics in 2011 revealed some fascinating insights into what makes the

biggest difference to how well a business performs. Cutting through all the business-speak, Steven Vamos, president of the Society for Knowledge Economics, summarised its findings nicely:

The study shows that leaders in higher-performing organisations prioritise people management as a key priority, involve their people in decision-making processes; are more responsive to customer and stakeholder needs; encourage a high degree of responsiveness to change and learning orientation, and enable their staff to fully use their skills and abilities at work. High-performing organisations are not just much more profitable and productive, they also perform better in many important 'intangible attributes', such as encouraging innovation, leadership of their people, and creating a fair workplace environment.

From the survey of more than 5,600 employees from 78 Australian organisations who participated in this study, it was revealed that the highest-performing workplaces enjoyed a 12% higher level of productivity, which translated into a profit margin roughly three times higher than found in low-performing workplaces.

The key differences were all derived from human interaction and behaviour. How we think and how we work as a consequence are hugely influenced by our mood, health and interactions with others.

Humans think and feel. It's time to put the humanity back into how we choose to live our lives and do our work. ♦