THOUGHT LEADERSHIP BRIEFING 16th Oct 2026

You Cannot Build a Sustainable Business on An Unsustainable Workforce.

Why workforce health belongs in the boardroom, and the four governance pillars that can help organizations turn good intentions into lasting accountability.

Bhakti Shah, MPH,
Managing Director, ImpactAfya Ltd

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & CORE THESIS

Workforce health is not a soft wellness benefit—it is an underpriced enterprise risk and a key baseline for business sustainability.

A wellness program is built to improve individual wellbeing, but it cannot measure succession risk, single points of failure, or structural presenteeism. Governing workforce risk requires Workforce Sustainability Governance™ built on top of wellness

1 The Hidden Reality of Modern Workforce Risk

Picture a mid-sized company doing everything right. It runs an employee wellbeing program. It sponsors a gym membership. It sends out a wellness newsletter every month and marks World Mental Health Day with a town hall. By every visible measure, it cares about its people.

And yet, eighteen months from now, its most experienced regional director will quietly resign after a health scare nobody saw coming, taking a decade of institutional knowledge with her. Two of its best managers will be managing early-stage type 2 diabetes they have not told anyone about, afraid it will be read as a performance issue. A talented analyst, newly diagnosed as neurodivergent in his thirties, will spend more energy masking at work than doing the work itself. None of this will show up on a dashboard. All of it will show up, eventually, in the numbers that do get measured: attrition, absenteeism, and the slow erosion of capability that boards only notice once it has already cost them something.

This is not a hypothetical. It is the ordinary condition of most organizations that have invested seriously in employee wellness and still find themselves exposed to the risks wellness was supposed to prevent.

2 Why Wellness Programs Fall Short: A Structural Limit

Wellness programs were never designed to solve this, and the gap is not a failure of execution. It is a structural limit. A wellness program is built to improve how an individual feels. It was never built to tell a board what the organization's workforce actually costs, or where its single points of failure sit.

Measuring a yoga class's attendance is not the same as measuring succession risk. Offering a counseling hotline is not the same as governing psychosocial risk the way a company governs financial risk. The confusion between the two is not a semantic one. It is the reason so many organizations can report healthy wellness-program participation rates in the same year they lose a critical leader to a preventable health crisis, or bleed talent to burnout they never tracked as a cost.

The human cost of this gap is rarely about one dramatic event. It is usually about the slow accumulation of things nobody names out loud. A senior engineer two years from retirement knows things about a legacy system that lives nowhere else,

and no one has structured a way to transfer that knowledge before she leaves. A high-performing manager entering his fifties is quietly managing the kind of cardiovascular and metabolic shifts that come with this life stage, and the organization has no idea it is one stress-related event away from losing him mid-project. A capable employee with an undiagnosed or newly diagnosed neurodivergent profile is working twice as hard to appear neurotypical as she is to do her actual job. An employee managing a family member's illness, or her own, has stopped disclosing anything to her employer, because the culture has taught her that disclosure reads as weakness rather than a normal feature of being human.

None of these people are underperforming by choice. They are navigating predictable human transitions inside organizations that have no structure for recognizing them as anything other than individual problems to be managed privately.

What happens to the organization when this goes unmanaged is not speculative. Institutional knowledge loss when an experienced employee departs without a transfer plan is a well-documented driver of lost productivity and rework. Executive and key-person health risk is a long-recognized category of enterprise risk. Presenteeism, people who are at work but not functioning, is harder to quantify than absenteeism but is increasingly understood by workforce researchers as the larger hidden cost of the two.

What is more speculative, and should be treated as such, is the precise financial magnitude of any one of these effects inside any one organization.

The risks above are real, underpriced, and governable, and the organizations which start governing them now will be the ones with fewer unpleasant surprises later.

A structured response to this gap does not require abandoning wellness. It requires building governance on top of it.

3 The Four Pillars of Workforce Sustainability Governance

At ImpactAfya, we have developed a model organized around four pillars and are partnering with corporations to test it in practice.

3.1 Pillar 1: Multigenerational Continuity

Four generations now share most workplaces, and institutional knowledge walks out the door every time someone retires or resigns without a structured handoff. The institutional risk is straightforward: expertise concentrated in too few people is a single point of failure, no different in kind from relying on one supplier for a critical input. Responsible governance here could involve mentorship structures built deliberately around the career stage, not generic onboarding, and retention strategies informed by what each generation in the workforce actually wants from its career rather than assumptions inherited from a previous one.

THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION
If our three most experienced people left tomorrow, what exactly would we lose, and do we already know the answer?

3.2 Pillar 2: Life Stage & Leadership Transitions

This pillar addresses what happens as executives age inside their roles. Hormonal and metabolic health transitions, including the cardiovascular and metabolic shifts common in midlife, are predictable, not exceptional, and they arrive at the exact career stage when people are carrying the most institutional responsibility. The institutional risk is succession fragility: a single unplanned medical leave at the senior level can disrupt continuity

far more severely than a planned departure. Responsible governance could involve preventive health screening built into senior role design, not offered as an optional perk, and succession plans that assume transitions will happen rather than hoping they will not.

THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION
Does our succession plan assume our key leaders are permanent, or does it assume, correctly, that they are human?

3.3 Pillar 3: Mental Health & Neurodiversity

This pillar moves psychosocial risk out of the personal category and into the governance category. The institutional risk is twofold: unmanaged psychosocial risk drives attrition and burnout-related cost, and workplaces not designed for neurodivergent talent lose the output of people working harder to mask than to perform. Responsible governance could involve formal mental health policy and crisis protocols, treated with the same seriousness as a safety protocol on a factory floor, and workflow design that accommodates different cognitive styles rather than demanding uniform conformity.

THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION
If a senior leader disclosed a mental health condition tomorrow, does our organization have a response, or only a reaction?

3.4 Pillar 4: ESG-Aligned Human Capital Accountability

This pillar closes the loop, converting what the first three pillars surface into something a board can actually use: structured reporting rather than anecdote. This is also where the greatest discipline is required, because the temptation to overstate is strongest here. The honest version of this pillar is that workforce data can inform ESG disclosure and give audit committees a clearer picture of a risk they are already formally responsible for under frameworks like IFRS S1 and IFRS S2. It is not that human capital has become, in any formal accounting sense, a balance-sheet asset, and any organization that claims otherwise is making a disclosure claim it cannot support.

THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION
If an auditor asked to see our workforce risk data tomorrow, could we produce it?

3.5 The Core Common Thread

What connects all four pillars is a single idea worth stating plainly: holistic health, physical, mental, physiological, and emotional, is not a wellness nicety sitting beside governance. It is the baseline data governance needs in order to function at all. A diagnostic baseline, specific to the actual risks of a given industry, whether that is burnout in banking or physical strain in manufacturing, is what turns a vague commitment to employee wellbeing into a measurable governance input. Without that baseline, every pillar above remains an aspiration. With it, each becomes something a board can actually track.

ImpactAfya in Practice: Insights from Tanzania

This is not theory tested only on paper. In Tanzania, over more than a decade, ImpactAfya has built and tested elements of this approach directly with employers, convening business leaders, health professionals, and policymakers through the Corporate Wellness & YOU Program with the UN Global Compact Network Tanzania, three Annual Corporate Wellness Conferences, and direct institutional dialogue with regulators and industry bodies on what workforce disclosure could look like in practice. None of this should be read as proof that the model has already been adopted as a standard anywhere, in Tanzania or elsewhere. It should be read as exactly what it is: a working laboratory for a model that is just as relevant to a bank in London worrying about burnout among its analysts as it is to a manufacturer in Dar es Salaam

worrying about shift-work injury. Emerging markets are not behind on this conversation. In some respects, because their regulatory and capital-market infrastructure is still being built, they are positioned to build workforce governance from the start rather than retrofitting it onto decades of legacy practice.

For a board or executive team wondering where to start, the useful questions are not complicated.

BOARDROOM CHECKLIST: 6 GOVERNANCE QUESTIONS TO ASK TODAY

1. Do we know which three people, if they left tomorrow, would take knowledge with them that exists nowhere else?
2. Does our succession plan account for the predictable health transitions of senior leadership, or does it assume permanence?
3. What would our psychosocial risk profile show if we measured it the way we measure financial risk?
4. Is our workplace actually designed for the range of cognitive styles already working in it, or only for one?
5. If an auditor asked us to show our workforce risk data tomorrow, the way they would ask for financial records, could we produce it?
6. And finally: are we managing workforce health as a cost to be minimized, or governing it as a risk to be understood?

Strategic Conclusion

Workforce Sustainability Governance, at its core, is simply the discipline of taking seriously what every organization already knows informally: that its people are not a line item to be optimized but the mechanism through which everything else gets done. A business is only as sustainable as the workforce that runs it, and no amount of financial engineering changes that arithmetic. The organizations that govern this well will not be the ones with the most generous wellness budget. They will be the ones that stopped treating their people's health as a private matter and started treating it as what it has always been: the foundation the rest of the business stands on. The conversation worth having in boardrooms now is not whether this matters. It is how seriously to start measuring it.

Join the Executive Conversation

How is your executive team measuring human capital sustainability this year?

Request a consultation to explore how to deliver audit-ready workforce data.

bhakti@impactafya.com | www.impactafya.com