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## Local benefits companies discuss how Covid-19 accelerated employers' focus on mental health, wellness

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Mental health and wellness programs offered by employers had been on the rise prior to Covid-19, but the pandemic's effect on wellbeing has accelerated these offerings even further.

The Dayton Business Journal recently caught up with the leaders of two local benefits companies about this topic. Scott McGohan, CEO of McGohan Brabender, and Cheryl Mueller, president and managing principal at HORAN, spoke to DBJ about the types of mental health and wellness programs they and their clients are offering, how the pandemic has bolstered these efforts and the business case for making these resources available to employees. Here's what they had to say.

### Have companies you work with chosen to invest more in mental health and wellness programs?

Mueller: Without a doubt, employers are looking for a robust Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that is focused on mental and emotional wellbeing. This is still an emerging need, so while the market continues to respond, we have sought regional solutions that are affordable and effective. This allows our clients to leverage local companies that provide these services than can support other employers in their community. For example, a municipality wants to offer onsite EAP for their employees. We are working with a local service agency to do that on a regular basis. This provides an opportunity for the agency to expand the services they offer while filling a gap that we've found within the community.

McGohan: We've had EAPs around for a long time, but for some reason employers hadn't really made it a priority to communicate the value of an EAP to their employees. With Covid, they're now asking us questions, getting information out and letting their workforce know about this.

### Have you seen more of an uptick in these types of offerings during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Mueller: Five years ago, we were talking about drug addiction in the workplace with the opioid epidemic and its effect on mental health. We even hosted events for employers to learn how they can help their employees. The Covid-19 pandemic has really exacerbated this once again, bringing it back to mental health. While some employers have traditionally offered an EAP to their employees, we saw this increase a little bit with the opioid pandemic, but it really has exploded over the past year. The constant in both of these is the importance of mental health. If any positives have come out over the past year, it's the focus on mental health and the efforts to truly help break the stigma. It has made us think differently and more supportive over these issues than ever before.

McGohan: When Covid first started, employers started to realize the impact of isolation and then the impact, especially those with children, on how to manage their job and doing home schooling at the same time. Around that time is when people got really curious about what tools and resources we could give them to help them out.

### What does your company offer its own employees in terms of mental health and wellness programs?

Mueller: HORAN offers a robust outcomes-based wellness program around physical, mental/emotional and financial health. Our open PTO plan ensures staff have the time they need to look after their mental and emotional health and offer flexible working options to all of our staff. We always encourage our staff and their families to access our EAP when needed. We also monitor our staff for signs of burnout and work-related stress through our daily team huddles. Our frontline teams "huddle" for 15 minutes at the start of each day to check in with each other — to help balance the workload, to creatively solve problems and to recognize one another for great work and trust-building behaviors. Having this regular, daily touchpoint has been incredibly helpful to drive employee engagement and cohesiveness during the Covid-19 crisis.

McGohan: We certainly have an EAP for folks to use, but starting probably in May 2020 we really leaned into giving our workforce face-to-face counseling and group counseling. We really worked through the stages of grief, because the stages of grief are very similar to the stages of Covid. I'm sure we made mistakes early on, but we certainly understood the isolation inside of Covid and the impact that had on the mind.

### What does offering these programs do for companies in terms of ROI, talent recruitment and retention, etc.?

Mueller: In regard to return on investment, it is still too early. We know historically based on our data from HORAN's book of business that a mentally well employee will cost your health plan less. We like to think about it as the value on investment. We have to build a healthy culture to support our employees. What we are seeing is that employers have moved away from just focusing on a program on physical wellness, they've expanded it to be more holistic to consider the mental and financial wellness as well. Any programs that employers can offer that show their employees they truly care will go a long way for retention.

McGohan: Employers that believe in this long term will have a workforce that is more engaged and more productive, and therefore more profitable.

### Do you see this trend continuing into the future, even after Covid-19 subsides?

Mueller: The importance of mental health was being recognized, but the pandemic pushed it to the forefront. I believe this trend continues as we continue to navigate out of this pandemic. If any positives have come out over the past year, it's the focus on mental health and the efforts to truly helping to break the stigma. Hopefully the end is in sight and we can continue to help employers support their employees through the transition back to the new normal.

McGohan: I hope it never goes away. I hope it stays alive and becomes even bigger and more important.

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