

# IS NUTRITION A MISSING PIECE OF EMPLOYEE WELLBEING FRAMEWORKS?



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### SUMMARY

The global burden of malnutrition, poor mental health, depression, and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) continues to grow, contributing significantly to mortality and poor health, reduced productivity, and economic stagnation. With over 60% of the population engaged in the workforce and spending more than half of their adult lives at work, the workplace offers a strategic platform to address these challenges. One important aspect of worker wellbeing is nutrition, which fuels the body, improves cognitive and immune function, and reduces sick days and NCD risk.

To understand how nutrition is integrated within employee wellbeing, GAIN reviewed 14 global wellbeing frameworks across policy institutions (2), governments (4), academia (3), private service providers (4) and non-profit organisations (1), as well as 23 company-specific frameworks in key sectors such as consumer goods (6), retail (5), finance (4), tech (2), energy (2), agriculture (2), and pharmaceuticals (2). All frameworks were found to include a mental health dimension, reflecting a dominant understanding of employee wellbeing through the lens of mental health. Although nutrition was integrated in 23 of 37 of analysed frameworks, it was only featured 15 times as a standalone dimension. In some cases, it was subsumed under entry points such as physical and mental health.

Despite this, there is a shared recognition across sectors of the role of food and nutrition play in employee wellbeing, and there is strong evidence of a relationship between nutrition and mental health outcomes. Poor dietary habits are not only a major contributor to the rise of NCDs, but also to declining employee mental health and reduced productivity. To address this, organisations should endeavour to include nutrition as a core component in their wellbeing frameworks and actively implement interventions that promote mental, nutritional, and physical wellbeing and health of employees. Also, for wellbeing frameworks to be truly effective, nutrition must be recognised not only as an essential dimension but also be backed by strong indicators. Prioritising nutrition within

### KEY MESSAGES

- Employee wellbeing frameworks are important to guide organisations in ensuring good employee health outcomes and productivity.
- Most publicly available frameworks focus on addressing the mental health wellbeing with few including nutrition wellbeing.
- Poor nutrition contributes significantly to the global burden of disease, including non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity and cardiovascular disease both of which have serious implications on employee productivity and organisational performance.
- There is a need to integrate clear nutrition dimensions into the frameworks in alignment with the WHO global standard framework on wellbeing.
- Corresponding SMART indicators targeted at healthy diet promotion and diet-related NCDs prevention should be integrated in the framework.

workplace wellbeing is a strategic investment in workforce productivity and economic resilience.

## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE**

Malnutrition in all its forms, including overweight and obesity, is one of the leading causes of poor health outcomes, social and economic challenges, and hampered development. As of 2022, 43% of adults globally were reported to be overweight, with 16% of them obese (1). Malnutrition is estimated to cost society up to US\$3.5 trillion per year, with overweight and obesity alone accounting for US\$500 billion (2). Additionally, cardiovascular diseases (one category of non-communicable disease (NCD) and the leading cause of global death and disability) account for 74% of global death (1,3) and contribute to a loss of \$156 billion in productivity each year (4). This highlights how malnutrition and NCDs undermine not only quality of life and health but also human capital and economic growth (2).

At the same time, mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression have been on the rise, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a 25% rise in prevalence globally (5). The economic implications of this are significant, with over US\$1 trillion lost annually due to lost productivity associated with poor mental health (6). In parallel, there is growing evidence of the strong relationship between nutrition and mental health (7), highlighting the need for integrated approaches that addresses both simultaneously.

Given that adults can spend over two-thirds of their waking hours at work, the World Health Organisation has prioritised the workplace as an important environment to influence dietary behaviours (8) and promote overall employee wellbeing. Employers are uniquely positioned to influence the health of their workforce, and by extension, the productivity and sustainability of their organisations. Investing in employee wellbeing including physical, mental, and nutritional health can yield significant returns in terms of motivation, performance, and reduced absenteeism.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines workplace wellbeing to encompass all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work, and work organisation (9). The ILO has developed conventions and standards that address core elements of employee wellbeing such as maternity protection, workplace safety, and supportive work environments. Aligning to this global positioning on workplace

### **BOX 1. DEFINITION OF NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES**

Non-communicable diseases, also known as chronic diseases, are diseases that are caused by a combination of factors including genetic, physiological, environmental, and behavioural factors. They are not transferred from person to person, and they have long term consequences, often requiring long-term care and management. Examples of NCDs are cardiovascular disease (such as heart attacks and stroke), diabetes, obesity, cancer, and chronic lung illnesses. NCDs share similar behavioural risk factors including unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use, and harmful use of alcohol, which are largely modifiable. The World Health Organisation reports that NCDs are responsible for 74% of global deaths, leading to business losses, decreased productivity, and increased strain on healthcare systems.

wellbeing, many governments, companies, and institutions have introduced frameworks aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of employees.

Recent global priorities further affirm this shift. The 2025 World Economic Report highlights employee health and wellbeing as a top strategy to address talent shortages between 2025 and 2030 (10). Employee wellbeing is therefore not just a matter of individual health; it is a strategic business imperative. Creating a work environment that supports holistic wellbeing can improve morale, collaboration, and overall performance, while enhancing an organisation's productivity, reducing turnover, and strengthening its competitive edge (11). According to McKinsey & Company (12), improving global employee wellbeing could create up to \$11.7 trillion in economic value worldwide.

This briefing paper aims to explore existing employee wellbeing frameworks to understand their dimensions, with a specific focus on how nutrition is integrated. The goal is to generate insights that can inform advocacy efforts and guide the development of more comprehensive workplace wellbeing strategies that place nutrition at the core of employee health and productivity.

### METHODOLOGY

This review examined how nutrition is integrated into employee wellbeing frameworks across global policy bodies, national governments, research/academic institutions, private service providers, and well-known private-sector organisations (categorised across sectors such as consumer goods, retail, finance, technology, energy, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals). Frameworks within the consumer goods and retail sectors were pre-selected for this review through the established advocacy efforts of the Workforce Nutrition Alliance. Other frameworks were identified and selected through a Google search on keywords related to ***employee (wellness or wellbeing) (frameworks or dimensions)*** and excluded frameworks that only included mental health.

For each identified framework, publicly available information related to its content, the organisations adapting/adopting it, and the geographic location were noted. In addition, the key focuses of each framework were identified and categorised following seven dimensions: physical, mental/emotional, financial, nutrition, career, social, and environment. Particular attention was given to how nutrition appears, either as a standalone dimension or embedded in other dimensions. Where nutrition was embedded within non-nutrition dimensions, these were marked as nutrition entry points. Furthermore, the nutrition indicators for each framework were then mapped against the four pillars of Workforce Nutrition - access to healthy food, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and health checks (Table 3). Frameworks were then analysed based on the level and nature of nutrition integration.

### RESULTS

The results of the comparative analysis of global wellbeing frameworks are summarised in Table 1. They reveal substantial variability in the dimensions they address and the sectors in which they are applied. Among the 14 global employee wellbeing frameworks reviewed, mental health was found to be included in all and emerged as the key wellbeing dimension of focus. This strong focus can be explained by the current burden of mental health challenges (45% of adults across 31 countries cite mental health as their top



health concern (13)). While nearly all (12 out of 14) frameworks address physical wellbeing, fewer explicitly address nutrition (8 out of 14). Notably, frameworks such as those of the World Health Organisation (14), Robertson Cooper, PERMA+4 model (15), Deloitte (16), the NHS (17), West Lothian Council (18), Civil Service Health (19), and Genial framework (20) address all three key dimensions – mental, physical, and nutrition. Other identified dimensions that are similar across the frameworks include emotional, social/relationship, financial, and career wellbeing.

Nutrition is a critical determinant not only of physical health and body composition but also of mental wellbeing (21). Despite this, the recognition of nutrition importance varies across these organisational wellbeing frameworks, including due to inconsistencies in how it is represented. Rather than being featured as a clear, standalone dimension, nutrition is often subsumed under broader categories such as physical health, personal health, or the work environment. This fragmented approach may weaken the perceived importance of nutrition within workplace wellbeing strategies, potentially leading to short-term initiatives rather than sustained strategic interventions.

There are models that provide useful guidance for both governments and organisations on how to build healthier workplaces. The World Health Assembly through the World Health Organisation Global Plan of Action on Workers Health (22) calls for protection and promotion of health in the workplace by implementing activities that will promote healthy diets and physical activity as part of NCD prevention. Several frameworks (6 out of 14) without a nutrition dimension do not align with the objective of this global standard. Good nutrition interventions are a proven strategy for NCD prevention.

While the existence of global frameworks on employee wellbeing provides a valuable foundation, it is evident that only few organisations have been identified as users of these wellbeing frameworks. They mostly adapt these frameworks to align with their specific operational contexts and perceived workforce needs. However, for some frameworks, no associated users have been found. This may be due to limited publicly available information on the use of the frameworks. This finding highlights the need for continuous advocacy targeted at organisational leadership, emphasising the integral role of nutrition in employee wellbeing. Such efforts can encourage not only broader uptake of wellbeing frameworks but also ensure that nutrition is intentionally integrated as a core component.

Table 1. Global employee framework, the key dimensions, identified users and sector of origin.

Explored Frameworks	Dimensions							Identified User	Sector of origin
	Nutrition	Physical	Mental/ emotional	Psychological/ Purpose/ career	Financial	Work environ. / Safety	Social		
OECD Wellbeing Framework (23)								OECD countries	Policy institution
WHO Healthy Workplace Framework (14)								No information	Policy institution
Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being(24)								No information	Government
West Lothian Council Employee Wellbeing Framework (18)								No information	Government
The Civil Service Health and Wellbeing Framework (19)								The Civil Service Departments in Ireland	Government
NHS Health and Wellbeing Framework(17)								National Health Service organisations in UK	Government
PERMA+ Model by Martin Seligman(15)								Deloitte	Academia/research
GENIAL Framework(20)								Academic and healthcare organisation	Academia/research
The Thrive at Work Framework(25)								Western Australian Department of Mining	Academia/research
Employee Gateway to Wellbeing Measurement – Robertson Cooper								Nestle, Coca-Cola, GSK, Deloitte, Travis Perkins	Private Service Provider
Deloitte's Wellbeing Dimension(16)								No information	Private Service Provider
Gallup Wellbeing Dimensions(26)								Paychex	Private Service Provider
Global Thriving at Work Framework by Mind Forward Alliance(27)								No information	Non-profit organisation
Five Ways to Wellbeing by NEF Consulting(28)								No information	Private service provider

**Note:** Gray shading indicates a dimension being covered within that framework.



While global standard and government institutions primarily establish frameworks for adaptation or adoption by different sectors and organisations, individual companies develop their own wellbeing frameworks according to their organisational policies and employee needs. Wellbeing frameworks used by well-known companies in consumer goods, retail, finance, technology, energy, agriculture, and pharmaceutical sectors in high-income countries across were thus also reviewed. The results are shown in Table 2.

Similar to the global frameworks, all corporate frameworks placed a strong emphasis on mental health, likely a response to the growing mental health awareness following the COVID-19 pandemic. About 75% (15 out of 23) of the companies have included a nutrition dimension in their framework, either directly (7) or indirectly (8) through other entry points. This suggests some recognition of nutrition as a key component of employee wellbeing among these companies. This relatively high rate may be due to the approach for selecting the companies to include: several of those included were chosen due to ongoing collaborations with the Workforce Nutrition Alliance or workforce nutrition programmes, which likely entails a stronger-than-average interest in nutrition.

The other eight company employee frameworks were found to be lacking a nutrition dimension, hence not aligning with the identified WHO framework (14), which provides flexible guidance on core wellbeing components suitable for all workplace settings.

Among the 23 frameworks (both global and company level) that do include nutrition dimensions, only 7 frameworks feature nutrition indicators (Table 3). These nutrition indicators relate to the three out of four pillars for workforce nutrition according to the Workforce Nutrition Alliance: nutrition education (NE), healthy food at work (HFAW), and nutrition-focused health checks (NFHC) (29). Out of 26 identified nutrition indicators, 13 align with HFAW, 7 align with NFHC, and 6 align with NE. While the integration of nutrition indicators in these wellbeing frameworks is important for monitoring and improving programmes, the majority are not formulated in a 'SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound)' way. This may limit their effectiveness in tracking progress, understanding the impact of the programme, and driving meaningful outcomes.

Four organisations (McKinsey Health Institute (30), Gallup (31,32), Mind by Mayo Clinic (33), and Robertson Cooper) offer services to measure employee wellbeing, providing tools and metrics to track health and work-related outcomes across their workforce. However, only one of these four companies includes nutrition as a measurable component in its wellbeing assessments. The other three organisations focus on services to measure mental health, employee engagement, and purpose.

**Table 2. Company Employee frameworks, key dimensions and nutrition entry points by sector**

Sector	Company	Employee Wellbeing Focus							Nutrition Entry Point
		Mental/emotional	Physical	Purpose/career	Financial	Work Environment/Safety	Social	Nutrition	
Consumer Goods	Unilever (34)								Physical
	Nestle (35,36)								
	Grupo Bimbo (37,38)								
	MARS (39)								
	Johnson & Johnson (40)								Mental
	Pepsico(41)								
Retail	Migros Ticaret (42)								Health
	Walmart (43)								
	Amazon (44)								
	Tokopedia (45)								
	TESCO (46,47)								
Finance	JP Morgan Chase (48)								Physical
	Bank of America (49,50)								Physical
	Bank of Central Asia (51)								
	OCBC (52)								
Technology	Google (53,54)								Health and wellness
	Apple (55,56)								Physical
Energy	Exxon (57)								
	Shell (58)								
Agriculture	Cargill (59)								
	Olam Agri (60)								
Pharmaceutical	Bayer (61)								Physical
	Sun Pharma (62)								

**Table 3. Employee Wellbeing Frameworks with associated nutrition indicators aligned with the 4 WFN pillars.** Number of indicators included in each framework is given in parenthesis.

Organisation's Wellbeing Framework	Nutrition Indicator	WFN Pillars
<b>Robertson Cooper</b>	Fruit intake, water intake, sugar in diet, freshness of food, balanced diet (5)	Healthy Food at Work
<b>PERMA+4</b>	Body Mass Index, Blood Pressure, heart rate variability (3)	Nutrition-focused Health Checks
<b>Deloitte</b>	Nutritional diet (1)	Healthy Food at Work
<b>WHO</b>	Access to healthy snacks/meals, refrigerator to store healthy lunches, meal break times (3)	Healthy Food at Work
	Education on healthy eating (1)	Nutrition Education
	Health assessments (1)	Nutrition-focused Health Checks
<b>Civil Service</b>	Participation in health promotion and awareness activities – nutrition, exercise and mental health awareness. (1)	Nutrition Education
	Health checks on blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose testing (3)	Nutrition-focused Health Checks
<b>NHS</b>	Free clean drinking water. Food is provided for staff in periods of unusually high workload in areas such as critical care, initiatives that support areas such as diet and drink choices, exercise and support with alcohol and tobacco (3)	Healthy Food at Work
<b>Nestle</b>	Employees reached through global employee health promotion communication campaigns (1)	Nutrition Education
	Number of employees having watched #HealthyLives videos (1)	Nutrition Education
	Number of views of #HealthyLives videos (global training on physical activity, mental health, nutrition and sleep) (1)	Nutrition Education
	Views of Health Talks webinars (1)	Nutrition Education
	Canteens offering a healthy meal (1)	Healthy Food at Work

## CONCLUSIONS

This review has highlighted a growing global commitment to employee wellbeing, with mental health emerging as a consistent priority across all reviewed frameworks. While this focus is timely and necessary, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the integration of nutrition remains uneven and often indirect. This could under-emphasise the critical role that nutrition plays in supporting physical and mental health—and through that, employee productivity and organisational performance.

The recently released WHO Framework on Achieving Wellbeing (63) further strengthens the case for integrating nutrition into workplace wellbeing strategies. It identifies NCDs and mental health as key drivers of poor health outcomes and recognises that addressing major risk factors (including unhealthy diets and physical inactivity) is essential to achieving wellbeing for all. The framework emphasises the importance of health promotion and calls for multisectoral collaboration across public institutions, private

companies, and trade unions to promote healthy diets, breastfeeding, and periodic health assessments in non-health settings such as workplaces.

While there is encouraging progress in the inclusion of nutrition within employee wellbeing frameworks, significant gaps remain. More organisations need to integrate nutrition into their wellbeing frameworks, and wellbeing measurement providers need to explicitly incorporate nutrition in their assessment tools. Additionally, frameworks should adopt SMART indicators to ensure accountability, track progress, and drive continuous improvement. Future research should explore how diet-related NCDs are addressed within these frameworks and assess whether the interventions are robust enough to align with the urgency highlighted by the WHO.

Ultimately, for workplace wellbeing initiatives to be truly effective, nutrition must not be treated as a one-time intervention. Instead, it should be embedded as a sustained, lifestyle-focused component of workplace culture. The workplace offers a unique and powerful setting to reinforce healthy eating habits and long-term behaviour change. By doing so, organisations can contribute meaningfully to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 3.4: reducing by one-third premature mortality from NCDs through prevention and treatment and promoting mental health and wellbeing by 2030.

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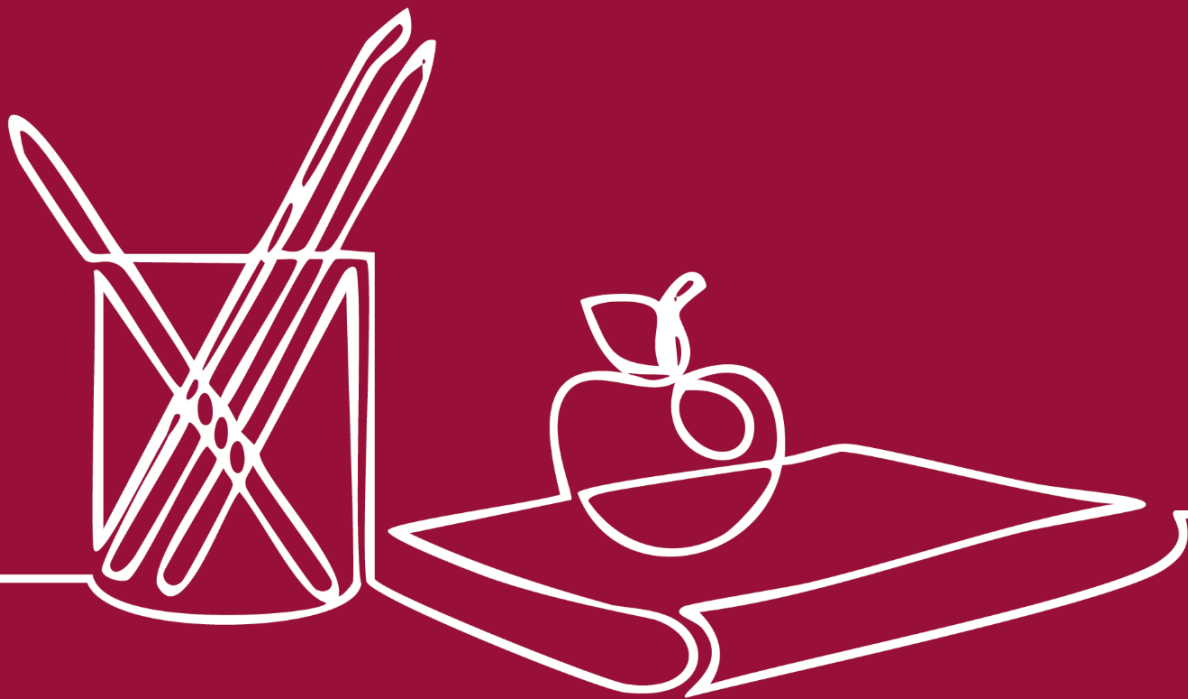
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## ABOUT GAIN

The Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) is a Swiss-based foundation launched at the UN in 2002 to tackle the human suffering caused by malnutrition. Working with governments, businesses and civil society, we aim to transform food systems so that they deliver more nutritious food for all people, especially the most vulnerable.

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