



The Workforce Vitality Model: Transforming the Culture at ICRC

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is dedicated to humanitarian response in some of the toughest places on earth. It is most often the first in and last out of war zones, failed states and fragile situations. Its leadership tends to rise through the ranks starting from field work. This has yielded an incredibly strong culture and sense of purpose. At the same time, working conditions in the field are often harsh, emotional stress immense, burnout common and expectations high. As leaders strive to transform the organisation into a sustainable, modern entity, they find that while organisational purpose is very strong, they often struggle to support the physical, mental, and social needs of their staff.

The Workforce Vitality model

The Adecco Group Foundation developed the Workforce Vitality model to address employee wellbeing in organisations around the world. This is a framework that can be used to test existing wellbeing programmes or incorporate new practices to build upon. The model hinges on four elements of wellbeing: physical, mental, social and purpose. This ensures that the focus is on employee inclusion and principles, along with the well-known issues of physical and mental wellbeing. What sets the model apart is the addition of four enablers: policy and practice, culture, environment, and technology and tools. These form the foundation to build a lasting, successful wellbeing programme. Combining all four elements and enablers creates a truly holistic model which can be applied within any organisation to build or enhance wellbeing practices that align with unique employee needs.

Identifying the why

Working with the global HR function, the Adecco Group Foundation employed the Workforce Vitality model via a design sprint with managers from across the ICRC. Over two days, the participants delved into the underlying causes of a prevalent culture of overwork and what makes people stay with the organisation despite the immense pressure.

One of the main issues identified was burnout, both in the field and while transitioning from fieldwork to headquarters. But what were the specifics leading to burnout?

- Accumulated stress surfacing during calmer times
- Financial stress from living in an expensive country
- Stress from being assigned to different geographies – in this case, headquarters in Switzerland
- When an employee's partner moves with them to Switzerland, they no longer receive the financial support they have become used to abroad

The scope of the Workforce Vitality design sprint was the ICRC headquarters. It is understood that 85% of ICRC employees are on a resident contract and therefore not necessarily connected with stress relating to the headquarters of the organisation. However, due to certain imperatives, we limited the workshop to headquarters stress. By concentrating the focus here, it was possible to form a clear outlook on what could be done within the ICRC as a whole going forward.

In the end, an urgent sense of drive was identified as one of the root causes, derived from the belief that there is so much to be done that one cannot say “no” without failing the mission of the organisation. This is so strong that it becomes an intrinsic driver, and therefore even harder to crack. By employing the Workforce Vitality model, the participants looked at the underlying drivers and ideated possible solutions.

Strategizing the solution

Following the sprint, the ICRC took concrete steps to alter its onboarding processes and practices – both for new staff joining the ICRC and staff changing positions within the organization. Based on the Workforce Vitality model, particular effort is being made to integrate elements related to physical, mental and social wellbeing. The aim is to create a culture where employees can more openly discuss their concerns or stress and solutions can be found so that their needs are met. The intent is to shift the culture, over time, to create better balance without compromising the passion that underpins the drive and commitment of the staff.

Four key requirements were identified:

- Consistent core global approach to supporting career transitions
- Engaging onboarding pathway enabling self-led learning and supported integration
- Guidance on what and how
- Flexible design to allow for key variants such as profession or location

By combining the existing manifold developments into a core onboarding global approach, a holistic Workforce Vitality perspective can be utilised successfully within the ICRC. The goal is to create a healthier, more productive and better-supported workforce, which then reflects well on the ICRC as an employer of choice.

Managing the ICRC going forward

The application of the Workforce Vitality model, with its four elements and enablers, tailored to fit with the ICRC’s unique needs, was the key to a successful test.

However, a design sprint is only the beginning. Teamwork and ongoing collaboration throughout the organisation will be crucial going forward. Managers and employees will be equally responsible for managing their own wellness, capacity, and contribution, but will also ensure the holistic wellbeing of their team, peers, and partners. Management of their work practices as well as financial, physical and human resource aspects will also be essential. Finally, it is crucial that employees take charge of their future and ensure their ‘unit’ is ready for what’s coming. This will trigger a cultural change throughout the organisation in cooperation with a new practice, which will enable unique engagement for all onboarding employees.

The Adecco Group Foundation will continue to monitor how the ICRC continues to engage with the model and will share the learnings with other employers going forward. The aim is to create a community of companies and organisations with this progressive, holistic mindset, and to ultimately shift the way employers approach health and wellbeing.