



## CASE STUDY

# **‘INVEST IN OUR PEOPLE AND THEY WILL TAKE GREAT CARE OF OUR CUSTOMERS’:**

HOW DELTA AIR LINES’ PEOPLE-FIRST APPROACH TRANSFORMED ITS WORKFORCE MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 At a Glance

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4 Determining the Mental Health Value Proposition

---

6 Assembling the Right Team

---

8 Extending the Team for Greater Impact

---

10 Recommendations for Businesses

---

11 Resources

---

# AT A GLANCE

Delta Air Lines is an industry leader in domestic and international travel, serving nearly 200 million travelers each year. Through Delta, its Delta Connection carriers, and partner airlines, the airline offers service to more than 290 destinations on six continents. With over 100,000 employees worldwide, Delta has built a reputation not only for award-winning operational excellence but also for its unique culture of care.

That culture extends to Delta's workplace mental health initiatives, aimed at meeting the unique needs of its multifaceted workforce. The pandemic and the airline's subsequent return to a new normal put significant pressure on an already demanding industry. For Delta's employees, the pressures of the rapid return of travel demand, albeit a positive development, were magnified by the nature of aviation work itself, which requires being highly mobile and following strict procedures to ensure passenger safety. Maintaining its long-held belief that excellence begins with supporting its people, Delta made the transformation of its workplace mental health program a strategic priority, addressing the unique challenges faced by its workforce with innovation and commitment.

Guided by its mental health value propositions of convenient access, quality of care, and employee experience, Delta's latest digital approach has transformed its workplace mental health programs into a critical component of business success. Delta's commitment to employee mental health and its dedication to fostering an environment where every employee can thrive is grounded in the principle of "caring for our people first."

The success of Delta's mental health efforts is underpinned by three key strategies:

- » Determining the mental health value proposition.
- » Assembling the right team.
- » Extending the team for greater impact.

Delta's approach has paid off:

- » In **less than one year**, employee engagement with Delta's employee assistance program (EAP) increased significantly.

*"Delta's founder believed that if we invest in our people, they will take great care of our customers. That is part of what we call the virtuous circle at Delta. In this case, by making meaningful investments in our people — like helping them get the mental health care they need — we help them to live and work better."*

*— Dr. Henry Ting, SVP and Chief Health & Wellness Officer at Delta*

# DETERMINING THE MENTAL HEALTH VALUE PROPOSITION

While many companies recognize the importance of investing in the mental health and well-being of their workforce, few companies take the time to translate this into guiding principles that help inform, shape, and enhance the impact of their mental health programs. Delta, by contrast, has set itself apart by starting with a clearly defined value proposition.

To ensure that every employee has the resources they need to thrive, whether they work on the ramp or in the flight deck, Delta defined four key areas of focus for its mental health investments: (1) accessibility, (2) quality, (3) experience, and (4) affordability. By embedding these values into its mental health strategy early on and putting them into action, Delta is proactively using them to shape the programs and resources available to employees.

Organizations that are very successful at creating a workplace that supports employee mental health are more likely to exceed their business goals (**49%**), achieve their retention goals (**70%**), be competitive with peer organizations (**92%**), and be competitive in today's job market (**86%**), compared to organizations that are not successful at supporting employee mental health (**16%**, **54%**, **72%**, and **52%**, respectively).<sup>1</sup>

The first key piece of Delta's mental health approach is accessibility. Recognizing that employees in different roles and global locations face unique challenges and have specialized needs, Delta has tailored its programs to move away from a standard, one-size-fits-all approach. Pilots, for instance, must navigate the demands of complying with regulations and maintaining mandatory certifications, while flight attendants often face barriers in accessing consistent mental health care due to the challenges posed by clinician state licensing laws and the inherently transient nature of their jobs.

"We have so much variation in how [our] people access resources, whether by generation, job role, or geography," said Dr. Alyson Smith, managing director of health and wellness at Delta. "We take that into consideration with every resource we build. We want to make sure anyone can understand it, access it, and use it."

With this in mind, Delta thoughtfully crafted its mental health resources to be adaptable and to meet employees' varied needs. This is why the airline invested in digital and around-the-clock mental health resources to address the access barriers that employees face in a 24/7 operation. Ground crew members, who have limited access to their phones during the workday, also benefit from these resources, which are delivered in ways tailored to their schedules and work environments. By incorporating tools that allow employees to access care regardless of their role, schedule, or physical location, Delta fosters an environment that ensures no segment of its workforce is left behind. This focus on meeting people where they are has not only expanded access but also improved engagement and utilization of mental health resources.

<sup>1</sup> Evaluation Makes Workplace Mental Health Programs Stronger, SHRM, 2022.

Ensuring quality of care is equally critical to Delta. The company places a strong focus on evidence-based outcomes, requiring that data inform all its mental health programs. Delta has a dedicated analytics team that evaluates program outcomes using de-identified, population-level data and relies on metrics such as appointment trends to guide ongoing adjustments, ensuring its mental health services remain relevant and beneficial to employees. Regular feedback from employees provides further opportunities for refinement so that Delta’s resources align with what employees actually need. “Employee feedback informs the benefits we offer and any changes or adjustments that should be made,” Smith said. “Our people have various mechanisms for learning about resources and sharing feedback. We continuously listen and act.” The result is a system that meets standards for excellence and regularly evolves to deliver better outcomes.

Improving employee experience and reducing the cost of care for employees are also critical components of Delta’s mental health approach. Delta redesigned its EAP and simplified its mental health programming to allow for more seamless collaboration between services. For example, before the program’s overhaul, employees often struggled to transition from short-term counseling through the EAP to long-term care under their health plan. This fragmented process created unnecessary roadblocks and discouraged many from seeking continued support. By integrating the EAP into its robust health plan, Delta not only ensured employees can continue to receive the care they need without delays or disruptions, but it also removed cost as a barrier for employees seeking mental health treatment.

“We’re moving toward more integrated solutions for better outcomes and easier navigation,” Smith said. Notably, Delta also supplemented these efforts by partnering with an advocacy vendor to serve as the “front door” to available mental health offerings, making it easier for employees to access all resources in one place and allowing them to work directly with an advocate to navigate their benefits.

Taken together, Delta’s clearly defined value proposition focusing on accessibility, quality, experience, and affordability has helped the company build a comprehensive, people-first approach to mental health that works for its workforce.

*“Throughout Delta’s history, and even through the challenges of the past few years, Delta’s strategy has been clear, and that’s to care for our people and our customers. We know that investing in our people is investing in the continued success of our business, so staying steadfast in our goal of putting our people first made our path easier.”*

— Kelley Elliott, VP HR Services and Total Rewards at Delta



# ASSEMBLING THE RIGHT TEAM

Many organizations rely solely on their HR department to deliver mental health programs. While the HR function undoubtedly plays a key role in spearheading these efforts, the best organizations understand the value of leveraging cross-organizational expertise to create initiatives and identify resources that are informed by data. Delta recognized that delivering impactful workplace mental health programs required integrating HR expertise with clinical expertise to understand the care needed, so it developed a multidisciplinary team to tackle the complexities of mental health care from all angles.

The team consists of HR professionals, data scientists, licensed mental health clinicians, physicians, and other specialists with direct ties to health care practice. At its helm is Delta's chief health and wellness officer. "One of the first hires our chief health and wellness officer made was a data scientist who built a data analytics team," Smith said. "That team is responsible for helping analyze and identify trends and using the data to shape wellness programs and health care benefits at Delta, including mental health benefits." For example, the data analytics team conducts an annual flourishing, or well-being, index aimed at measuring the various dimensions of wellness across the organization, including mental and financial health. The team also integrates qualitative interviews and quarterly engagement surveys to gain deeper insights into workers' experiences. These examples demonstrate the pivotal role Delta's data analytics team plays in ensuring that the company's mental health offerings are relevant and thoughtfully tailored to reflect employees' needs.

Smith, a family physician, leads the company's clinical care team, a multidisciplinary group made up of licensed clinicians, HR professionals, and industrial-organizational psychologists with expertise in areas such as health benefits, occupational health, and workplace mental health. The clinical care team is designed to address the full spectrum of employee mental health needs. For example, a licensed professional counselor (LPC) on the team oversees the partnership with the EAP provider, contributes to responses to critical incidents, and helps employees safely return to work.



The multidisciplinary group also includes members who focus on prevention and engagement through traditional wellness programming. In addition, the wellness team has a physician who serves as the director of Pilot Health Services to ensure that efforts supporting the health and mental health of pilots are tailored and optimized for this highly specialized group.

This multidisciplinary model aligns mental health care with Delta’s broader health function, integrating mental wellness, preventive programs, physical health, and employee benefits into one cohesive entity. This approach demonstrates that Delta is not only prioritizing mental health in principle but also actively and deliberately creating the infrastructure needed to design programs with positive, lasting impacts for its workforce.

*“We were intentional about building up mental health subject-matter expertise on our team. It was important for us to go into meetings and to develop programs with a real understanding of what good-quality care looks like.”*

*— Dr. Alyson Smith, Managing Director of Health and Wellness at Delta*



# EXTENDING THE TEAM FOR GREATER IMPACT

To meet employees' mental health needs, many companies are enhancing the reach of their mental health resources by investing in EAPs that offer virtual appointments and digital tools. This approach ensures employees across locations and roles can access benefits conveniently. However, some employees may still prefer in-person services, which can be challenging for those whose jobs involve frequent travel or working in diverse locations. This is particularly true for Delta employees, many of whom work far from traditional office settings and must navigate a fast-paced industry often affected by time zone shifts and high-pressure situations. These factors, coupled with the critical emphasis on safety and performance in airline operations, create a need for tailored support systems that address the complexities of varied working conditions.

Delta has tackled this challenge head-on by investing in a model that extends the reach of its in-person resources through its EAP partnership. Delta has placed clinicians in locations including major domestic and international hubs, reservation centers, customer engagement centers, and corporate facilities, ensuring reliable access to mental health care for a constantly mobile workforce. These clinicians are connected to Delta's EAP and provide immediate, accessible, and convenient mental health care to employees in need.

For instance, flight attendants taking a break between flights can visit therapists stationed in employee lounges, while customer service agents can access support after high-stress customer interactions. Onsite clinicians are also available in customer engagement centers where reservation agents can talk to a clinician after handling difficult phone calls.

“Our reservation specialists are on the phones during their shifts, addressing situations that can be complex and require a deep understanding of policies and procedures, and this can be challenging on high-volume days,” Smith said. “In this scenario, with our people consistently going above and beyond to help customers, having that ability to talk to a therapist is welcomed, and bringing clinicians onsite allows them to meet with the therapist during their lunch break or immediately following their last call. Building that support right onsite has been well-received.”

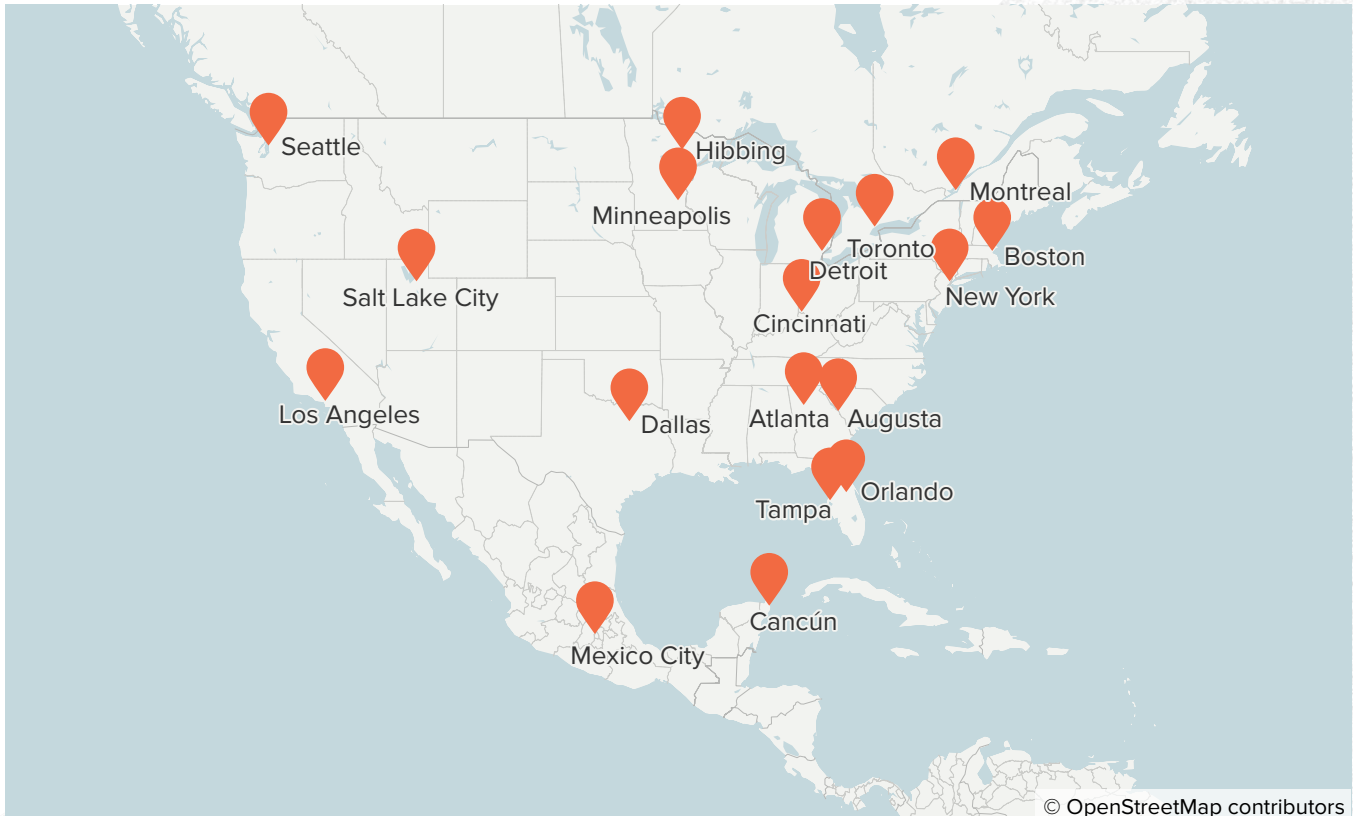


Since its launch in 2019, this approach has delivered multiple benefits for Delta’s workforce. First, onsite clinicians allow Delta to provide employees with timely, face-to-face assistance no matter where they are located. Second, onsite clinicians strengthen the connection between Delta’s workforce and its broader mental health strategy. Integrated through the EAP, these onsite visits enable Delta to capture valuable data on service utilization, creating a proactive feedback loop. By meeting employees where they are, literally and figuratively, Delta has prioritized ease of accessibility and reduced common barriers that employees may experience when seeking mental health care.

## Locations of Delta Air Lines’ Onsite Clinicians



This map illustrates the breadth of locations of Delta’s onsite clinicians in North America. In addition to the locations shown, Delta also has clinic locations in Tokyo, Singapore, Amsterdam, and London.



**SOURCE: ‘INVEST IN OUR PEOPLE AND THEY WILL TAKE GREAT CARE OF OUR CUSTOMERS’: HOW DELTA AIR LINES’ PEOPLE-FIRST APPROACH TRANSFORMED ITS WORKFORCE MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.**

*Note: List of onsite clinician locations provided by Delta Air Lines.*

*“Onsite clinicians are a big part of what has built our success. I don’t think a day goes by where we don’t hear a positive employee testimonial about an onsite clinician or the EAP therapy. We have people who are happier, healthier, and more engaged as a result.”*

*— Dr. Alyson Smith, Managing Director of Health and Wellness at Delta*

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESSES

Delta's approach to supporting mental health at work offers insights for other employers:

- » **Define your company's mental health value proposition to guide strategic mental health investments.** A well-articulated value proposition serves as a strong foundation for employer mental health programs, ensuring that valuable company resources, such as staff time and budget, are directed toward initiatives that provide the greatest impact and return on investment.
- » **Prioritize evidence-based mental health care models when developing your organization's mental health strategy.** Research and implement programs that are backed by data. By doing so, your organization can ensure that quality care and employee experience are at the core of your mental health efforts.
- » **Tailor mental health programs to reflect employees' unique roles and working environments.** Moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach ensures that mental health resources are tailored to the workforce's specific needs and challenges, maximizing their impact.
- » **Leverage multidisciplinary expertise when shaping mental health programs.** Bringing together multidisciplinary experts (e.g., HR professionals, mental health clinicians, data scientists) allows employers to design and implement programs that are comprehensive, evidence-based, and aligned with workforce needs.
- » **Define clearly how each member of your mental health team fits into the broader mental health strategy.** Assigning clear responsibilities and aligning them with your overall strategy fosters a unified approach, strengthens collaboration, and amplifies the collective impact of your mental health team.
- » **Refine mental health programs through data-driven feedback loops.** Regularly collecting and analyzing metrics, such as resource utilization and employee input, allows organizations to proactively adjust mental health offerings so they remain responsive to evolving workforce needs.
- » **Prioritize accessibility to reduce common barriers to mental health care.** Design programs that meet employees where they are, both literally and figuratively, ensuring that constraints such as location, time, or mobility do not limit access. For example, combining virtual tools with targeted onsite solutions enables employers to offer inclusive care for all employees, regardless of their location or job demands.



# RESOURCES

## » **Determining Your Mental Health Value Proposition**

The [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability's \(EARN's\) Guide for Creating a Mental-Health-Friendly Workplace](#) provides a meaningful framework for employers to begin thinking about their mental health value proposition. It offers advice for how employers can cultivate a mental-health-friendly workplace by focusing on the “4 A's”: awareness, accommodations, assistance, and access.

## » **Assembling the Right Team**

The [Rise of Corporate Wellness to Support Employee Retention](#), published by *Forbes*, examines the advantages of corporate wellness programs and provides guidance to employers on how to select the ideal leader to drive these initiatives.

## » **Extending the Team for Greater Impact**

[SHRM's toolkit on Managing Employee Assistance Programs](#) equips employers with the knowledge and tools necessary to choose an EAP that aligns with their organization's goals. It also highlights key factors employers should consider before making a decision.





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