

How the working environment can be used to support mental wellbeing



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Mental wellbeing in the workplace

With work being one of the most stressful elements of people's lives, employers must create a culture that focuses on staff wellbeing. But are businesses taking notice, and what are they doing to tackle this rising issue?

David Price, employee wellbeing expert and CEO of Health Assured believes mental health is now less of a taboo subject in the workplace. He proposes that, "With so much noise in the media and high profile figures speaking out, there has been a significant increase in awareness around the issue of mental health in the workplace. Employers are now recognising this as a business-critical issue which poses a threat to the wellbeing and productivity of their workforce."

But how should businesses address this issue? It's about putting measures in place to deal with it. David says, "It is important that employers monitor their employees' mental health and wellbeing. This can start with a simple conversation to get a general sense of how employees are feeling, moving onto the implementation of staff satisfaction questionnaires, which cover mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, mental health should also be included in any appraisal or staff feedback process to ensure there is a consistent dialogue between management and their employees."

David also added, "Assessing how mental health is discussed at work is also an important part of creating an open culture when it comes to employee mental health and wellbeing. If it is perceived that employers are not taking stock of employee mental health in the workplace, or approach it in a negative light, then employees will not feel comfortable in coming forward with any issues they are facing. Having strong leadership who demonstrate an open and honest working culture, involving their employees in key decision-making, will go a long way in increasing employee engagement and establishing a workplace that values positive mental health."

The work-life balance

The rise in technology has made agile working easier than ever. While flexible working may not work for all job roles, allowing employees to work remotely or to be flexible with their hours can empower employees to take control of work and non-work commitments, to balance both in a way that suits them, their families and lifestyle. This in turn can build trust, reduce stress and anxiety, and boost productivity.

Workplace benefits that encourage employees to make healthier lifestyle choices can also have an impact on mental wellbeing. Exercise and healthy eating play a big part in our mental health. Nearly two thirds of those who do not report daily mental health problems eat fresh fruit or fruit juice every day, compared with less than half of those who do report daily mental health problems. While scientists believe that exercise can help alleviate the symptoms of conditions such as depression.

Initiatives could include:

- Allow employees to buy or sell extra holidays.
- Have time off for emergencies.
- Give employees spaces to take a break (e.g. quiet areas).
- Provide workplace benefits like fresh fruit, discounts on gym membership and cycle to work schemes.

Workplace support

It's important to embed a mental health support network within your organisation, and give employees a range of ways to reach out if they are struggling. Below are a few ways you can do this in your business:

- **Courses and talks** – these provide staff with a forum to discuss their issues. It could include topics like time or stress management, or information tools about mindfulness in the workplace. It could also include resilience training and awareness courses.
- **Mental Health First Aiders** – like a physical first aider, these are employees within your business who are trained to spot the signs of mental distress, and can provide initial support and signposting for someone who is feeling mentally unwell.
- **Employee Assistance Programme's (EAP)** – like the one provided with Legal & General's Group Income Protection policies through Health Assured - this can be a cost effective, accessible way for employees to receive expert advice and assistance with everyday problems that can often be the root cause of poor mental health.
- **Services covered under the EAP** – range from help with budgeting, to legal advice and counselling for mental health issues. Usage statistics from Health Assured have found that introducing an EAP had the following benefits:
 - 35% reduction in presenteeism
 - 35% reduction in workplace distress
 - 20% improvement in life satisfaction
 - 71.5% reduction in those out of work

Buddy support system – In some cases, people might find it easier to talk to a colleague, than their manager. Buddy systems, such as those used by the armed forces, allow colleagues to support one another outside of the line-management structure and ensure that employees know they always have someone who they can turn to.

With these simple initiatives employers are likely to find their workforce is healthier and more productive than those who do not.



Communicating the support available

For staff members to begin opening up about their personal mental health struggles, they need to know that there is support available for them if they do. Affirming your organisations stance on mental health sends a message to all employees that you are committed in supporting them through difficult times. Make sure all employees are aware of your mental health plan, who they can talk to, and where they can get additional help should they need it.

Initiatives like the ones listed, will help raise awareness throughout the workplace of the support available to employees, if they are struggling with any mental health issues.

Some simple ways to get your message across to employees include:

- Computer screen savers
- Desk drops
- Placing posters around the office
- Internal emails
- Celebrate mental health awareness days within the office
- Include the support available as part of employee induction training
- Sharing success stories on how the business is tackling mental health

Identifying mental health hot-spots

Certain areas within your organisation may be more susceptible to poor mental health than others, these can include triggers such as, certain job roles, stress, long-hours, tight deadlines and bullying. By identifying potential hot spots, you can put measures in place to mitigate any negative impact on employee wellbeing.

Good job design, informed by employee consultation, and underpinned by good line management, is essential to managing mental health hot spots. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) outlines six areas of good work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health, lower productivity and increased absence rates. These are:

- **Demands** – issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment
- **Control** – how much say the person has in the way they do their work
- **Support** – the encouragement, sponsorship and resources available

- **Relationships** – promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- **Role** – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles
- **Change** – how organisational change is managed and communicated in the organisation

Training for line managers can underpin good job design. It can also help line managers spot the signs of poor mental health, support employees who are struggling, and give them the knowledge and confidence to share wellbeing information with colleagues.

Measuring mental health

Monitoring what's going on and how employees are coping with mental health in the workplace is key. By keeping track of the risks posed and how employees are feeling, you can understand better how to look after their mental health and make improvements to the support you offer.

Employee surveys are a useful method of routinely monitoring and comparing how your employees are feeling. When appropriate, exit interviews can help identify the key stressors that may be affecting your workforce.

Creating an open culture for mental health to thrive

Managers and business leaders play a significant part in helping to create a mentally inclusive culture for employees. They must set the scene and lead by example, so that employees feel able to follow suit.

Things you can do:

- Encourage regular lunch breaks
- Avoid sending emails outside working hours
- Be adaptable and positive when necessary

- Acknowledge employees when they've stayed late or exceeded the expectations of their role.
- One-to-one meetings not just on performance, but on workload pressures and if they need extra support

You could also identify role models within the management team to show people that it's okay to talk about their mental health issues, and that it's not a barrier to progression.

Healthier workplace balance starts here

There are many opportunities to help provide the right working conditions for your employees. After all, employees are the heart of any business so it's vital to ensure their wellbeing is taken care of.

By following these simple steps, you can support a better work life balance and protect your employees' mental health.

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