



With Mental Health problems in the workplace costing the UK and economy £26 Billion a year what can be done to help Channel Islands companies support employee wellbeing at work?

## How well is your Workforce?

Mark Shields takes a closer look

The facts are frightening. 70 million lost work days from sickness throughout the UK workforce each year equates to a cost equal to 4% of GDP, a staggering £26 billion a year. Whilst these figures are representative of the UK this does not mean that Channel Island companies are immune. Their close organisational links within the financial industry means they are also likely to have 1 in 6 of their staff suffering with mental health challenges caused by work related stress. As one of the largest financial centres in Europe the impact of this is enormous.

Paul Farmer the CEO of MIND, one of the largest charities supporting Wellbeing at work believes much can be done to improve the situation by promoting openness, trust and honesty in the workplace, helping combat the stigma associated with mental health issues.

### The Challenges Employees Face

As we spend most of our lives at work it is not surprising to learn work is deemed the biggest stressor we all face in our lives. A recent survey confirmed due to the stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health issues many employees confirmed they could not talk about taking a day off due to stress and preferred to hide it from their line manager and colleagues. The culture of silence surrounding mental health in the work place although improving has a long way to go and there is so much more that can be done by line managers and senior leaders.

The pressures are well known and well documented and I am sure will sound familiar as you read this article. Continual change, heavier workloads, increasing demands, and the list goes on. This coupled with outside pressures such as debt, relationship problems, bereavement, illness and so forth means that life generally can be tough for many.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of knowhow many Managers do not know where to start when dealing with such problems and often fail to spot early signs of stress. Such signs can include minor behavioural changes in staff, mood swings, staff external appearance and presentation (unshaven, personal hygiene) and spasmodic absence.

### 2015 Evidences the most qualified work force yet

Another important fact to take into consideration is this generation of workers is the most highly educated generation to date with more qualifications and higher work expectations than any generation that has gone before them. This being said they are still subject to being given jobs with little autonomy, and even less responsibility or purposeful engagement.

### So how does a company start to introduce health and wellness promotion?

You need to start at the top and work down. A supportive corporate culture includes not only a commitment to the wellness program from senior management, but also extends to the mid-level and front line managers best positioned to affect program success due to their day-to-day contact with employees. It is, thus, important to align their management and performance goals with the health and wellbeing of the people who report to them.

It is also important for Managers to recognise the environmental context which includes influences external to the workplace, such as the home setting, friends and social networks, and the policies and resources of the local and national community. Although workers spend a significant amount of their time in the employment setting, these other factors can also affect their need for and success in a wellness program.

### The Impact of a Good Manager

As a senior manager in a previous life I know how important it is to have the necessary purpose, challenge, control, security and sense of achievement to help create the right environment for your staff to feel empowered, motivated and inspired to deliver great results. This coupled with an open and honest management style, flexibility and taking a genuine interest in your staff's personal development and wellbeing, is paramount to the success of any team or individual.

#### How to create the right environment for staff:

- Ensure that staff have secure and interesting jobs that they find both fulfilling and developmental
- The ethos and style of management is based upon high levels of trust and fairness
- There is choice, flexibility, and appropriate control over working hours
- There is an equitable balance between effort and reward
- Staff feel they have autonomy and some control over their workplace and environment
- There is a voice for employees in any critical employer decision making arena

Line managers have a duty of care and due diligence to employees and need to understand the warning signs of mental health issues as they develop. They can then make the necessary and appropriate workplace adjustments to help and support their member of staff.

Simple common sense steps such as taking an interest in your staff, being approachable and empathetic and managing staff as individuals will help build the trust and openness you need when dealing with workplace stress

This is also a time when managers can utilise resources that are available both internal and external to support their employee, such as, Employee Assistant Programs (EAP) and Occupational Health.

#### Organisational strategy to support employee wellbeing

When an organisation wants to tackle problems created by mental health the Line Managers are key in ensuring there is a comprehensive wellbeing strategy in place supported and endorsed by the senior leadership team.

This strategy should adopt a three pronged approach:

- 1) Promote Wellbeing at work
- 2) Tackle work related causes of mental health problems
- 3) Have a program of support available for employees suffering with mental health problems

#### Top Tips for Managers

- Talk about wellbeing regularly at staff one to one and monthly team meetings
- Encourage open and honest dialogue around outside stressors
- Ensure staff take a lunch break, it is a day of two halves
- Support flexible working hours
- Promote open dialogue and feedback.
- Involve staff in decision making
- Ensure good clear communication
- Ensure staff understand how they fit into the organisation and they have a voice
- Promote physical, social and team building activities
- Promote Wellness action plans to ensure the right resource is in place offering the required support
- Ensure staff are aware of what's inside and outside of your remit of control as the manager

#### How does a company motivate their staff to change?

Once again when influencing and promoting change in a work place it needs to start from the top down so firstly, Senior Executives could implement initiatives or form a working party within their organisation to investigate what their employees would like to see or what challenges they face.

Whilst keeping within HR regulations, a Health related questionnaire could be developed for all employees to complete which would give the company insight into their variety of needs and therefore support to be offered. Here are some other examples for introducing wellness into an organisation:

- By delegating and giving more autonomy to staff, chosen staff members could set up a health and wellness in the workplace committee and have them take responsibility for implementing the selected ideas for health promotion activities
- Designate a wellness coordinator for implementing action plans
- Allocate a budget for health and wellness in the workplace activities
- Develop good employment practice and policies, eg, communication systems; training and personal development; supervision, appraisal and mentoring; attendance / absence management; equal opportunities; return to work/rehabilitation for people with illnesses or disabilities; time off for career responsibilities (children, other dependents); job sharing; flexi-time and flexible hours / days; dealing with harassment and bullying; grievance procedure; disciplinary procedure
- Include health and wellness in the workplace activities in manager's objectives

There are many ways in which companies have incorporated Wellness into their organisations which come with relatively little cost. Here are a few ideas:

- Cross-department teams could earn points over a 12-week period by doing healthy things like drinking a certain amount of water or going for a walk on their lunch breaks
- Subsidising healthy options in vending machines with junk food options. For instance, charge more for a cupcake and less for an apple.
- Set up a walking club before or after work.
- Conduct meetings whilst walking.
- Start a pedometer challenge with a goal of 10,000 steps a day.
- Provide a safe place to store bikes in the office.
- Encourage employees to take the stairs.
- Buy healthy food for meetings instead of junk food.
- Health and wellness seminars / discussions – with guest speakers
- Awareness raising, workshops, training sessions on health topics

Once you have management fully on board, it's time to market the program to employees. Posters, emails and newsletters can spread the word. Even inject a little fun into the project and utilise photos of executives displaying bad posture or holding up an apple to advertise wellness events. Prize incentives can also be offered when running a challenge.

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