



THRIVING AT WORK

Gemma Copestick and Laura Keith outline strategies to improve mental health and productivity in the workplace

Mental health issues in the workplace are common: one in six workers will experience depression, anxiety or problems relating to stress at any one time.¹ Unaddressed issues are costly to employers and governments alike, and the World Health Organization forecasts that by 2030 depression will be the single leading cause of the 'global burden of disease'.

Mental health has been defined by the Health Education Authority as 'the emotional and spiritual resilience which allows us to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own, and others', dignity and worth'.²

During Mental Health Awareness Week (14-20 May 2018), the STEP Employer Partnership Programme team held an event at which four of our Employer Partners (EPs) shared insights about their organisations' mental health initiatives.³ The event was hosted by Farrer & Co, which also outlined its own practical strategy for promoting and supporting wellbeing. Human Resources Manager Kelly Leslie commented: 'We have recently trained a number of mental health first aiders in our human resources and knowledge, learning & development teams, along with rolling out awareness training for over 30 members of the firm's leadership, both of which initiatives were delivered by Mental Health First Aid England.'

We asked our EPs to share their thoughts about mental health in their organisations, and some key takeaways were as follows.⁴

CONDITIONS TO THRIVE

Our EPs recognise that mental health is as important as physical health, but that this perception is not universally shared.

'Mental health is something we all have. When we enjoy good mental health, we have a sense of purpose and direction, the energy to do the things we want to do and the ability to deal with the challenges that happen in our lives'

Intertrust

People are the foundation of any business. For a business to thrive, it is essential that the health and wellbeing of its employees are also provided for.

STRATEGIC SUPPORT

EPs recognise that a positive working environment leads to happy and engaged employees, which in turn helps to drive the business forward.

'Our wellbeing vision is to create a positive working environment and way of working where our people can thrive, are happy and bring their best self to work each day'

BDO

Many of our EPs have signed the Time to Change Employer Pledge.⁵ All organisations that sign up commit to embed these seven principles into their workplace:

- senior-level buy-in to the initiative;
- increase accountability and the recruiting of employee wellbeing champions;
- raise awareness about mental health;
- enact policies to address mental health problems in the workplace;
- ask employees to share their mental health problems;
- equip managers to have conversations about mental health; and
- provide information about mental health and signpost to support services.

The responses indicated that having senior leaders share their own personal experiences has a profound impact on breaking down barriers and encouraging an open and inclusive workplace.

An array of support mechanisms are offered by our EPs, including: employee assistance programmes; confidential support; advice and counselling; medical health plans; and signposting to mental health support networks/resources.

FUTURE PLANS

It is clear from our EP responses that mental health and wellbeing support will continue to be an important part of their commitment to staff. Future plans include:

- creating a health and wellbeing action group;
- supporting national health and wellbeing campaigns;
- funding mental health training and education sessions;
- creating a diversity and wellbeing role at the organisation;
- introducing a mentoring scheme for all staff; and
- flexible and agile working opportunities.

'We plan to reinvigorate our existing mentoring programme by inviting more internal mentors to step forward. Our mentoring volunteers will receive training to enable them to make the most of their role in supporting colleagues. We will also be putting added focus on further flexible and agile working opportunities. We now aim to make it even easier for our staff to build a work-life balance that suits their individual situation'

Anderson Strathern

➔ KEY POINTS

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

One in six workers are affected by mental health issues each year.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?

A healthy workplace is a productive and agile workplace, so it is crucial that employers invest in staff wellbeing.

WHAT CAN I TAKE AWAY?

A summary of how STEP's Employer Partners are approaching mental health management.

DESTIGMATISING MENTAL HEALTH

Key to reducing the stigma surrounding mental health is crafting an environment where employees feel comfortable and empowered to discuss their issues without fear of discrimination and isolation. Employers recognise that our mental health can fluctuate throughout our lifetime.

'It is crucial that we have support mechanisms in place for our partners and staff. Our focus is on early identification of problems and having the support available for anyone who may need it' Dentons

'Destigmatising mental health is key, and the increase in public figures speaking out about the challenges they have faced,

and increased media coverage of this, has helped. We have an open-door culture and encourage employees to speak up if they have any concerns as early as possible' Saffery Champness

By removing the stigma surrounding mental health, EPs hope to improve morale, and reduce sickness and presenteeism by creating a healthier and happier workforce.

There are also strong commercial reasons for safeguarding employees' mental health.

'We not only have a duty of care to our staff, but also recognise that people are our most important asset. It's about creating a culture to attract and retain talent' Old Mutual Wealth

IMPACT FOR EMPLOYERS

One of our EPs confirmed that they have continuing low staff turnover and absence figures. Another reported significant and increasing engagement over the years, while managers are better able to recognise problems and address them considerably and efficiently. Staff are more aware of the different options they have and are confident that the organisation treats them with dignity and respect.

'The rate of absenteeism among those who have presented with mental health issues has been reduced on the basis that individuals are able to be honest about why they are unfit for work. This means they are more likely to seek medical advice and are not fazed by a mental health diagnosis on a GP fit note' Anonymous Employer Partner

Excitingly, there has been a significant shift in mental health awareness and more people are being given access to the help and support that they need. They are not having to cope in isolation and are finding out that others know what they are going through.

By confronting the issue of mental health in the workplace from the starting point of promoting wellbeing, companies can contribute both to eroding the stereotypes associated with mental health and attaining early buy-in from staff. If employees are more aware of mental health wellbeing and its benefits, they will be better equipped to care for themselves and the needs of others.⁶

IMPACT FOR EMPLOYEES

There has been strong anecdotal evidence from employees about the positive effects of the initiatives implemented by our EPs. An increase in people sharing their experiences has helped others to talk and break down barriers.

More people are volunteering to be mental health first aiders and wellbeing champions; staff are enthusiastic about being involved.

BDO stated that the resilience-learning workshops it delivered were 90 per cent booked within days of launch, and feedback from the sessions confirmed they were well received.

'We have found that engagement with wellbeing and mental health initiatives has been consistent and improving throughout recent years. We offered membership to a mindfulness app in 2018, and 75 per cent of licences purchased by the firm for 2018 were redeemed by June – far quicker than expected' Freeths

Flexible working provisions have been utilised, for either short- or long-term/permanent changes to working practices, to help maintain a more constructive work-life balance. This has encouraged employees to remain at their organisation rather than seek employment elsewhere.

'We value being aware of the needs of our workforce. We have been in the top 100 best employers for 15 years running. We conduct regular staff surveys so we can test the morale of our staff. All of our support options are used and so we believe these measures have had a positive effect' Mills & Reeve

SAVE THE DATE

Following the success of STEP's Mental Health Awareness Week event earlier in the year, a similar event is being held on 10 October in London, in aid of World Mental Health Day, exploring best practice and training around mental health and capacity issues. On 25 October, STEP will hold another event in Jersey, entitled 'Mental Health in the Workplace: Breaking the Silence'. For more information, visit www.step.org/events-calendar

¹ SC Davies, *Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2013*, 'Public Mental Health Priorities: Investing in the evidence'. Available at bit.ly/2LzmBPI ² *Mental Health Promotion: A quality framework*. London: Health Education Authority, 1997 ³ *Mental Health in the Workplace: Breaking the silence*. bit.ly/2MBRpVv ⁴ With thanks to all our Employer Partners who contributed: Anderson Strathern, BDO, Dentons, Freeths, Intertrust, Mills & Reeve, Old Mutual Wealth and Saffery Champness ⁵ bit.ly/2qzD6VN ⁶ Further EP case studies can be found at www.step.org/communities/case-studies



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