

Opinion: How to build a mentally healthy workplace

October 11 2016, by Tine Van Bortel



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Mental health has long been the Cinderella of healthcare: left to scrape an existence while the bulk of funding and attention goes elsewhere. As we mark [World Mental Health Day](#), it is clear that policy makers and the public [are coming to the realisation](#) that there is no health without mental health. This shift is desperately needed.

An estimated [one in four people worldwide](#) experience a [mental health](#)

problem at one point in their life. This bare number might be alarming but even that does not adequately reflect the human suffering, isolation, lost productivity, and brake on human development and general development for countries.

To the individual, mental ill-health can be isolating, exhausting and sometimes deadly, but it also takes its toll more broadly on organisations and businesses around the world. We might think the corporate world is quick to address issues which threaten growth and profits. However, while this common phenomenon drains the economy through absenteeism and healthcare costs, the [persistent taboos](#) around mental ill-health [slow down the uptake](#) of solutions at businesses, just as they do at the individual and government level.

Financial benefits

It shouldn't be that difficult. Increasingly, organisations around the world [now advocate investment](#) in a mentally healthy workforce as a measure that simply makes good business sense.

It can lower total medical costs, increase productivity, decrease the number of sick days, disability costs, and more. From the perspective of investors and company owners it can simply come down to a matter of better financial performance and enhanced reputation, with the added benefit of a happier, more motivated and engaged workforce.

In reality, each company comes at this from a slightly different angle. As part of the work of the [Global Agenda Council on Mental Health](#) from the World Economic Forum, 23 global corporate organisational case studies on mental health strategies were gathered and analysed. Analysis of the these global corporate leaders' investments in mental health in their workplaces revealed no single motivation. Instead, several tend to work in combination.

A healthy and happy workforce is more productive which is good for business and so protecting the mental health of employees makes perfect business sense.

It is the "right thing" to do.

There are clear benefits to the organisation from employee engagement, loyalty and in terms of wider organisational reputation.

It makes sense to manage the costs and liabilities of ill-health (including mental ill-health) of employees.

Taking it on

There is a [growing body of evidence](#) on the economic costs related to workplace mental health. This can include absenteeism [and presenteeism](#) – where staff spend too long at work despite being ill – as well as the wider costs of staff turnover and recruitment. We also have [increasing evidence](#) that there are things companies can do to address risk factors and build resilience to overcome and manage stress for employees.

The case studies we looked at showed that there is a growing tendency for mental health to be tackled as part of a broader health, well-being and safety strategy. Initiatives are [increasingly integrated](#) and built around positive health, prevention and early recognition, as well as support and rehabilitation where needed. So what are these companies actually doing?

One key step is often to focus on the work environment itself. It can be simple stuff like increasing the available natural light, fresh air or bringing in plants. The inertia of office routine can be punctured by buying in standing desks – or even treadmill desks. The nature and outlook of a workplace can be shifted by social meeting spaces, healthy

food options on site, proper lunch break areas and discounted sports facilities on site or nearby, combined with flexible work arrangements to encourage their use.

It is also common for companies to tackle work-related stress. Again they can look like easy wins, but not everyone does it. One measure that [has been shown](#) to significantly decrease stress levels of employees during annual leave is to set up email systems to delete messages while out-of-office is activated. Senders are warned to resend the message once the person returns and the recipient doesn't come home to a deluge of mail.

Dog's life

At the more extravagant end of the spectrum, some larger corporate businesses bring in professional coaches to provide personal and group coaching, or provide resting areas for power naps or quiet contemplation. Employers could even turn to pet therapy interventions. There [is good evidence](#) that spending time watching, patting or walking a cheerful puppy or dog can significantly bring stress levels down.

Other strategies we found include the company making a public pledge to address [mental health issues](#), as well as taking part in national mental health campaigns like [See Me](#), [Time to Change](#) or [Beyond Blue](#). These large corporates also invested in mental health training in the workplace, including themes such as [managing mental health](#), [mental health first aid](#) and [building resilience](#), the capacity to adapt in face of challenges.

In the 23 global corporate case studies, common strategies to address mental health in the workplace emerge. Flexible working works, as do policies which allow workers to [swap pay for leave](#). Counselling, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness services [can also work](#). An open environment can be crucial. Boosting mental health

literacy and mental well-being champions can encourage people to [speak up and seek help](#).

Whether it is a small business or a multi-national FTSE 100 company, [tackling mental ill-health is a necessity](#) in today's world. The case studies referred to here represent only 23 global corporate businesses, but they also represent practices which can make a difference. Every organisation is different and requires a unique set of policies which meet the needs of its staff. The trick then is to identify [what those needs are](#), how a workplace mental health programme [could begin to address them](#), and to bring all employees along as you work out how to implement them.

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