Building Resilient and Healthy Workplaces: A Call to Action

BRIEFING PAPER
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This executive briefing was prepared in support of World Economic Forum work on mental health at the workplace via the Healthy Workforces initiative, aiming to raise awareness about this critical issue with case studies from pertinent stakeholders.

The World Health Organization (WHO) 2013-2030 Mental Health Plan emphasizes that good mental health and well-being are not luxuries; they are essential for leading fulfilling lives, realizing people's full potential and thriving in communities.[1]

As organizations, both public and private, emerge from the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, they find themselves navigating a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). In this landscape, fostering good mental health in the workplace takes on increased importance.

The relentless tide of change, the demands of hybrid work arrangements and the looming questions about the impact of automation and artificial intelligence on job security have collectively exacerbated anxiety among employees. Furthermore, the rise of precarious employment, defined by short-term, on-demand, task-oriented work, has only intensified uncertainty regarding working hours and incomes, both of which have a significant influence on mental well-being.

With an estimated 15% of working-age adults experiencing a mental health disorder at any point of time[2] and 60% of the world's population engaged in work, workplaces and employers are well positioned to take important steps to promote improved mental health.

In addition to the positive impact on employees and their families, there is clear evidence that corporations benefit when they take a health equity approach to interventions[3] that affect their workers, their suppliers and their communities. By responding effectively to mental health concerns at work and improving the quality of work, as well as improving access to care through employee benefits, productivity can be increased while sickness absence, turnover and health care costs can be reduced. The economic consequences of mental disorders in terms of lost economic output have been estimated to amount to over $16 trillion between 2011 and 2030,[4] with over $1 trillion dollars annually attributable to anxiety disorders and depression alone.

Investing in mental health brings not only a sound financial return but also reputational benefits. Investors and the public increasingly demand tangible evidence of commitment to corporate responsibility for employee health and to making progress on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. Without good mental health, advancements on improved employee health and progress on sustainable development will be more limited.

Workplaces play a critical role

With the WHO setting a target of 80% of countries having at least two functioning national, multisectoral programmes for mental health promotion by 2030, workplaces are seen as a critical sector to engage in the implementation of evidence-based programmes to promote mental well-being.

Despite a plethora of well-being interventions in recent years, many targeted at improving mental health, the levels of stress and anxiety at work remain high, particularly for younger workers. In a recent survey, nearly half of Gen Z and Millennial workers – the engine-room of future growth – said they felt stressed or anxious all or most of the time.[5] This highlights the importance of evidence-based interventions for addressing the underlying causes of mental illness. In the context of the workplace, this means the promotion of "good work" – addressing factors such as autonomy, fair pay, worklife balance and professional progression – and ensuring the absence of bullying and harassment.[6] The Forum's Good Work Alliance and its partners have put forth a compelling vision and framework

for companies to proactively shape the future of "good work" with a strong emphasis on the importance of delivering on holistic health and well-being to improve employee health, trust and engagement.

Some recommended interventions for improving mental health in the workplace

In its review of the evidence for effective interventions, the WHO[7] recommends three specific evidence-based interventions to protect and promote mental health at work:

1. Manager training in mental health to increase their capability of recognizing and responding to mental ill health

2. Training for workers in mental health literacy and awareness

3. Individual interventions to help workers develop the skills they need to manage stress and its symptoms

As recently as September 2023, the World Psychiatric Association (WPA), whose membership spans 250,000 psychiatrists worldwide, updated its position on mental health and work. Its recommendations are segmented by employers, governments and healthcare providers and amplify the importance of a systematic approach to the mental health of the working age population, as called for by the WHO and the International Labour Organization.[8]

The role of the chief health officer (CHO)

With workforce well-being playing an increasingly pivotal role in building resilient, sustainable businesses, a growing number of companies are integrating the role of chief health officer into their executive leadership teams. While the CHO position traditionally focused on basic employee and workplace safety, it assumed greater prominence during the pandemic and, in many cases, the scope of this role expanded.

The breadth of CHO capabilities in highlighting the intricate link between well-being, productivity and an organization's overall resilience is being increasingly recognized. With a growing appreciation of tangible strategic benefits from targeted, evidence-based investments in mental health, the CHO's role is becoming indispensable for guiding these strategies to improve employee health and for driving their positive impact on the organization's overall growth, profitability and commitment to corporate responsibility.

The World Economic Forum has established a CHO community with diverse membership drawn from its partner organizations which spans over 20 industries. In September 2023, to kick off the Mental Health workstream of the Healthy Workforces initiative, the CHO community and global leaders showcased good practices from around the world that have been effective in driving a holistic and comprehensive mental health strategy.

Board and C-suite engagement is imperative for meaningful progress in workplace mental health. Chief executives and senior leaders from 185 organizations in 62 countries have pledged their commitment to positive action on workplace mental health by joining the Mind Forward Alliance.[9]

Their pledges, touching the working lives of over 3 million employees, commit them and their organizations to tangible actions that reduce stigma, promote positive culture change and improve access to support. They and their organizations have committed to advocating for better mental health in all the regions they operate in.

"Leadership commitment at the highest levels is essential if organizations are to truly accelerate progress in workplace mental health," said Poppy Jaman, Global Chief Executive Officer, Mind Forward Alliance, United Kingdom, at the launch of the initiative.

Mental health in healthcare

Arguably, interventions that improve mental health in the health and care workforce are even more important; they touch the people who deliver the care and support functions, population health programmes and emergency response services that we all depend on.

And yet, many public sector roles, particularly in emergency and disaster response, are stressful by nature. Public sector workers often face additional workload pressures from uncovered positions and financial worries that compound job stress. In a 2021 survey of the United States's public health workforce, 53% of respondents reported symptoms of a mental health condition in the preceding two weeks[10] – almost twice the rate of the general population.[11]

In the New York City Health Department, unprecedented levels of stress, trauma and burnout were seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. "Exhaustion, racism, moral injury and frustration with the system and the frequent limitations they face all contribute to burnout, leading to high attrition and vacancy rates, and jeopardizing our ability to keep our communities safe and healthy," said Ashwin Vasan, physician, epidemiologist and Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health.

Workplace wellness programmes were introduced to improve workplace culture, boost morale and improve staff's overall health. A destigmatizing campaign, "Let's Talk NYC Health!", promoted mental health conversations at work and training was offered to help supervisors better support staff with mental health issues. Regular communications to staff described the mental health resources available and how to access them. These included novel tele-mental health resources, making it easier to scale-up access to support for more employees. Training workers in mental health literacy and awareness such as these have been shown to play a key role in reducing stigma and improving understanding of and attitudes to mental health at work.[12]

Risk assessment

In its review of the evidence and its guidelines on mental health at work, the WHO recommends that organizational interventions be based on an assessment of the work-related or psychosocial risk factors affecting workers' (mental and physical) health, since interventions work best with meaningful participation of workers and their representatives[12].

Accordingly, CHO Andreas Tautz of logistics company DHL, who worked closely with academics from the University of Aachen in Germany, shared insights gained from the development of online tools tailored for assessing and addressing work-related mental health risks in the logistics sector.

These enable managers to better understand how psychosocial factors affect mental health, reliably evaluate factors affecting mental health in each work area, and how these can be prevented. Topics frequently mentioned by employees include their individual influence over their work and challenges in customer contact.

The risk assessments are also important to ensure compliance with European Union regulations. Education for employees and manager training courses complement the risk assessments so that effective interventions can improve the design of work. Based on its initial success in applying the methodology, DHL has developed additional modules for call centre staff, remote workers and development teams working in agile structures.

"Manager training, employee education and effective rehabilitation programmes for employees with mental illnesses promote mutual understanding between managers and staff and are all part of a team culture that supports every employee to bring their authentic self to work," said Tautz.

In India, Reliance Industries (RIL) has introduced an organization-wide well-being approach to mental health. It focuses on the development of a supportive working environment, taking action to reduce workplace stigma and ensuring there is access to mental healthcare for all employees.

RIL's Mental Health and Emotional Well-being framework has core elements directed at enhancing leadership skills, raising awareness, cultivating a supportive culture, promoting resilience and coping abilities and facilitating early intervention and recovery. In addition to management training, an interactive guide is available to equip managers with information to make it easier to talk about stress and mental health with their peers and teams.

Cultural challenges to positive mental health also need to be overcome. In India, for example, some workers are reluctant to speak up, seek help or raise a mental health issue with relatives for fear of being judged or bringing shame on their families. In these cases, a whole-family approach to provide support at work is essential. RIL's independent Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are available to support workers and their families 24x7 and complement an innovative peer-to-peer support programme, "Mental Health Missionaries", in manufacturing sites to help fellow employees address their mental health issues.

Access to specialist support from psychologists and psychiatrists, which is also a challenge nationally, is made available to employees with more significant concerns when picked up during regular medical checks.

"With our participatory model at Reliance, we have been able to scale our mental health response. RIL management, site and business leaders, medical doctors and 'missionaries' are all involved and indeed accountable for successful deployment throughout the company," said R. Rajesh, RIL Chief Medical Officer.

The Mental Health at the Workplace initiative

The VUCA world of today creates challenges for leaders and employees alike. Enlightened employers from the Forum's partner organizations in Europe, India and the United States have found that thriving as individuals and sustainable organizations in such an environment demands a clear focus on the mental health of the workforce at every level.

The lighthouse examples shared by CHOs and members of the Forum's CHO community provide a few insights here that can hopefully benefit others as they seek to create healthy, productive workplaces and engaged, high-performing teams. This community also invites organizations to join the Forum's Healthy Workforces initiative to advance holistic health at work by identifying and sharing those interventions that have the most potential for positive impact on holistic employee health.

Endnotes

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