Mental health in the UK City Workplace – How Are You Doing?

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No job within the Square Mile is immune from its own stresses or strains. As the City of London Corporation’s Business Healthy blog notes, the recent economic climate has exacerbated these through the invariable requirement that businesses reduce their cost base without adversely affecting their profits. Undoubtedly, this drive to do more with less has caused a rise in the number of mental health issues faced by City employees. Sadly, the same drive has also made employees fearful of disclosing these issues in case they find themselves in the next round of cuts.

As Poppy Jaman, CEO of Mental Health First Aid England has identified, hiding a mental health issue does not help the employee, his line manager or the employer: the employee subjects himself to further stress by trying to hide the issue; the line manager has to manage an employee who is unlikely to be fully productive, but who is also reluctant to engage on the reasons; and the employer is left with an employee in whom it has potentially invested a great deal of time, training and resource but who is not repaying that investment.

This scenario is ‘presenteeism’, where an employee turns up to work but fails to carry out his role at 100% because of some physical or mental health condition – one survey estimated the cost of presenteeism to UK businesses as in the region of £15bn per year, so it is a significant issue. Of course continued presenteeism is unsustainable, with the common end result that the employee becomes absent from work altogether or that the employer commences performance proceedings, neither of which benefits anybody.

It’s clear, therefore, that not talking about their mental health means that employees are less likely to get support – this lack of support then means that they are more vulnerable to worsening mental health, poorer performance, possible absenteeism and potential dismissal – it’s a vicious circle. So why are employees so reluctant to seek help and speak out?

Despite the best efforts of campaigns such as Time to Change and charities such as MIND and Rethink Mental Illness, the fear of being stigmatised due to mental illness remains a real one. Although some employers, often due more to ignorance than malice, may well have concerns about employing someone with a mental health issue, the majority of employers that we assist take a more enlightened approach. The key thing to remember is that for most employers in the City the employees are the key assets of their business – especially when you consider the amount invested in recruiting, training and retaining them. In the same way that an employer would look to work with an employee with physical issues, employers should (and, for the most part, do) try to find ways to assist and retain employees with mental health issues. They are both just health issues.

How can employers help?

The first way is to recognise that we all have mental health, whether good or bad. Using myself as an example, when I come into work basking in the warm glow of a smile from my five-week old daughter
as I left the house, it is fair to say that I have good mental health. Equally, when I arrive tired and irritable after my same daughter has given me another sleepless night, it’s fair to say that my mental health is not in quite such a good place. Whilst this example might seem to trivialise the far more serious mental health problems suffered in the workplace, it is not intended to do so – it is purely used to demonstrate that our mental health affects us differently every day.

Secondly, employers can open a conversation. Although they may not consciously do it, our managers friends and colleagues inquire after our mental health, simply by asking “How are you?” The real key, as identified by campaigns such as Time to Change, is whether they listen to the response and how they act on that response. If employees feel that they are listened to and that their needs are heeded at a more general level by the employer, then this will go a long way to making them comfortable in disclosing any mental health issues that they may have.

Some may view this as a utopian vision of the workplace. However, that view is formed from hard experience earned litigating discrimination cases for both employers and employees, as well as personal experiences of struggling to help friends with mental health issues. In nearly every case, both personal and professional, you can identify a point early on where, if someone had just opened the conversation, the situation might have had a happier outcome (and in the professional cases, also avoided costly litigation). Over the last few years we have run a series of seminars with mental health trainers, occupational health and experienced HR staff in which attendees can share their stories and best practice and are given a practical ‘toolkit’ to engage with employees about their issues. These have led to better early identification of potential issues by our clients and a concurrent decrease in the number of disability-related cases that we deal with.

Thirdly, mental health is not just an HR issue or an engagement issue – it is a whole-company issue. The next step for employers is to engage and train not only HR but also line managers and Board members in mental health support, as these are the people who may have the first opportunity to identify an employee’s problems and to open the conversation. The positive signs are that many employers in the City are taking this step – just as they saw in time that physical health is a key driver of employees’ production, they are now recognising that mental health is the next frontier, be it through mental health training for managers, signing up to the Time to Change or Rethink Mental Illness campaigns or through other, innovative ways of measuring employee’s mental health. Adding these visible signs of support to employee engagement programmes can only be a good thing. It is sure to lead to decreases in presenteeism and saved employment costs (in terms of recruitment, training, management time and legal costs).

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