Mental Health in the Workplace

By Michael Hughes

About <u>one in five</u> Australians are suffering from a mental health condition in the workplace right now, yet as many as half will continue to turn up to work despite their symptoms contributing to a lower level of performance.   In 2014 a report published by <u>PwC</u> suggests that every $1 invested in creating a mentally healthy workplace would have a return on investment of roughly $2.30 in benefits to be gained by the organisation.   IT has been reported that roughly <u>one fifth</u> of the workforce have taken sick days in the last year due to mental health conditions.   Understanding what mental health is and what steps you can take to ensure you are part of a mentally healthy organisation can only have a positive impact on your business.

What is a mentally healthy workplace

Positive culture: A positive culture in the workplace is one where employees are happy to come to work and feel supported and valued while they are there. The onus is on all employees to contribute to this culture and be vigilant about understanding and recognising when they themselves or another staff member might be dealing with a mental health issue. Communication is essential. Practices should be put in place to allow employees to feel comfortable speaking about any concerns they might have.

Management of mental health risks: The management of mental health risks falls to everyone.   Managers should be given the tools to assist employees and to coordinate any changes which may help an employee perform their duties more effectively due to any mental health concerns. Clear company policies should be provided and available for all employees to read and understand.

Support for employees with mental health conditions: There are a number of ways employees with a mental health condition can be supported. Some employees might seek a reasonable adjustment to their work duties which can be discussed without feeling the pressure they are 'doing something wrong'. Some companies may offer inhouse services through their own Human Resource department, but others may be able to suggest a number of services and options to help the employee outside of the company. Plans can be developed to either help employees return to work or stay at work depending on needs.

Zero tolerance for workplace bulling, harassment and discrimination: Workplace bullying is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards a person or group of personas at a workplace, which creates a risk to health and safety. Bullying and harassment can take many forms, including:

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- Foul language
- Abusive behaviour
- Malicious rumours
- Inconsiderate remarks and actions putting other employees down
- Ignoring other employee's points of view on work and non-work matters

Formal and confidential avenues for complaint handling should be implemented and accessible to all employees and clear procedures and training should be provided on their use. Any cases of bullying, harassment and discrimination should be dealt with quickly, creating confidence in the company's methods and procedures which will strengthen the commitment to creating a mentally healthy workplace.

Benefits

Good for business: A recent global TNS study has found that employees rate mental health as the second most important factor in deciding on a new job and that those that already work in a mentally healthy workplace are more committed and less likely to look elsewhere for employment. Having a strong, mentally healthy workplace is not only more likely to attract employees, but help retain them as well.

Improves productivity: Increased productivity can come from lower levels of absenteeism, fewer compensation claims, and an increased level of dedication towards work across the board.

Workplaces are naturally diverse: Workplaces are naturally diverse and as such, it is imperative that everybody's views and opinions are treated with equal respect.

Legal requirements: Australia has strong laws that govern the types of behaviour that is allowed in the workplace. Not only will a mentally healthy workplace provide a company with an increase in productivity, it can also save it considerable money in legal fees and compensation claims.

Creating a safe and healthy workplace

Awareness and stigma: Creating awareness through training, communication, support and a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination will help break down any negative stigma of mental health and empower employees to not only seek help when they need it, but show care and compassion towards others mental health needs. Some companies arrange for a professional to speak to employees who can help share experiences and offer examples of the type of communication that can be used to help break down any barriers.

Roles and responsibilities: There should be clear information provided to all employees on their own roles and responsibilities regarding mental health. Training should be provided where necessary and refresher courses should

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be held periodically. Employees should know who to speak to about any mental health issues of their own with a clear pathway to any help and services offered by the company. Ensure all employees have an up-to-date job description which clearly defines their role purpose, key duties and who they have a reporting relationship with.

Support: Supporting employees with mental health conditions is an important indicator that the company is serious about creating a safe and healthy workplace. Employees should receive continuous support from their managers as outlined in any roles and responsibilities. All staff should be pro-active in fostering a healthy workspace and any indiscretions should be reported and dealt with quickly.

Managing mental health and assistance

Monitor and accountability: Managing mental health is a continual and ongoing responsibility. Management should monitor targets and be prepared to adjust accordingly where there is a risk to employee mental health and wellbeing. Managers should be made aware of not only the risks of mental health issues, but also potential causes of things like workplace stress. Having clear management understanding of company policies and a robust reporting and monitoring system will help with both managing mental health issues and providing employee confidence in the systems in place.

Commitment: A review should be set up of both short term and the long term effect of the mental health plan and an action plan can be developed and followed accordingly. Employees should be engaged on the action plan and their opinions should be sought and valued. Progress should be promoted internally on successes and advancement and all the benefits that are available to employees. Show them and tell them how you have improved and how they are valued.

The importance of mental health in the workplace and the value it provides both business and employee can't be understated. If you truly want to get the best out of your employees and be a part of a happy, successful business, then the challenge of implementing a strong mental health program should be started immediately. Not only will you save money, but you are showing you are committed to being a place people want to work.

Where to go to seek further information

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