

HRD

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SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE*

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CORE

“THE CORE OF THE BUSINESS -
ITS CULTURE AND ITS DNA - CAN'T
JUST BE INJECTED FROM OUTSIDE,
IT HAS TO BE BUILT OVER TIME”

MATTHEW DALL
PEOPLE & CULTURE DIRECTOR UK & IRELAND
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ARTICLE BY NIC SMEETH, CLINICAL DIRECTOR - IESO DIGITAL HEALTH

CRACKS

PRESENTED WITH EMPLOYEES LABELLED AS 'UNDERPERFORMING' OR 'DIFFICULT', IT CAN BE HARD TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN TRUE UNDERPERFORMANCE AND UNDERLYING ISSUES. HOWEVER, SPENDING TIME DOING THIS CAN HELP DICTATE THE COURSE OF ACTION TO TAKE. BUT WOULD YOU RECOGNISE THE SIGNS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN YOUR EMPLOYEES... OR EVEN YOURSELF?

There's a strong link between mental health and how well people function at work. But would you know how a struggling employee might present in the workplace? Some signs are subtle: Irritability with colleagues, disengagement in meetings, avoiding social or team activities, failing to respond to messages, missing deadlines despite enthusiasm, loss of passion for the company's mission and frequent complaints of physical issues - because sometimes it's easier to say "back pain" rather than "depression". The more obvious indicators include; openly stating they're struggling, regular sick leave for stress, anxiety or depression and being frequently tearful or overwhelmed. HR leaders are in a powerful position to help create mentally healthy workplaces. This can include access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and mental health first aid training and equipping line managers with the right tools. In any mix of support made available, it is important that each component is supported by evidence of effectiveness. Performance conversations can be delicate, particularly when mental health is a factor. So here are some tips to navigate them: Be ready to listen, as you might be the first person they confide in and stay non-judgemental - mental illness isn't a flaw, people can recover and it can happen to any of us - and it's okay to not know what to say. Don't worry about having the perfect

response, your role is to guide an individual towards considering support. Importantly too, understand the stigma, many employees will want discreet access to help.

"STAY NON-JUDGEMENTAL
- MENTAL ILLNESS ISN'T A
FLAW, PEOPLE CAN RECOVER
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OF US - AND IT'S OKAY TO
NOT KNOW WHAT TO SAY"

If an employee does need help, quick access to effective care makes a huge difference. Indeed, analyses of outcomes from over 27,000 NHS patients treated for mood or anxiety disorders - reducing wait times from six to three months led to a £500 economic saving per patient (Catarino et al, 2023, Nature Mental Health). One way to improve speed is to enable self-referral, so that employees can access help privately and with fewer steps. So, what treatments can work? Evidence-based psychological treatment, like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and counselling, are highly effective for conditions like depression, anxiety and bereavement. They also improve workplace functioning. Analysed data

from 11,000 employed patients with Generalised Anxiety Disorder treated via one-to-one online CBT using the Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS) - found that 52 percent with moderate to severe work impairment improved to mild impairment after treatment, demonstrating significant return-to-function benefits. But For treatments to work, people must be able to access them and so common barriers such as travel, lack of privacy at home or work and inflexible appointment times, need to be considered in effective provision. One group with a growing need is menopausal employees. Around 70 percent of menopausal people experience mental health symptoms that impact confidence, concentration and energy levels. Despite growing awareness, stigma still limits open conversations and here, typed therapy has proven particularly effective for this group. When employees access timely, effective care, the whole organisation benefits, through increased productivity, creativity, job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism. But the impact is more than operational, it shapes culture, improves team dynamics and shows employees that their wellbeing is valued.

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