

Dealing with problems related to Mental Health and Wellbeing (MHW) in the workplace provide unique challenges for management. It is an area that requires careful attention and professional support which may initially prove costly causing some to question its value. However, in depth investigation and review at the outset will inevitably prove to be more cost effective and reduce difficulties and further problems later.

Employers legal requirements in terms of their duty of care are often pigeon holed and deal with hazards that are physically tangible and more easily identifiable.

Mental health still has a stigma attached which is often mis-reported in the media who either trivialise, generalise or scandalise news items linked directly to an individual or groups of people. There is also still a tendency to report the high profile or the most shocking cases.

Developing an understanding of employee needs, providing health care and support when required, will help staff remain effective in the work environment.

Recognising that an employee's personal circumstances can drastically affect their workplace performance, personal health, self-esteem and how they treat others is the first step toward active health care.

What can an employer do to improve the health and well being of their staff?

Whereas there are several opportunities to improve an employee's wellbeing at work these are not always easily defined due to lack of information.

In the first instance an employer could benchmark where they currently are in managing their employee wellbeing. This does not have to take the form of an intrusive interrogation of an individual's private life but to try and understand how they perceive the work environment and possibly how they manage outside of the workplace. An anonymous employee survey would be a usual starting point. However, be warned, whereas some employees will welcome this sharing of information others will be vehemently against sharing anything and may cite invasion of privacy so tread carefully! Taking care to design questionnaires appropriately may require external assistance if it the intention to elicit particular information in order to review or attempt to deal with specific areas of concern. Understanding an employee is not embarking on a quest to become best friends but trying to ensure that communication channels within the work place are clear, give the opportunity for consultation and highlight issues of concern promptly. Unfortunately, if this communication is delivered by untrained staff the message can be confusing, be wide of the mark and create mistrust. An employer's team leaders and managers may not recognise employee wellbeing or the correlation between personal, work life and a content workforce. Poor delivery may undermine an employer's recognition or initiatives to improve the individual s wellbeing.

This is a complex area of people management especially as individuals can be incredibly diverse in views on items such as politics, religion, etc. It is therefore vital that middle management receive support and training and are able to present a neutral view on items that an employee feels strongly about.

By providing basic health and welfare standards, information, instruction, training and supervision will set solid foundations to build upon. However, as the human element generally demands more input to address an individual's specific and unique needs, to be a successful employer requires proactive communication and consultation with employees (or their nominated representative(s)) on a regular basis. The management structure should seek to utilise managers that are not only trained in identifying potential issues but are then supported by suitable health and welfare professionals as and when required.

For further information on up to date statistics on Health and Well-Being at Work, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in partnership with Simplyhealth has recently published its eighteenth annual survey. The analysis is based on replies from over 1,000 organisations in the UK covering 4.6 million employees.

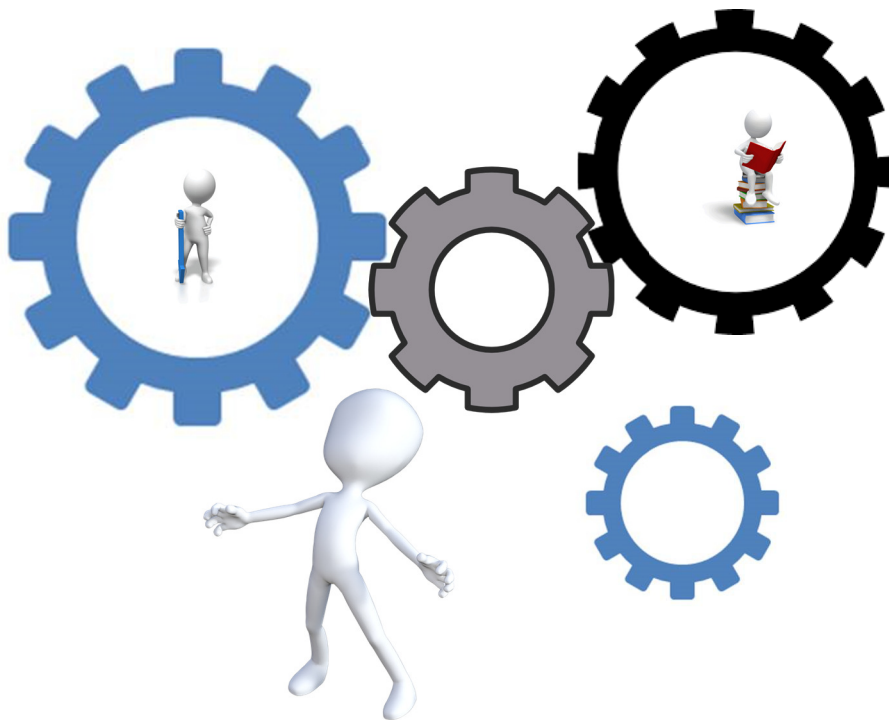
In the Public Sector key challenges for HR were identified as;

1. Identify and tackle root causes of ill health,
2. build a more robust framework to promote good mental health,
3. strengthen the capability of line managers and
4. ensure a holist approach.¹

There is also a lot of free information available on the HSE website covering Stress, Anxiety and Depression as well as several books that offer in depth views and guidance. For example;

Mental Health and Productivity in the Workplace – ISBN 978-0-7879-6215-9

Happiness at Work – ISBN 978-0-470-74946-3



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¹ <https://www.cipd.co.uk/>