

Making a genuine difference to employee mental health



Thought leadership: Employee mental health

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Thought leadership

Employee mental health

The increase in psychosocial risks requires a stronger focus on building individual mental and emotional resilience at work.

Did you know that psychological stress or mental disorders account for around half of all lost working days in Europe? And are you aware that employees who take sick leave for mental health reasons are commonly absent for an average of two to four weeks according to EU OSHA? These figures predate the COVID-19 pandemic. So an increase in the last two years is highly likely, particularly given statistics published by the OECD that point to soaring levels of anxiety and depression in 2020¹.

Many organisations are aware of the need to address mental health at work, but less than 30% have procedures in place for doing so² and managers say they find it harder to tackle psychosocial risks than any other occupational health and safety issues³. In fact, our recent report on attitudes to safety at work in Europe among leading safety figures showed 97% did not believe they were doing enough to address psychosocial risks. Since the COVID crisis, it is clear that organisations cannot sufficiently improve the management of psychosocial risks.

Depression & anxiety disorders cost the European economy an estimated

170 bn.

per year in lost productivity⁴



This requires a holistic approach to mental health as part of the safety management system. Some organisations are already implementing this, as Eva Trulsson, Vice President Responsible Care, Health, Safety & Environment at global specialty chemical company Perstorp AB explains. "We never talk about safety in isolation. We always talk about health and safety as connected needs. Mental health is an integral part of that, but it presents its own complexities. Unlike putting on a pair of safety goggles for protection, mental health problems are less evident to both see and prevent. But I still believe that there are certain things that you can add to your framework that supports good physical and mental health. First, helping an employee understand their rights and how they can get support with all their health issues - within that framework, assisting managers in developing a clear understanding of the problems and how they can support and encourage an open dialogue on health issues."

An effective safety management culture should therefore consider all aspects of health and safety including mental health. Leaders need to be able to pinpoint and understand psychosocial risks and should make mental and emotional resilience of employees their responsibility. And employees must be able to build their mental and emotional resilience.

As research shows, the following three aspects are difficult to implement, but there are steps that organisations can take to achieve a significant change.

¹ OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus, 12 May 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tackling-the-mental-health-impact-of-the-covid-19-crisis-an-integrated-whole-of-society-response-0ccafa0b/>

² Mental Health Europe

³ P 48, Psychosocial risks in Europe, Prevalence and strategies for prevention, a joint report from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2014

⁴ World Health Organization,



42%

of managers find it more difficult to tackle psychosocial risks than other occupational health and safety issues⁵

1.

Identify sources of stress

Psychosocial distress can manifest physically, for example as a stomach ulcer, or mentally as stress or burnout. An extreme example of how stress contributes to lack of attention is illustrated by a conversation between two airline pilots about the impact of COVID-19 on their families which caused them to miss vital control tower information and led to the death of 92 passengers in Karachi in August 2020. Nobody intends for such accidents to happen. What is missing in this and many other stress-related incidents and ill health is lack of leadership awareness of psychosocial risks and management of stress factors.

In order to be able to manage psychosocial risks effectively, leaders need to pinpoint both internal stress factors – unclear roles, lack of understanding of targets, understaffing, etc. – and external ones such as COVID. A quantitative survey of employees can provide some insights but should always be followed by a qualitative study to identify what needs to be changed.

2.

Make psychosocial risk management a leadership responsibility

While some organisations believe they are addressing mental health by offering wellness weekends or weekly yoga classes, they won't make much of a difference to those who need it most – the employees who are working 40 to 60 hours a week and simply don't have the time. It is their managers who need to keep an eye on them and help them to build resilience at an individual level, for example through resilience workshops. This needs to be supported through team or organisation resilience by creating an open feedback culture and an environment in which there is no fear of discussing issues.

Globally, resignations have increased markedly since the start of the pandemic. While a change in priorities is one reason why people have moved, the vast majority of employees cite the way in which their employers treated them during the pandemic as the main reason for leaving⁶. Making employees feel valued and creating a culture in which everyone looks out for each other is therefore very much in business leaders' own interest.

Less than

30%

of workplaces in Europe have procedures for dealing with mental health at work⁷



3.

Integrate mental health into the organisational safety culture

While personal resilience is helpful, it is difficult to maintain in a setting where teams are fragmented or not supportive. Resilience is always a team effort. That can be difficult in view of current remote working and remote management practices. But it is still possible to create islands of human interaction and organise social team events, even if they only take place online. Team spirit and relationships will only exist if they are maintained regularly. An effective safety management culture will integrate all aspects of health and safety and enable organisations to better address all operational risks including mental health.

⁵ P 48, Psychosocial risks in Europe, Prevalence and strategies for prevention, a joint report from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2014

⁶ BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210629-the-great-resignation-how-employers-drove-workers-to-quit>

⁷ OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/employment/mental-health-and-work.htm>

3 actions organisations can take to improve psychosocial risk management

Action #1:

Build individual resilience

Offer employees a resilience workshop and give them the space and time to implement changes. Allow for self-care and help them to manage their workload.



Action #2:

Maintain resilience through leadership

Employees will follow the example set by their superiors. They can tell when leaders are authentic, so the leaders most likely to successfully manage psychosocial risks will be those take care of their own mental and emotional resilience, who talk about the subject and give personal examples. While discussions around mental health can be difficult to initiate, there are structural approaches that make difficult social conversations easier to manage.

Action #3:

Create team resilience

The creation of a holistic safety culture in which there is no fear of mentioning stress factors enables discussions that allow people to recognise they are not on their own. Often the mere act of talking about these issues provides a release and can be an initial step to improving resilience.

"We need to think about workplaces more holistically by looking at the safety of body and mind. Taking a tick box approach to mental health issues, for example, means they won't be taken seriously by employees. For any wellbeing programme to be effective, employees need to know and feel they are a valued part of the business, and that managers and leaders are taking action because they genuinely care. Exercises to monitor mental health are only meaningful to employees if leaders take steps to change what is making the workplace miserable for them. Part of this is ensuring that machines and processes are designed with employees in mind. (...) Leaders tend to focus on significant and obvious safety issues, but sometimes the slow creep of less visible safety and psychosocial safety issues can be equally problematic."

Maria Pia de Caro, Vice President, Home Care Supply Chain, Europe

Conclusion

The recent surge in mental health-related absences from work and resignations demonstrate that management of psychosocial risk has to be of prime concern to organisations who want to attract and retain employees and enable them to work productively. This requires a clear understanding of psychosocial risks and a holistic and proactive approach to managing individual and team resilience from the leadership down to the shop floor as part of an effective safety and operational risk management culture.

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By leveraging its DuPont heritage, deep industry and management expertise and diverse team, dss⁺ consultants are on the ground and in the boardroom helping clients work safer, smarter and with purpose.


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