



Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace

“ Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of your clients “

Sir Richard Branson

Since setting up Sequoia Health 18 months ago, I have read several books from Entrepreneurs across various industries, however, this quote from Sir Richard Branson above has always stuck with me. Possibly, the reason it has stayed with me is because we look after a lot of fantastic businesses who genuinely care about their employees, and by no fate of coincidence, they are also very successful in what they do. As Richard eludes to, having a happy, healthy workforce will pay dividends when it comes to looking after your clients and making your business successful.

What is Mental Wellbeing?

In a time where it's becoming less stigmatised to talk about our mental wellbeing, strong mental health strategies at work make employees more productive and therefore have a significant impact on how a business performs. Conversely, poor Mental Health at work is posing a cost on employers of £33bn - £42bn a year, a truly staggering figure. But, what actually is Mental Wellbeing and what can we, as employers, do to support our employees at work?

Mental wellbeing is your day-to-day status which informs your overall mental health. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development and mental health charity Mind, Mental Wellbeing is “the ability to cope with the day-to-day stresses of life, work productively, interact positively with others and realise our own potential.”

When we are “confident”, “up for the challenge”, “handling the pressure” etc, we are describing positive mental wellbeing. What employer doesn’t want employees who are “engaged”, “switched on”, “committed”? - All expressions of positive mental wellbeing.

Companies are human organisations, it stands to reason that the Mental Wellbeing of the people involved will affect company performance. Always has done, always will.

What is the current state of Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace?

The 2017 Stevenson-Farmer Review found that in addition to the human costs of mental illness, the ‘economic costs to employers, directly to Government and to the economy as a whole are also far greater than we had anticipated’.

The report found that costs to employers of mental health illness is staggering and amounts to a cost per employee of between £1,205 and £1,560 per year – between £33 billion and £42 billion a year (Deloitte 2017). This is made up of:

- Absenteeism cost: £8 billion
- Presenteeism cost: £17 billion to £26 billion
- Staff turnover: £8 billion

That people working in an unfit state (presenteeism) costs more money than absence is a wake-up call for any company which thinks a low rate of staff absence means that mental ill health is not an issue.

Further evidence was contained in the 2018 edition of *Health and Wellbeing at work* from the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) and Simplyhealth. This annual survey, running for the past 18 years, presented a mixed picture. The number of cases of

employees experiencing mental health issues at work is rising. 87 percent of survey respondents also stated that modern technology and working patterns make it harder for staff to 'switch off'. On the plus side, more companies are getting pro-active on physical and mental wellbeing – 40 percent of companies now have a standalone wellbeing strategy and 55 percent say Mental Wellbeing is on the agenda of senior leaders.

What are Businesses doing to support Mental Wellbeing at work and Why?

Whilst the figures are alarming, it is great to hear that more and more businesses are starting to recognise the importance of the Wellbeing of their workforce. Indeed, of the clients we look after at Sequoia there is a clear directive strategy from the top, and a genuine care for the welfare of their people. Just as Sir Richard eluded to, look after your people and they will look after your business.

Some of the typical propositions they are implementing are Private Healthcare plans with the likes of Bupa and Vitality Health, both of which have excellent Mental Health provisions built into their offerings. With costs averaging as little £15/£20 per employee per month for their strongest schemes, companies are seeing a significant return on their investments in terms of assisting staff when they need it most. Not only is this giving employees pathways to best in market health provisions, evidence clearly shows, such plans act as significant retention and attraction tools for good people. In a world where finding and retaining good people isn't easy, these marginal gains made by innovative employers is paying dividends.

Return on investment

The Stevenson-Farmer Review was supported by a major research project by Deloitte which included return on investment (ROI). A business making an intervention on mental health can expect an average ROI of £4.20, with the most successful programmes returning £9 of benefit for every £1 spent.

Taking the initiative on supporting Mental Wellbeing at work does not only mitigate the costs of absence and low productivity. Being seen as a leader on Mental Wellbeing will add to a company's reputation (especially in the competition for talent). More and more shareholders and stakeholders are also including Mental Wellbeing amongst their measures of company performance.

Boosts Productivity

Paul Farmer, the CEO of MIND, a huge advocate of Mental Wellbeing in the workplace – Smart employers know that organisations are only as strong as their people; they depend on having a healthy and productive workforce. Good mental health underpins this. By positively managing and supporting employees' Mental Wellbeing, employers can ensure that staff perform to their potential – and this allows the business to achieve peak performance. Research shows that FTSE 100 companies that prioritise employee wellbeing outperform the rest of the FTSE 100 by 10 per cent. By supporting staff wellbeing, they reap the benefits through enhanced morale, loyalty, commitment, innovation, productivity and profitability. This mantra is now also being taken on by more and more forward-thinking SMEs.

Good Business Sense

The twin goals of increasing employee engagement and creating a mentally healthy workplace are interdependent. Positively managing mental health underpins good employee engagement and benefits everyone – employees, employers and the bottom line. Engagement is about recognising that employees, if they are to perform at their best, must be respected, involved, heard, well-led and valued. Making changes that have a positive impact on employees' experiences at work are integral. Approaches such as flexible working, private health provisions, building resilience and staff development contribute to good engagement.

How is positive Mental Wellbeing at work achieved?

Mental Wellbeing asks fundamental questions about how a company is organised and to what purpose. For this reason a policy to protect and promote Mental Wellbeing should be a part of a company's strategic vision for itself.

Not only does Sequoia Health work alongside the UK's strongest Healthcare providers such as Bupa, Vitality, AXA PPP, Aviva, Cigna etc; we also work closely with well respected HR providers locally, in High Performance Consultancy (HPC) and more recently Health Consultancy Service, Health @ Work. Both, fantastic organisations aiming to improve, and assist the Health and Wellbeing of employees in businesses across the country.

One thing that is consistent across these organisations is that a commitment to Mental Wellbeing must be high-profile, systematic and persistent. One way in which a business can make a clear statement of intent is to sign the [Time To Change Employer Pledge](#).

One-off gestures and tokenism will only make a (possibly) bad situation worse. A strong Healthcare programme to promote and sustain positive mental wellbeing should include the following actions -

Measure current Mental Wellbeing

Before starting on a Mental Wellbeing programme, measure the existing Mental Wellbeing of employees. Options include using a confidential questionnaire (even a few simple questions can be revelatory) or a more detailed audit such as Mind's [Workplace Wellbeing Index](#).

Create a dedicated Mental Health policy

Mental health is too important to be contained in a vaguely worded statement on general employee wellbeing. The policy should clearly explain what the business is doing to foster positive mental wellbeing and provide a clear path for employees to follow if they need to raise an issue. This is where a strong Private Healthcare provision can come into its own and pay dividends, as discussed above.

Examine the design of work and workloads

A permanent state of overworking has proven links poor mental health. Also be aware that having too little work has a negative impact. Monotonous and unpleasant tasks (or a lack of variation if such tasks are essential) are also a negative factor. Employees should clearly understand why their work is important, and be consulted on decisions directly affecting their work.

Examine the physical workplace

The condition of the workplace will signal to employees how they are understood and valued by their employer. Air quality, natural light levels, and hygiene standards are some of the most important influences on our mood in the workplace.

Lead by example

The credibility of a Mental Wellbeing programme relies on a clear, unambiguous endorsement from the leadership team. A senior management champion for the programme is recommended.

Engage with employees

There are two important elements here:

- Communication around the actual delivery of a company mental health programme so that employees know how to access company Healthcare schemes, what is to happen, see it happening, and accept the programme as a permanent feature of the workplace. Confidentiality to the employee is also key.
- Continuing communications which support positive mental wellbeing – This includes structured employee appraisals, the setting of clear, attainable objectives, leadership on work-life balance. (Most underperforming companies take a casual and inconsistent approach to such matters)

Some final encouragement

Mental health has long been an issue in the British workplace since the first employee took up their tools. It's an area of work which has long been crying out for proper recognition from business leaders. However, with continual education in this space and the breaking down of Mental Health stigmas in society as a whole, we are thankfully making huge strides in this area. Getting started may conjure up images of – initially – awkward meetings and long silences as you get the mental health conversation going in your business. Be persistent. Remain open and honest about what you are aiming to achieve. People will respond – and your business will be better for it.

Useful Links

There is a growing body of research into mental health at work. The following selections are notable for their authority and clarity and recommended by us at Sequoia Health.

[People Manager's Guide To Mental Health](#) (2018) – Leading mental health charity Mind and the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD) produced an accessible guide to good mental wellbeing at work.

[Health and well-being at work](#) (2018) – The latest edition of the CIPD's penetrating survey of employee wellbeing. The project includes a detailed analysis of reasons for absence.

[The Stevenson-Farmer Review](#) (2017) – This Government-commissioned review of mental health at work fully exposed the cost to British businesses and recommended a series of practicable changes for companies to make.

[At A Tipping Point?](#) (2017) – Deloitte sets out the stark financial cost of ignoring mental health at work, and examines the demographic shifts driving workplace mental wellbeing up the agenda.

[Mental Health Toolkit For Employers](#) (2016) – Business In The Community and Public Health England provide a comprehensive guide for employers to establish and maintain a mental wellbeing programme.