



INSIGHT



Safeguarding Mental Health: A Priority for Employee Well-being

----- CITY MENTAL HEALTH ALLIANCE HONG KONG

Amid growing awareness of the importance of putting mental health at the centre of workforce well-being policies, City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK), a not-for-profit membership organisation, highlights various ways organisations and their HR function can develop and implement mental health initiatives that support a productive, thriving and mentally healthy workforce.

While a growing number of Hong Kong organisations are taking steps to support mental wellbeing in the workplace and the topic of mental health has moved up the list of concerns for many Hong Kong employers over the past few years, there is still room for improvement, notes CMHA HK Managing Director, Hilleke van Osch. For instance, van Osch explains that overcoming mental health stigma remains a key area that needs to be improved. Mental health stigma can prevent people from asking for and receiving support for mental health problems. Meanwhile, a culture of support can make a difference in reducing the barriers to seeking help. “Destigmatising conversations and issues related to mental health problems is paramount,” says van Osch.

CMHA HK surveys show in 2018 the number of employees reporting stigma was 55% for Hong Kong and in 2020 this figure had fallen to 33%. In 2022, employees reported experiencing the following types of mental health stigma or discrimination: 41% personal experience, 44% experienced by a colleague and 39% experienced by someone they knew. While the period 2020 to 2022 was marked by fluctuations in the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong, which resulted in dramatically changed working practices and environments, the data from CMHA HK’s previous surveys conducted in 2017, 2018, and 2020, provide longitudinal data

on the factors that impact on employee mental health. Globally, according to the World Health Organization, an estimated 12 billion working days are lost every year to depression and anxiety at a cost of US\$ 1 trillion per year in lost productivity.

Training and education

To support companies in their efforts to improve workplace mental health, CMHA HK provides a range of training programmes for members and non-members. To better understand workplace mental health, in recent years, the collection and use of data has been a growing area of focus for CMHA HK. Collection of data involves both the identification of indicators of success to monitor strategy implementation, an assessment of the data available and how it can be used, and a process to collect and report data to inform senior leaders and adjust the mental health strategy as appropriate. For example, it enables companies to look at ways in which presenteeism can be identified and measured.

Specifically developed with input from CMHA HK members and mental health professionals, training modules help line managers, team leaders and HR practitioners recognise stress, anxiety and depression; areas commonly associated with mental health problems. Because they have direct relationships with employees, noting how initiating conversations relating to mental health problems can be challenging, van Osch says increasing mental health literacy among managers and team leaders is a

Key Takeaways

- Initiating conversations about mental health is essential to build perspective so the topic can be discussed openly instead of treating such issues with stigma.
- Mental health is one of the most stigmatised issues in the workplace. The HR function is in a prime position to help to break down barriers and create a safe and supportive environment for all employees, which paves the way to create solutions.
- Make regular well-being check-ins a standard practice across the organisation. While there is more to empathy than a quick “How are you doing?” check, there is nothing wrong with making that a good place to start.
- Whether it’s a bad day or long-term mental health issues such as anxiety and depression—managers and team leaders need to know how to deal with these issues and get staff the help they need in a supportive and empathetic way.
- One-size doesn’t fit all. A holistic approach to mental and physical well-being needs to consider workforce demographics, diverse identities, backgrounds, experiences and current and future needs.

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crucial step in helping to reduce the stigma around mental health issues. “It is important that managers and team leaders have the confidence and insights to initiate conversations around mental well-being,” says van Osch. Often overlooked, van Osch highlights how it is equally important that managers and team leaders look after their own mental well-being. Similar to the “secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others” — advice frequently heard during airline safety briefings — CMHA HK offer training modules that focus on ways that team leaders and managers can look after their own mental well-being so that they are in a stronger position to care for the mental well-being of others.

Regardless of the position they hold within an organisation, employees at all levels of seniority face various stressors, challenges and work-life balance issues, van Osch says open communication about mental well-being can help people to recognise issues such as stress and anxiety. Open communication, van Osch adds, can also help individuals to feel less self-conscious about asking for help if they need it.

The role of the HR function in promoting mental wellness

While making it clear that HR practitioners are not expected to be mental health experts, van Osch says the HR function can play an integral role in advocating mental health literacy to ensure that mental health stress-points are identified as well as advancing a mental wellbeing culture within the organisation. “What we see as being really important is the facilitating role the HR function can play,” van Osch says. For example, the HR function could collaborate with managers and mental health professionals to develop programmes tailored to the needs of the workforce. Initiatives could include establishing stress management workshops, mindfulness training, resilience-building programmes and raising awareness about access to mental health resources. The HR function can also help to identify and arrange training for senior leaders and mental health champions to initiate conversations, as well as being available to offer support to colleagues.

While the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic have made individuals and organisations more aware of the importance of mental well-being, the point is, van Osch says, to create a work environment that supports mental well-being, it’s not enough to talk-the-talk, you also have to walk the walk—and this means providing a range of policies, resources and training that cultivates a healthy and flexible work environment. For example, while some people will benefit from having access to resources and self-led programmes that can help them combat stress, anxiety or depression, others might require different forms of support, such as meditation or counselling. Crucially, van Osch stresses, implementing mental well-being initiatives do not need to be overly complex or costly, however, maintaining a momentum that fosters mental wellness at work does require the buy-in from top-level management and key

stakeholders. To show they genuinely care about mental health well-being, during check-ins with members of the workforce, senior management can talk about their own approach to work-life balance and dealing with stress. “It doesn’t need to be too detailed or personal, just relatable,” van Osch says. Similarly, at the start of team meetings whether in person or online, team leaders can explain briefly how they are feeling and encourage colleagues to talk about their own feelings. What seems like a simple start to a conversation, van Osch explains, can mean a great deal to others, especially if someone is in a position where they feel they are facing a situation alone. She adds that this is particularly important in an era where the use of technology can mean that the boundaries between work and personal time are no longer clearly defined.

At a time when employers are increasingly aware of the benefits that focus on workplace mental well-being can deliver, the HR function has a major role to play in nurturing a mentally healthy workforce that is not only more engaged and productive, but also contributes to the overall success and sustainability of the organisation.

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