

MENTAL HEALTH – IT'S OUR FEELINGS THAT MAKE US HUMAN



THE PANDEMIC HAS TAKEN ITS TOLL ON BUSINESSES IN MANY WAYS, NOT LEAST OF WHICH IS THE MENTAL HEALTH OF OUR EMPLOYEES. NONE OF US HAS HAD ANY EXPERIENCE IN ADAPTING TO A WORLD OVERTAKEN BY A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, AND THE SITUATION WE HAVE ALL BEEN FORCED INTO HAS DRAMATICALLY AFFECTED OUR WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND UNSURPRISINGLY, SENSE OF WELLBEING.

We are all human, and anxiety is a natural response to uncertainty. A global survey by Qualtrics found that 42% of respondents suffered a decline in mental health since the pandemic began. It's likely that your team will be struggling with issues such as:

employer can afford to start paying them again. Concerns over money can lie at the heart of many mental health issues (look out for our next blog that addresses this area in more detail).

WILL MY JOB CHANGE?

Certain sectors, like retail and hospitality, may have changed forever. The job that existed before the pandemic may not be the same one offered on a return to work. Many companies are looking at retraining and redeploying staff to other areas of the business, a positive move, but one that might cause anxiety for people who are not sure what will be expected of them.

WILL I BE KEPT ON WHEN MY FURLOUGH ENDS?

The furlough scheme has supported the jobs of 10 million people and has been a useful tool for preventing mass redundancies. As the scheme comes to its scheduled end in October, people furloughed will naturally be concerned about whether their

WILL WHERE I WORK CHANGE?

Many studies show that at least an element of working from home is likely to remain, particularly in markets such as technology, financial services and other office-based industries. For those who welcomed the demise of the daily commute, this is probably good news. But others feel isolated at home, or unable to work efficiently as they do not have room for a home office. Concerns about internet capacity, phone signal strength and many other elements may drive people to prefer a return to the office.

IS IT SAFE TO RETURN TO THE OFFICE?

Employers must recognise that many staff will be worried about leaving lockdown and exposing themselves to an increased risk of infection. They may have other issues that make returning difficult, such as caring for elderly relations or childcare.

As an employer, the way a job affects your staff's mental wellbeing is your responsibility. So what steps can you take to reassure those of your team that are struggling with these types of issues and support their mental health?

MENTOR EMPLOYEES THROUGH THE CRISIS

When someone hears about a mentor's experience, it can help to

give a fresh perspective on their own problems. By sharing concerns and moving away a little from the normal professional relationship, a mentor can support and offer personal advice.

Experienced mentors will often see employees facing the same issues that they may have encountered and overcome. This is a time for people to show their vulnerability and normalise mental health concerns. Making mentors available to staff helps them to feel more comfortable about talking about their concerns which is often the first step to addressing them. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming and less scary.

ADDRESS CONCERNS AND COMMUNICATE WELL

If an employee is worried about returning to the workplace, you should explore their reluctance and try to address any specific concerns about their own individual circumstances. You should only ask employees to return to the workplace if it has been made COVID secure in line with government advice. You need to communicate clearly with employees about the measures that have been put in place to help build confidence.

Increased communication is important, with the Qualtrics study showing that employees who felt their managers were not good at communicating have been 23% more likely than others to experience

mental health declines since the outbreak.

So keep people informed about company changes, new working hours or practices. People may need more guidance on workloads and prioritisation than normal.

BE FLEXIBLE

It's likely that everything will remain in a state of flux for a while yet. The pandemic, the needs of your people, your own needs – they will all change and evolve. So be flexible about what you expect and how you empower your team to deliver it. Make sure you check in regularly with them, particularly as things move to another stage. If you know what's happening with your people you can help to solve their challenges and give them the framework to deliver in a way that suits everybody.

SHARE USEFUL RESOURCES

There are many useful resources that you can direct your staff to that may help. Some services support physical health such as [online GP helplines](#), giving access to a GP when you need it, [free eye care appointments](#) or [discounted gym memberships](#). Others focus on mental health such as online counselling, or on [financial health](#). By keeping a library of resources, you can give your team additional sources of information and support as they need it.

