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May 19th, 2023

How we can work better to support employee mental health

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Companies are increasingly investing in their employees' mental health. In an environment of labour shortages, the losses caused by workers' mental problems have made mental health a priority. Employers may not always succeed in addressing the problem, but individual employees have a role to play. Yolanda Blavo, Nikita and Daniel Jolles discuss how we can take charge of our mental well-being at work and help create a supportive environment for others.

In the past 12 months, most major companies reported **increasing their investment in mental health** to create environments that better support employees' health and well-being. The cost to firms of poor mental health that results in days lost to illness, presenteeism (attending work when ill) and turnover run into the **hundreds of billions**. Additionally, the combination of

increased **mental health challenges** and **labour shortages** during the COVID-19 pandemic has put employee mental health firmly on the priority list for firms.

However, despite this recent positive progress, employers may not always succeed in creating environments that adequately meet their employees' **mental health needs**. In such cases, how can we as individual employees take charge of our mental well-being at work? By recognising our own needs and advocating for those needs to be met, we can create a healthier work environment for ourselves and our colleagues. Prioritising our own mental health needs in the workplace is a great way to support the needs of our colleagues and ensure that the increased investment made by employers does not go to waste.

Here are six small ways we can take charge of our mental well-being at work and help create a supportive environment:

1. Lead the way

Our ability to successfully lead others can be negatively affected by **anxiety and strain**. This is because poor mental health reduces our ability to lead positively and can even result in negative behaviours that deplete our colleagues. Communicating our own needs ensures we have the right support from peers and senior management, which in turn **protects others** in the team. This communication encourages a **psychologically safe environment** where thoughts and ideas can be shared freely without fear of backlash. However, even in such an environment, some employees may still hesitate to express what their needs are, and it may be useful to provide anonymous avenues to collect feedback.

2. Set boundaries

Having a manageable workload and reasonable goals are important to thrive both at work and outside it. While it can be helpful to keep **boundaries flexible**, hybrid working means our work and personal lives are increasingly intertwined. It is important to **set healthy boundaries** to feel empowered and to avoid taking on too much. Although challenging, this can mean saying "no" more often. Politely, this might sound like *"I would love to help with this task but right now I am working on X, Y, and Z"*, *"I could use some support on Project X"*, or *"I don't have the capacity to take on this task, but I'd be happy to help in the future"*. Setting boundaries could also mean scheduling time without meetings to focus

on your work, muting work notifications outside of work hours or taking your work email off your phone. Many of us now enjoy the flexibility and benefits of working at our own pace and schedule, but too much **blurring of work-life boundaries** also has the potential to reduce our well-being.

3. Take breaks and take time for yourself

Regular **breaks during and outside of work** support our well-being. These breaks, together with longer holidays, allow us to completely disconnect and detach from work, which is **important to mental health**. We should view breaks as a way to prevent burnout, as opposed to resorting to breaks to recover from burnout. This can involve engaging in activities such as yoga classes or taking a brief walk during the workday. Taking a lunchtime walk or doing something to relax can improve afternoon **performance and overall well-being**. By prioritising breaks and allowing time for rejuvenation, you can better manage stress and maintain mental health.

4. Initiate informal catchups with colleagues

Have casual check-ins with people you feel comfortable within the office. Talk about something other than work. It can be challenging when you feel that you are alone in the workplace, and those with **social support at work** have lower stress. With people working at different times and locations, it is even more important to make a concerted effort to connect with others. Having a sense of team purpose with our colleagues is good for our **mental well-being and job satisfaction**. This might mean leaning into team activities or social events, but it could also be something as simple as arranging a virtual or in-person coffee chat with a colleague. By prioritising these casual interactions, we help foster a sense of community and **improve the overall well-being** in our workplaces.

5. Engage in job crafting

Have you ever felt highly unmotivated at work because you were bored? Or irritated by particular job demands? This is where job crafting can be beneficial to mental health. Job crafting is curating your job to better align with your interests and strengths. This might include adding or dropping certain responsibilities or tasks so that your job can be tailored better to your interests. For example, creating fewer PowerPoint presentations and engaging in more

client-facing activities. Or you might focus on how frequently you interact with certain people or build new relationships. Evidence suggests that job crafting can increase **autonomy** and **reduce irritation** at work, bolstering our mental well-being.

6. Track your well-being

Well-being encompasses physical and mental health as well as life satisfaction. Regularly asking yourself well-being questions related to your health (how you're feeling), and your energy levels (how you're functioning), can help you identify patterns and progress. You may choose to track your well-being by keeping a personal journal or using a well-being app. This provides a space to reflect on thoughts and feelings, provide a way to **process your emotions** and consider your **overall well-being**. Many employees are **still reluctant to seek support** or take advantage of employer mental health benefits. Tracking your well-being can help you decide when it is time to reach out, as well as look at your health more holistically by monitoring markers like emotions, physical activity, sleep, and nutrition.

While employers work to create better workplace environments and benefits that allow employees to advocate for their employees' mental health, it is equally important for employees to take advantage of these opportunities, and to understand, monitor and communicate their needs to leaders. By championing our own mental health by investing in our well-being and relationships, as well as taking advantage of the flexible work arrangements, well-being and mental health support available to us, we can contribute to a happier, healthier, and more productive workforce.



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