

# Exploring workplace mental health

**W**orkplace health and wellbeing expert Zoe Ecclestone is the founder of The Wellbeing Business, which provides strategy and guidance to businesses on how best to optimise the mental health of their employees. She speaks with *HEQ* about the significance of workplace wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## What are the key benefits of maintaining mental health in the workplace for employers and staff?

It's well documented that if you have a happy, healthy workforce, they are more productive at home and at work; I think the benefits speak for themselves. People need to recognise that physical and mental health are difficult to separate: although there is a lot of emphasis now on mental health, in order to get really good mental health, we need to have good physical health as well.

The COVID-19 situation is helping us to see how purpose is really important. People benefit from having concrete goals at work and knowing what they're doing, as well as from clear communication – particularly in these strange times, knowing what changes are going to happen and how that will affect them is really important.

## Has the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on the mental health and wellbeing of workers? How could this be addressed?

People have had all kinds of different reactions, depending on where they are in their career and how their job has been affected. Wellbeing is always quite difficult, because it's not the same for everyone and each individual person's mental wellbeing varies from day to day. The pandemic was such an unknown for so many people – and

it is well known that people don't like change, but normally at least there are some static factors within any major change, or at least there is a very clear outcome or goal. Normally we do something in a workplace because we want to get a certain outcome, but unfortunately with COVID-19 hitting it came so quickly, no-one knew what the outcome was: it was very much driven by safety. However, we didn't really know what that meant, so we kept implementing different things.

At first people were united, thinking: whatever we're told to do, we can do this. People who were furloughed accepted that, people who had to carry on working on the frontline accepted that; and at least for the first few weeks, a lot of people were pulled along by a sense of community spirit. We had a lot of very clear messaging from the government and medical advisors as to what to do, so everybody knew why they were doing things – but since then, unfortunately, it's become quite muddled.

People have got very fatigued for a variety of reasons: it's difficult to know what is happening; we don't know because the science isn't clear. Are we going to get a second wave? Are we beating the virus? Are we building immunity? Meanwhile, in companies where some people were furloughed and some weren't, it was quite difficult for two or three of employees to be working around the clock to try and keep the business afloat, while their colleagues were being paid 80% of their wages to sit in the lovely weather we had in April and May. That has an effect of frustration and jealousy.

People's mental health has taken a battering, and it has been exacerbated by the very strange situations people have found themselves working from home in. With childcare problems, sharing domestic responsibilities, care of the elderly and shielding vulnerable relatives, lots of people suddenly had roles that they had not necessarily

signed up for, they certainly had no training; they had no time to prepare. We all try and plan for change, but this just happened so quickly. I think the effects of COVID-19 on our mental health are going to come slowly and in different ways.

## Have you found that, where people aren't coping well with all the changes incurred by the pandemic, that feeling is intensified by the fact that everyone is experiencing the same issues so people are reluctant to single themselves out?

There are those who are always going to say: it's worse for me, because it is my problem – and it's probably not worse for them. Then there are the copers, who are trying to sort it out without any backup mechanism. It's quite hard for people to imagine that it is happening to everybody. It's hard to complain because we are all in it together, but on the other side of the coin it is quite difficult to imagine that everywhere in the country – and the world – is going through what we're going through.

## Have you found that employee wellbeing has been sidelined as a priority during the pandemic?

Following the 2008 financial crash, employee wellbeing came off people's agendas because it was something you could cut. I think this is going to be different, because COVID-19 has proved how health is important: it's difficult for people to take it off the agenda, because we need to put the health of everybody at the forefront. In my role as health and wellbeing advisor to big corporate firms, I have been saying: you should use this opportunity to embed health and wellbeing in your employees, because they are clearly very important.

We need to use this as a reset to make sure that people are actually looking after their health and



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wellbeing; probably one of the most difficult things people have always talked about, which is going to be an interesting topic as we come out of lockdown, is work-life balance. Most people used to strive to work at home, but people are thinking very differently about that now.

There are so many aspects we haven't thought about. We haven't thought about the age categories, and that's going to really define people's experiences of the pandemic. The older generation are finding their pension funds have taken a considerable turn for the worse; so they're wondering: are we safe in our jobs for the next 10 years? Are we all going to get chucked out – rightly, possibly – so that the younger employees can get some experience? Then there are the financial implications; people who haven't yet got into the housing market are now finding they can't get mortgages. Management of staff from home has been interesting: younger people in particular have found they are suddenly being micromanaged and really struggled with it. When people start to emerge and go back into offices, there are going to be some strange relationships having to play themselves out.

### **What are some common ways in which employee wellbeing has been historically deprioritised at work?**

People have forgotten that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines say for most common mental health problems, physical exercise is one of the first lines of treatment; and that's been sidelined. People are encouraged to talk – but I'd like to hear people say it's good to listen, because if we listened to what people were saying we would be able to take actions. That would be really important. We have to look at the whole, by adding physical health back in when we're looking for treatments for mental health; I think that that will really help companies.

### **What are some examples of good practice in supporting the welfare of employees?**

The common theme is: know your demographic. I do get frustrated when I see companies implementing what they think are wellbeing strategies because they've read in the Sunday Times that a really cool, trendy tech company has done this, and they have failed to notice that their

staff are nearing retirement, not new tech people; and they don't actually want whatever the benefit is being rolled out to them. It's important to make the programme specific to your staff. One of my favourite examples of this is a company which read that it's really important to do a no smoking programme – this was before the NHS ran these programmes, so the company invested in a very expensive smoking cessation programme, and nobody enrolled. When they analysed why it had been so unsuccessful, they found they didn't actually have any smokers in the company.

The most important thing is to try and get people to understand why it's important to change; and more importantly, to encourage them to change something in their life that would improve their wellbeing. Targeted education at the right level, to the right people, with a motivational element, is always going to remain a key part of any successful wellbeing programme.

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