Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace:
A Comparative Study of Employers' and Employees' Perspectives
A summary

Introduction

Mental Health and wellbeing has become an area of increasing interest to UK employers as the effects of poor employee mental health can be detrimental not only for affected employees but also to the business. Despite the importance of managing employee mental health in the workplace being largely recognized nowadays, many employers still feel like they need more support in the area. In addition to this, while stress has been widely discussed in relation to the workplace, the management of mental health conditions in the workplace and unique issues attached to this – such as stigmatization – have only been considered rarely.

Thus, this research project has aimed at understanding both employers' and employees' perceptions around how mental health and wellbeing can be fostered within an organization and what the most effective initiatives are to enable a discussion around mental health and in turn decrease stigmatization thereof. In cooperation with *MHScot Workplace Wellbeing CIC,* a concurrent mixed-methods research design has been chosen to explore different themes in this context, namely: how aware employers and employees are of mental health conditions and their impact on the workplace; what their experiences with disclosure of a mental health condition or a general discussion of mental health in the workplace is; how stigma ties into this; and what the most effective policies and practices are in respect to employee mental health and wellbeing.

In order to gain an understanding for both, employers' and employees' experiences and perceptions around the topic, ten employers have been interviewed and an online questionnaire was distributed, which generated 106 employee responses.

Main Findings
Mental Health in the Workplace
When it comes to specific mental health conditions, employers most commonly noted to have encountered stress, which is consistent with existent literature and underlines that stress tends to be thought of first albeit recognizing it is not a condition in itself but a cause for it and arguably also something employers are partly able to influence. Apart

from this, employers most commonly listed depression, followed by anxiety. Similarly, 90% of employees associated anxiety with mental ill health in the workplace, followed by depression with 88% and stress with 86%.

All interviewed employers appeared to be highly aware of mental health being an important factor of employee wellbeing as well as recognizing their responsibility in offering their employees appropriate support mechanisms. In support of this, the majority of employees, who participated in the online survey, described their colleagues and managers as supportive and concerned for their wellbeing. This finding is significant considering that both employers and employees highlighted the importance of a supportive environment as a key factor not only ensuring good employee MH but also in encouraging employees to share possibly mental health problems.

Experiences with Disclosure of a Mental Health Condition
The large majority of employers have had experiences with employees disclosing a mental health condition. This has predominantly taken place during, and not prior to employment, which is also consistent with employees' responses, considering that 82% of respondents who have disclosed a mental health condition to their employer, did so during employment. Findings suggest that this is due to the fact that people tend to wait until they are employed for fear of discrimination during the recruitment phase and in order to assess what kind of reaction they would receive from their employer if they disclosed.

The main argument for disclosure on the side of employers has been their inability to adequately support employees without having full knowledge of their mental health status. Looking at employees' perspectives on this matter, 82% of respondents noted that they would feel comfortable discussing mental health in the workplace, which can be considered a positive result in connection to employers' desire for disclosure in order to address issues in a timely manner.

Employees most commonly attributed this likeliness to discuss mental health with having a supportive environment and an approachable management. They moreover pointed out the importance of discussing mental health in order to foster improvements and dispel stigma. Interviewed employers similarly emphasized the importance of role-

modeling openness around the issue and signaling transparency through policies and practices. The minority of employees (18%) who noted they would not feel comfortable speaking up about a possible mental health problem most commonly attributed this to fear of discrimination and stigma.

Mental Health Stigma

In relation to mental health stigma, all participating employers and employees showed low levels of stigmatizing attitudes towards mental health albeit recognizing that it does exist. As outlined above, stigma has been found to hinder discussion of mental health in the workplace not only by employees but also by employers, who recognized fear and misperceptions as major barriers to improvements - thus underlining the importance of openness and transparency around the topic in order to encourage a discussion of MH and disclosure.

It has moreover been found that familiarity with mental health problems significantly decreases stigmatization among both employers and employees and in turn increases acceptance of it. Among employers, it appeared that the more experience they have had in dealing with employees suffering from a mental health condition, the more confident they were in managing it and encouraging employees to discuss their mental health in the workplace.

Practices and Policies

80% of employers did not have a specific policy around mental health. This is not only consistent with existent research but may also be explained through the embeddedness of mental health in either health and safety or absence policies. This result can moreover be related to the perceived connectedness of stress, general wellbeing and mental health, which has been a theme throughout this research with the majority of employees (66%) thinking their employers' practices and policies do not adequately distinguish between the three areas.

When it comes to what employees perceived to be the most effective practices, these were: flexible working arrangements, including working from home and flexible holiday leave. It was specifically underlined that these contribute to stress reduction and enable management of health conditions. Interestingly, flexible working was only mentioned by

two employers while several spoke of adjustment of work regarding management of employees with a mental health condition. Most employers noted to offer EAP/Helplines, counseling or referral to occupational health when asked about specific practices and policies around mental health and wellbeing. What is important to consider is that when it comes to EAP and counseling, employees, who have good mental health may be less likely to be aware of their existence as well as unable to evaluate their effectiveness. Hence, this may explain the contrast between employees emphasizing flexible working as it is something that is beneficial to all employees, while interviewees specifically noted to receive good feedback for EAP or counseling by employees who have been in need of these practices specifically targeting poor MH.

Relevance of the Managerial Role

As this study has found a supportive environment – and management in particular – to be a decisive factor in increasing employee wellbeing and fostering a discussion of mental health in the workplace, it is important to emphasize the impact of management training. While this study has found several employers to have managers acting as great role-models, who encourage discussion of mental health in the workplace by being open about personal experiences, it is vital to acknowledge that not all managers have this experience to draw from. While 50% of participating employers offer some form of training to their managers, it was never noted to be mandatory. This finding is however to be considered carefully considering that employers participating in this project were arguably more aware of the issue than the large majority, which is evident in the CIPD's finding[1] that only 10% of UK employers offer specific line management training in regards to dealing with a mental health condition in the workplace. Several employers pointed to the lack of top-level commitment to combating mental health problems in the workplace. Hence, this study's findings indicate that mental health training should be considered a priority within organization to signal organizational commitment and enable managers to recognize changes in their employees and in turn manage good employee mental health proactively rather than reactively.

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[1] CIPD (2016). Employee Outlook – Focus on Mental Health in the Workplace. Retrieved from: http://www.cipd.co.uk/research/employee-outlook.aspx

Recommendations

As this study has emphasized the importance of managerial commitment and organizational transparency, it is recommendable to increase overall awareness around mental health within organizations. In order to do so, it may be useful to implement a specific mental health policy in cooperation with HR, line management and employee representatives. This policy should be introduced with an opportunity for employees to give feedback and then communicated consistently to ensure all employees understand their organization's approach to ill mental health in the workplace as well as available support mechanisms.

Secondly, as this study has outlined the significant role of management not only in implementing practices and policies but also as they are in a position to manage employees with poor mental health proactively, it is recommendable for organizations to introduce training opportunities consistently throughout all levels of management to signal organizational commitment and increase overall awareness. To address attendance issues, it would be recommendable to make training at least for some managers mandatory. One option would then also be to spread awareness by having participating managers share their knowledge in internal workshops.

Conclusion

It is vital to point out that perhaps the most significant limitation of this study – which also in part serves as an explanation of the results – was the likeliness of participants having a higher level of awareness and familiarity with the overall topic than the general public considering they have been contacted through a Social Enterprise specializing in the field. Hence, further research in this field with a larger and diversified sample is recommended.

Nevertheless, by establishing a positive connection between openness and familiarity with mental health conditions and discussion of mental health in the workplace, the findings of this research project offer a valuable insight into what employers can do to address issues around mental health and wellbeing strategically.