

How to build a workplace culture that prioritises mental health

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October is Mental Health Awareness Month in South Africa, which is aimed at not only educating the public about mental health matters, but also at reducing the stigma and discrimination that people with mental illness are often subjected to. This is not only an important conversation for the public, but one that all businesses should be having on an ongoing basis.

In 2021, the [World Health Organization reported](#) that one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives. Around 450 million people currently suffer from such conditions, placing mental disorders among the leading causes of ill-health and disability worldwide. Given these statistics, it is safe to say that mental health issues impact most employees at certain times during their careers. Unfortunately, few individuals will proactively seek treatment for their symptoms, which often results in negative outcomes – both personally and professionally.

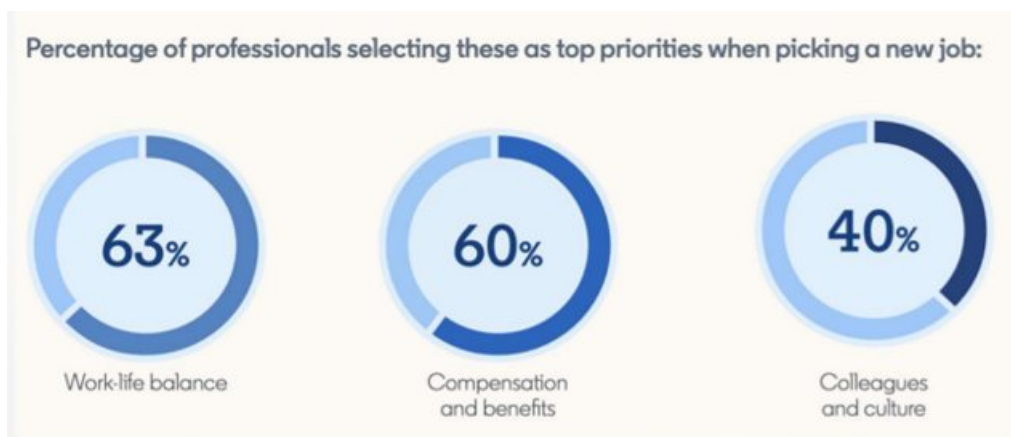
Mental health is not just a personal priority, but a business one too

When employees thrive, their companies also benefit. Increasingly, employers of choice are engaging with their people on mental health matters and developing employee assistance programmes (EAP) as an integral part of their employment value proposition.

An employee assistance program (EAP) is a work-based intervention program designed to assist employees in resolving personal problems that may be adversely affecting the employee's performance.

The more employers are willing to listen and support their employees through mental health challenges, the more likely a company will be able to build a workplace culture that is based on mutual support and understanding and enables their workforce to flourish.

Within the context of mental health, the [2022 Universum Talent Outlook report](#) revealed that work-life balance is more important than ever, even trumping income as a priority for most professionals.



Source: 2022 Universum Talent Outlook webinar

Work-life balance has been an aspiration for a long time, and more so since the start of the pandemic. Supporting mental health in the workplace can result in lower rates of burnout and higher rates of engagement, which in turn helps companies attract and retain top talent.

Here are some of the ways you can foster a sense of work-life balance among your employees and build a workplace culture that prioritises mental health:

1. Create a safe space for candid conversations

Managers should create an 'open door' policy and set aside time for regular one-on-one sessions with those reporting to them – not only to discuss tasks and deadlines, but to check in on an employee's mental health. This provides employees with an opportunity to discuss any issues or concerns as they arise. All leaders in your company should hone the skill of listening, to build trust and make it easier for employees to reach out when they are facing mental health challenges. Listening is only the first step, however. Leaders also need to take action and assist employees to find solutions to the problems they are dealing with. Many employers of choice now offer third-party confidential preventative care and counselling services as part of their employee benefits – [ICAS](#) is one such example.

2. Provide employees with tools to manage their stress

All employees experience some degree of stress in the workplace from time to time. Companies can help to reduce stress by creating 'fun' areas for staff to unwind and enjoy some downtime – for example gyms, game rooms or even gardens. Virtual meditation classes, fitness classes, or even cooking classes can be scheduled to help remote workers relieve stress.

A well-designed CSI initiative is another great way to help employees reduce their stress levels. Allowing employees a certain number of extra leave days every year to volunteer for a cause that is dear to them can help to reduce stress and increase brand loyalty.

3. Allow time for focus and for short breaks in between meetings

The Microsoft Work Trend Index 2021 revealed that between February 2020 and February 2021 there was a staggering 148% increase in meetings (often back-to-back), partly attributed to the new remote/hybrid work model. Along with this, there has been a massive increase in emails, while 'chat' has replaced many face-to-face conversations among employees.

The rise of virtual work has resulted in fewer breaks, more challenges with communicating effectively (non-verbal cues are often removed in Teams or Zoom calls) – all of which lead to an exhausted workforce. In the words of Mary Donohue, founder of the [Digital Wellness Centre](#), "The exhaustion many are feeling can be blamed on the speed and urgency of virtual work."

In the era of digitalisation, it's crucial to give employees short breaks between meetings and to allow them to schedule 'focus time' for uninterrupted work without distraction.

4. Take proactive measures to stamp out stigma

Mental health issues are often deeply misunderstood, which can lead to employees being stigmatised and result in bias creeping into a company's culture. It is the employer's responsibility to prevent this from happening by promoting a transparent working environment. Mental Health Awareness Month provides a great opportunity for companies to shed light on myths associated with mental health issues and show their support of people living with mental health conditions.

Internal communication should be timely, candid and sincere, even when the content is uncomfortable. Starting important conversations with employees – and encouraging them to share their comments, queries or concerns – will go a long way in helping them feel respected and trusted.

5. Create a culture of flexibility to support mental health

Over and above formal benefits packages, companies can support wellness and the mental health of their employees by introducing flexible work arrangements – both in terms of time and location. Allowing employees to work at least some of the

week from home, or to adjust their working hours, can alleviate stress and foster work-life balance. Some companies even offer additional “mental health day” leave as part of their Employee Value Proposition (EVP).

Parting thoughts

Simply put, supporting employee wellness by providing mental health benefits is good for business. Building a workplace culture that prioritises mental health will not only help you to attract and retain top talent, but also boost productivity and reduce absenteeism. Mental health is a crucial consideration in the evolving world of work and taking steps to support the mental wellbeing of employees is yet one more way that you can define yourself as an employer of choice.

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