

BUILDING A MORE RESILIENT WORKFORCE

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EMPLOYERS CAN DO
MORE TO HELP THEIR
WORKFORCE.**

It was announced this week that 87 million pints of beer will be thrown away as a result of pub closures during lockdowns around the UK, equivalent to £331m in sales,

was a further heartbreaking statistic to bring home the economic cost of Covid-related restrictions on the brewing industry.

After almost a year in various stages of lockdown, it is no longer the mere fact of living through a pandemic and nearly a year isolated from friends, family and colleagues that individuals are having to contend with.

Many in the brewing industry have experienced substantial financial and operational pressures as a result of having to contend with an ever-changing public health landscape.

No longer simply in fire-fighting mode, many have been working under intense pressure to keep independent and small breweries afloat with a merry-go-round mix of uncertainty of furlough schemes, increased hours, often compounded by added childcare and teaching obligations as a result of school closures.

They are also heavily reliant on government support to survive this latest lockdown, including the extended Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and financial help announced by the Chancellor.

All of these factors can increase feelings of anxiety, loneliness and isolation, which are factors for mental ill health.

Recent data presents a stark picture. Stress-related absences in 2020 rose 64% compared to the previous year. UK workers have increased their working week by almost 25% since the pandemic

began and according to the findings of a YouGov survey, 65% of British respondents reported a negative impact on their mental health due to Covid-19 (higher than any other surveyed nation). Whilst 2021 and the mass vaccine rollout now underway brings with it a new dynamic to help forge a path to recovery and a reimagining of how a brewing business can thrive, the relationship between mental health and brewing will for many remain the elephant in the room.

Due to, amongst other things, the financial pressures that the pandemic has wrought, with the UK economy shrinking by a record 9.9% in 2020, the rising mental health crisis has reached a tipping point for which businesses will be dealing with for years to come.

It is worth considering how a person can bounce back from major challenges and thrive. What it means to be resilient. In order to make the concept of resilience less abstract, Mental Health First Aid England talk about the concept of a "stress container".

The idea is that the bigger the container, the more resilient the person is to stress. But both the volume of the container and the volume of the issues the person is facing play a key role in how well people respond.

If the container overflows, difficulties are more likely to develop as the stress is out of control.

The stress container contains a tap to let stress out – this refers to coping strategies that can be employed to help reduce unhealthy stress and maintain good mental health.

Some coping strategies are helpful –

Left: The idea is that the bigger the container, the more resilient the person is to stress



things like getting adequate rest, making time for positive experiences, asking for help from others.

There are also unhelpful coping strategies that many of us have used from time to time which might feel like they are helping the situation, and sometimes do in the short-term, but if abused can become additional stressors and fill up the container even more – things like working excessively long hours, self-medicating with drugs or alcohol, or not getting enough sleep. For employers in the brewing industry, it is crucial then to work to turn on the taps to help people cope and build up a more resilient workforce.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Employers are recommended to acquire the tools to be able to spot the early signs and symptoms of a mental health issue developing, or of an existing condition worsening, so they can provide support and early intervention to their employees.

This means investing in training so that managers can lean in to difficult and sensitive workplace conversations without hesitation, or fear of making matters worse.

It is not about feeling like you have to “fix” a situation, but about embedding a more open and inclusive culture where people

feel heard and that their needs are approached from a position of empathy. Given the challenges we are facing, even if an employer cannot make a change to someone’s macro environment, they might be able to make a change to their micro work environment and make a positive difference.

Managers are recommended to have regular check-ins and create space for conversation about the demands of work and wellbeing.

Making time for discussions around wellbeing can help set an inclusive tone and create opportunities for individuals to feel able to talk more openly, especially if individuals have been regularly burning the midnight oil.

It also might mean building in and setting expectations around working hours and the taking of breaks. The taking of annual leave should be encouraged – it is not all about that beach holiday (though we can but dream...), but rest away from the brewery and the work phone and blocking out time to not be “always-on” that is key to helping maintain resilience.

Employers should also ensure they are signposting the internal and external support available, and participate in mental health campaigns to help show their employees that they take their mental health seriously, that they will

be treated with empathy and that they can express themselves without fear of stigma. Thinking about the brewery’s wellbeing strategy in a holistic sense is worth the time, as there may be areas that are being under-utilised.

For example, many businesses have employee assistance programmes (EAPs) but suffer from lacklustre take-up. It might be time for a re-launch to promote its positive benefits, or even to consider whether there a better alternatives in the market to reflect the demographics of the workforce, such as EAPs through apps that may be more user-friendly and get better engagement.

Not all mental health initiatives need to cost anything to set-up. Thinking about how work is organised can be helpful – as Winter turns to Spring, maybe it will be time to initiate “Walk and Talks” instead of static meetings so that everyone is getting exercise and releasing endorphins throughout the day.

Lastly, business owners should not forget to take care of themselves. It is a cliché for a reason, but making sure that oxygen mask is put on first is so essential given the enormous pressures at the moment. So it is more important than ever for employers to think about their own stress container to help keep them resilient and in the right frame of mind to support their workforce.