

# MONITOR MENTAL HEALTH

**THERE ARE A NUMBER OF THINGS EMPLOYERS IN THE BREWING INDUSTRY COULD BE DOING RIGHT NOW TO IMMEDIATELY HELP SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THEIR WORKFORCES. HERE DANIEL STANDER, EMPLOYMENT LAWYER AT VEDDER PRICE LLP, PRESENTS A FEW, NON-EXHAUSTIVE, IDEAS.**

COMMENT

**M**ental Health Awareness Week has just taken place earlier this month. This year's theme is "nature" –

something that will no doubt chime with many in the brewing industry.

The process of brewing is, after all, all about harnessing natural processes in order to make the most of the resources with which we have been provided.

This year, of course, many may have a new found appreciation for nature and for the world around them.

With the weather improving, and outdoor hospitality having already opened up on 12th April, communities across the UK are taking the opportunity to get out there and to enjoy a drink with those closest to them after a long winter spent at home.

## VALUE MENTAL HEALTH

Research indicates that, on average, 1 in 4 people experience a mental health issue in the course of a year. Over the course of our lives, it is highly likely that we will either develop mental ill-health ourselves or know someone who does.

In employment terms, mental ill-health is responsible for 72 million working days lost, costing employers £34.9 billion each year.

During 2018/2019, stress, depression or anxiety were responsible for 44% of all cases of work-related ill health and 54% of all working days lost due to health issues.

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the scale of the mental ill-health crisis, with the number of employees experiencing symptoms of ill-mental health increasing by 33% in 2020.

Employers in the brewing industry will be acutely aware of the additional mental health challenges that Covid-19 has posed.

With the stresses of isolation, job security, bereavement, and a great many other concerns, it is important to appreciate that employees who are experiencing a developing mental health issue or a worsening of an existing condition will not always approach their employer with the problem neatly labelled.

And, if they reach out, not all businesses will know how to respond. The line between stress and a clinical mental health condition can be difficult to establish.

It is vital for employers to understand and appreciate the difference between the "normal" stresses that everyone goes through and lives with, and damaging stress that can lead to more serious and long-lasting conditions and to take action when signs of the latter present themselves.

There are a number of things employers in the brewing industry could be doing right now to immediately help support the mental health of their workforces. Here are a few, non-exhaustive, ideas: No matter how big, or small, the business, or how far along the business may be with its wellbeing strategy, it is important that the fundamentals are not taken for granted.

Although society has made great strides in recent years, it is still the case that talking about mental health does not come naturally to some or is something they are not comfortable with, mental health issues often being perceived differently to physical issues.

Start by better acquainting employees with mental health and wellbeing as a concept. Simply engaging with employees at this fundamental level is often the first step in working to strip away stigma and start to nurture a more open culture.

This can mean running lunchtime

sessions or inviting colleagues or external speakers into the workplace to get staff talking about mental health. It can also coincide with signing up to external initiatives such as "Time to Change" or "My Whole Self."

By involving senior leadership in disseminating these messages, and by leading from the top, employees can be more confident that they will not be thought less of, or treated unfavourably, for speaking up.

## INVEST IN TRAINING

In addition to leadership, managers have a similarly key role to play. Managers are often the conduit between the employee and the business, and it is crucial that managers are equipped with the skills not only to pre-emptively reduce the risk of issues arising (such as training on how to avoid workforce burnout) but to be able to effectively spot signs and symptoms of someone struggling where an issue does occur, and to approach any such issues with empathy.

Clearly, this is an area which must be approached with caution given the potential legal risks of getting it wrong when engaging in difficult and sensitive conversations. Employers who are serious about scaling up their mental health and wellbeing strategy should flag training their managers in the art of effective, non-judgmental communication as a high priority issue.

To set the right tone for the business, and create opportunities for employees to feel more comfortable talking about mental health, it is worth considering what internal and external supports are available, and, work to signpost these (regularly and not just during Mental Health Awareness Week!).

Internal supports are your mental health

first aiders (or "champions") – do people know who they are and how they can be approached? Are the champions aware of any policies they should be referring to as they carry out their role?

Are there supports in place to assist and protect the champions' own mental health? If you have an Employee Assistance Programme, is this actively being utilised by the workforce, and if not, why not?

The charity Mind and Mental Health First Aid England both provide access to resources (many of which are free of charge) which can be used to help raise awareness and, ultimately, strip away stigma and discrimination which unfortunately still works to undermine effective communication around mental health.

The government's Covid-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan refers to the "Hub of Hope" database which combines grassroots and national mental health services in one place, including contact details for urgent mental health helplines.

The database, which can be downloaded as an app, helps individuals find the nearest source of support for any mental health issue, from depression and anxiety to post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal thoughts, as well as providing a 'talk now' button connecting users directly to the Samaritans.

## GET CREATIVE

In addition to the tried and tested measures set out above, 2020/21 has seen an increasing trend in organisations seeking creative solutions to show their workforces that they "get it" regarding wellbeing. A raft of household names, including the likes of Brewdog, Channel 4, LinkedIn, Kelloggs, Timpsons and



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others have all made news by embracing company "wellness days," no-meeting days, better access to mental health resources, care packages, encouraging regular breaks or the taking of time off to switch off from work.

These initiatives have worked to foster a feel-good atmosphere at their respective companies.

The diversity of the initiatives above demonstrates that there is no one size fits all approach that need be adopted.

Instead, with communication, empathy and understanding playing just as important a role at the agenda-setting level as they do in one-on-one conversation, employers stand to reap the rewards of engaging with their staff and learning which measures would make a real difference in the context of their business.