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**INTERACTION**

# THE RISING IMPORTANCE OF WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

Interaction Opinion

In recent years, the conversation surrounding mental health and wellbeing as a whole has gained significant traction within conversation, media and importantly, the workplace. Mental health is slowly becoming normalised – although, there is a long way to go. There is an unspoken rule within workplaces that if you are physically sick, or break a leg, you take time off to recover (until working from home became an option but that's a conversation for another day...). However, the same rule doesn't necessarily apply for mental health.

The impact of the workplace upon mental health is becoming increasingly apparent, shifting to be a central concern for employers, employees, and society. Mental health and wellbeing as concepts are closely intertwined – mental health refers to the cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing of an individual (or group of individuals). Conversely, wellbeing is a holistic, overall state that encompasses all aspects of 'being'.

Research shows that nearly 1 in 5 people experience poor mental health each year, and nearly 2 in 5 people experience poor mental health across their lifetime. This has significant implications beyond the individual – a majority of people spend a third of their lives at work, if not more. Poor mental health can significantly impact organisational performance, productivity, quality of output, and overall expenditure. According to the Australian Government Productivity Commission, poor mental health has a \$12.2 to 22.5 billion impact on the Australian economy per year.

The Covid-19 pandemic wrought profound and unprecedented changes in our social and working environments. The implementation of lockdowns, social distancing measures, prolonged periods of isolation, coupled with income loss, job insecurity, and an uncertain future, had a profound impact on mental health. From March 2020 onwards, prevalence of anxiety and depression increased and, in some countries, even doubled. The pandemic not only exposed the prevalence of mental health issues but also catalysed a significant shift in raising awareness and improving access to available services. This transformation was particularly evident in the workplace, compelling organisations to confront mental health challenges head-on. As we continue to emerge from the remaining impacts of the pandemic and resume our work routines, a noticeable transformation is underway regarding the integration of discussions about mental health within our workplace culture. The COVID-19 crisis has prompted numerous employers to adopt a more proactive stance in championing the mental well-being of their workforce, including offering flexible working arrangements, encouraging mental health leave and fostering a safe and positive working environment.

A mentally healthy workplace is one where employees feel respected, supported, and boasts a culture of open and reflective communication. Mentally healthy work and a supportive workplace culture supports employees to feel more engaged, more committed and productive, protects against risks to mental health and helps to contribute to their overall sense of wellbeing. These positive benefits have a cascading effect into life outside the workplace. On the other side of the relationship – for businesses, mentally healthy work improves quality, productivity, efficiency, lowers absenteeism, increases employee morale, and enhances talent retention. Companies that invest in mental health initiatives often see an increased return on investment.

But how can organisations build a supportive workplace culture to foster the mental health and wellbeing of their employees? Considerations may include the working environment and the way the organisation is structured and may include clarity around the demands of your role and having the skills and resources to perform, receiving fair treatment and support, work is recognised, rewarded and celebrated (or not), the communication of major change, and alignment with personal values and sense of purpose. The key to longlasting, pervasive change in the workplace culture space around mental health may include implementing mental health initiatives and programs to directly support employees including access to employee assistance programs (EAPs), mental health training and education programs, stress reduction workshops, and holistic wellness initiatives.

There are now multiple legal and ethical obligations that organisations face regarding employee mental health. Governments and regulatory bodies have introduced measures to protect the mental and physical wellbeing of employees. Employers should be aware of the following key areas:

- Workplace health and safety (WHS) laws to ensure the work environment and activities are reasonably safe and includes measures to manage risks to both physical and mental health.
- Disability discrimination laws protect people with disabilities (including mental health conditions) against discrimination.

- The Fair Work Act protects employees against action from an employer for discriminatory reasons.

The rising importance of workplace mental health is a reflection of a wider societal shift – changing attitudes, increased awareness, and the recognition that a mentally healthy workforce is essential for organisational success. Investing in workplace mental health and the wellbeing of your employees is not just a moral imperative, but is also a strategic advantage and an investment in the future of your organisation. There are so many resources out there to support you in creating your supportive and mentally healthy workplace culture. Interaction can help – contact us about our mental health first aid course, and the programs we offer to support wellbeing.