Addressing Mental Health in the Workplace

Mental health at work is an increasingly important topic in the modern world. Decent work positively impacts mental health, offering individuals a sense of purpose, community, and financial stability. However, poor working conditions, such as excessive workloads, discrimination, job insecurity, and inadequate support, can severely harm mental health. With approximately 15% of the global workforce affected by mental health conditions and an estimated 12 billion working days lost annually due to depression and anxiety, it's essential to take meaningful actions to improve mental health at work.

Risks to Mental Health in the Workplace

Workplaces can either nurture or harm mental health, depending on their structure and culture. Many factors contribute to mental health risks at work, including excessive workloads, long and inflexible hours, lack of control over tasks, and poor physical working conditions. When employees feel under-skilled or that their skills are under-used, their mental health can suffer. Additionally, negative organisational cultures that allow for bullying, harassment, or discrimination based on race, gender, or other identities can exacerbate mental health issues.

Certain jobs carry inherent risks to mental health. Health workers, emergency responders, and humanitarian workers often face higher exposure to stressful or traumatic events. Workers in the informal economy, including more than half the global workforce, face even greater risks due to a lack of regulatory protection, unsafe working conditions, and little to no access to financial or social safety nets. These environments amplify psychosocial risks, contributing to mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and stress.

Promoting Mental Health in the Workplace

Creating work environments that promote mental health involves proactive measures to protect employees. Organisational interventions that target working conditions can help reduce psychosocial risks. For example, providing flexible working hours, clear job roles, and frameworks to address violence and harassment at work can make a substantial difference. Ensuring managers are trained in recognising mental health issues and equipped with communication and support skills is essential to fostering a mentally healthy workplace.

Moreover, training workers in mental health awareness can reduce stigma and create an environment where employees feel more comfortable discussing mental health concerns. Encouraging individual interventions such as stress management techniques and opportunities for physical activity also plays a crucial role in maintaining good mental health. Employees who have access to mental health support are more likely to engage in their work and experience fewer negative mental health symptoms.

Supporting Employees with Mental Health Conditions

Employees living with mental health conditions have the right to work in environments that accommodate their needs and support their success. Creating an inclusive and supportive workplace requires reasonable accommodations, such as flexible working hours, workload adjustments, or time off for mental health appointments. Return-to-work programmes can further support employees absent due to mental health challenges by combining clinical care with work-directed adjustments to ease the transition back into the workforce.

For those with severe mental health conditions, supported employment initiatives provide a pathway to maintaining their place in the workforce. These programmes offer ongoing mental health and vocational support, ensuring employees with mental health challenges can sustain employment and thrive. By investing in inclusive work environments, employers improve their employees' mental well-being and enhance overall productivity and retention.

Mental health at work is a crucial issue affecting both employees and employers. Creating a mentally healthy work environment benefits everyone by improving employee well-being, increasing productivity, and reducing the global economic costs of mental health-related absenteeism. Addressing the risks to mental health at work through organisational interventions, training, and support for employees with mental health conditions is essential for fostering an inclusive and productive workforce. Employers, governments, and workers' organisations must collaborate to create environments that protect, promote, and support mental health, ensuring that all workers can participate in work fully and fairly. By doing so, we can help individuals thrive both in and out of the workplace.

Source: World Health Organisation

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Published on : Tue, 15 Oct 2024