Mental ill-health: a hidden problem that undermines British businesses

'Employees need to be more open about mental health issues at work', says Louise Aston.

Many people hide issues of mental health at work for fear of reputational damage. Many do not know how to spot the warning signs that they may need help. This means issues that could easily be managed take hold. Businesses are not reporting on mental health and many are not openly discussing it, which is exacerbating the problem.

BITC Workwell research on the FTSE 100 found that one of the firms publicly report on employee psychological health and only six revealed that staff have access to an employee assistance programme (EAP).

A lot of businesses may have processes in place to manage mental ill-health when it occurs but much of this is reactive and they are not talking about it. It suggests that employees don't know what to do if they have concerns and neither do their managers.

The belief at BITC, and among our Workwell Practitioner team, is that a more open dialogue on mental health will lead to a greater prevention, greater staff engagement and more competitive businesses.

However, people won't feel confident to voice concerns unless they know they will be supported. This cultural shift must be led from the top. Leaders must talk openly about the issues and foster a collaborative approach to resilience, while better communicating what the company is doing to promote mental wellbeing.

Our research also noted that the transparent human capital management reporting affects investor decisions. If investors started asking tougher questions about how mental well-being is managed then employers would be compelled to be more transparent.

A cultural shift at the top will influence how middle managers respond but organisations need to train managers to help them act appropriately when issues occur. The research reinforced the view that it is in the interests of managers to ensure everyone is engaged and sometimes the only action required is listening, signposting to the right help and then monitoring.

Transparency will also help reveal that many issues are not rooted in the workplace but are caused by stresses at home. However, when a heavy workload is the problem it doesn't always have to be a resource issue, it could be solved by training and planning.

But some workers cope with pressure better than others and it is up to the employee to talk to their employer about what role is right for them.

Professional services firm Deloitte has a network of people who act as mental health champions.

Employees can talk to them about issues of concern and staff know there is a clear map for what will happen next. A lack of this framework in other organisations may be a barrier to having the confidence to talk.

The economic climate is exacerbating the conspiracy of silence as people worry about job security and feel that flagging concerns about stress or mental well-being will damage their prospects. Employees want reassurances, they also want leaders to demonstrate less stressful ways of working, such as being more visible in the cafeteria or leaving on time.
There is also an element of personal responsibility for workers to spot their own warning signs and flag them, which can be a simple as small changes in general behaviour, performance or sleep patterns.

It can often be hard to take the first step and admit you have concerns – people need more examples of those going through the same process. There are more celebrities talking out about these issues now, perhaps because they face fewer perceived professional consequences. We need more business leaders to discuss this openly, as has been seen recently with a small number of MP's including John Woodcock. Such transparency is helping to debunk the myths that surround people affected by these issues, particularly around their effectiveness.

Everyone has a role to play in breaking the culture of silence. Silence is stifling UK businesses, the way to break that is by talking and the time is now.

Louise Aston