





WHEN Prince William appeared at the Davos World Economic Forum in January, he had an appeal to make: to end mental health stigma. The emphasis was not simply on wider society to achieve this, but also on employers, who, he suggested, should be providing more support when it came to the mental health of their staff.

'It should be so much easier to go to HR and talk about it,' he told the crowd in Switzerland, before adding that change needed to come from the top. John Flint, chief executive at HSBC, who appeared on the same panel, agreed, saying: 'There's a profound difference between when I'm feeling my best and when I'm not.'

Flint is not alone. Research from [Warwick University](#) found that employees are 12 per cent more productive when they feel well while the OECD claims that mental ill health costs the UK economy more than £94 billion every year, due to lost productivity, treatment and social care costs.

'It's good practice not just on a personal level but a professional level to invest in mental health awareness and workplace wellbeing,' says Lucy Donoughue, head of content and communications at Memiah, an organisation grown by two sisters who wanted to create a counselling directory for those seeking trusted and qualified mental health support. 'If you think that one in four of us will have a mental health challenge in our lives, aside from other challenges like bereavement or changing relationships, it doesn't make sense not to look after people's wellbeing as well as their performance.'

The Health and Safety Executive, the UK Government agency responsible for the encouragement and regulation of workplace welfare, estimates that 26.8 million working days were lost due to work-related ill health in the period 2017/2018, of which 15.4 million related to stress, depression or anxiety.

It is an issue that Thames Water is already addressing. While injury prevention and safety have been on the Board's agenda for many years, this has now been joined by health and wellbeing.

Karl Simons, chief health, safety and security officer at Thames Water, explains: 'Businesses can do a lot for prevention. Often it's the working environment that causes more problems than actual disability.' The company believes that, if an employee is off work for something Thames Water could have done better, it needs to learn from this and act to prevent a recurrence.

'We do this very well with safety,' adds Simons. 'Now we have to do this very well with health, both mental and physical. Whether it is stress, anxiety or depression, if you're unable to come into work because of a situation we've created, that is unacceptable.'

As with employees that suffer physical injury at work, there is an investigation into any mental health-related incident, followed by an executive review, but this is not about assigning blame. Simons is adamant that the processes are in place so that

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CorpComms | March/April 2019

31

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

the company can learn and improve the support offered. He adds: 'The local team will have already implemented the right steps, and line managers generally want to do the right thing.'

The strategy appears to be working: Thames Water has experienced a 78 per cent reduction in work-related illness absences as a result of its efforts. But initiatives, such as those by Thames Water, which has also organised a health and wellbeing week for the past six years, are voluntary. Donoughue believes there needs to be a more consistent and coherent approach for businesses. 'I think it's really important that there is a wellbeing charter in the workplace. Organisations like [mental health charity] Time to Change do these actually, they do a pledge for employers, where they can set out what they are going to do,' she says.

The Time to Change Employer Pledge, which has been signed by more than 1,000 employers, including Eurostar, insurance group Ageas, Lindt chocolatiers and, most recently, The Telegraph, requires companies to develop and submit action plans designed to get their employees talking about mental health. These are reviewed by the charity and, sometimes after proposed amendments, approved. The company then receives a Pledge Board from Time to Change, which is signed by a senior executive, usually in front of employees, to demonstrate commitment.

Most pledges include the provision of mental health first aiders in the workplace, something which is not currently a requirement in the UK. Natasha Devon, who co-created the campaign *Where's Your Head At?* last year, delivered a petition with more than 200,000 signatures to 10 Downing Street, prompting a parliamentary debate in January on

legislative change around mental health first aid in the workplace. More than 60 MPs backed a motion to introduce legislation putting physical and mental first aid on an equal footing, with updated First Aid regulations. Despite the 'ayes' winning the debate, there is a long way to go before it is written into law.

Thames Water already has mental health first aiders on its workforce. It ensures this mental health support network is visible so that employees know where to turn to for help, whilst also providing educational videos for line managers to allow consistency in the support that is given. A specialist virtual reality programme, which allows training groups of between 12 to 15 people to be immersed simultaneously, is also offered. 'For every one safety intervention, we have five mental health interventions,' says Simons. 'We now have 400 mental health first aiders built through the company. The appetite is very real and our people are receptive.'

Supporters claim that mental health first aid training also helps people to identify colleagues who may be going through a depressive episode, including noticing the signs of suicidal feelings and psychosis. But it also helps employees understand what support they can offer, and the resources available to them.

'It helps people to understand where they can help, what they can signpost people towards and also the boundaries of helping someone in the workplace,' asserts Donoughue. 'It just gives that confidence to be able to chat to someone if you think they're not doing very well, and to be able to support them on a daily basis but know where you can refer them on to.'

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With anything like this, the scariest thing is *What if I say something wrong?* It gives people the confidence to have that conversation without being a trained counsellor or without knowing everything about mental health.

Unsurprisingly, mental health support is built into the fabric of Memiah. 'I work in an environment where mental health and wellbeing are what we do,' says Donoghue. 'It's important that we practice what we publish, and we really do. We have a Time to Change pledge. I'd say around 90 per cent of our staff have had mental health first aid training. We have a mental health first aid panel. On the wall in the kitchen, there's a list of people who are mental health first aid trained, so people know who they can talk to. We have a wellness group and meditation sessions. We do volunteering, which is good because we can connect with each other outside the workplace, but also do something that's good for everyone else.'

The boundary between 'inside' and 'outside' the workplace is especially blurry when it comes to mental health. 'Wellbeing is constantly in flux. It's not something we can keep on a level because we always have things outside of work that will impact how we feel inside of work,' explains Donoghue. 'It's about making the environment at work one where people can come in and feel comfortable to do their job, but also to be honest and open about what's happening in the rest of their life so they can do their job.'

Simons agrees: 'The separation of work and life doesn't work. I still have a family when I come into work every day, you don't leave everything at the door. Companies need to recognise the value of making sure your employees feel supported.'

'We spend more times with each other than we do our partners, so it's really important that our work environment is a good one because it is such a big part of most people's lives now,' adds Donoghue.

Memiah is currently examining alternative working practices to reduce stress levels. Director Paul Maunders has launched a trial, where staff are working a traditional five days a week shift for three months before switching to a four day week for the following three months. Employees' cortisol levels will be monitored to ensure that the research is solid and rooted in fact. They will also fill out questionnaires throughout the period. Donoghue says: 'We hope to share that research afterwards with other companies to show them, hopefully, that a

four-day week can be as productive and less stressful for teams.'

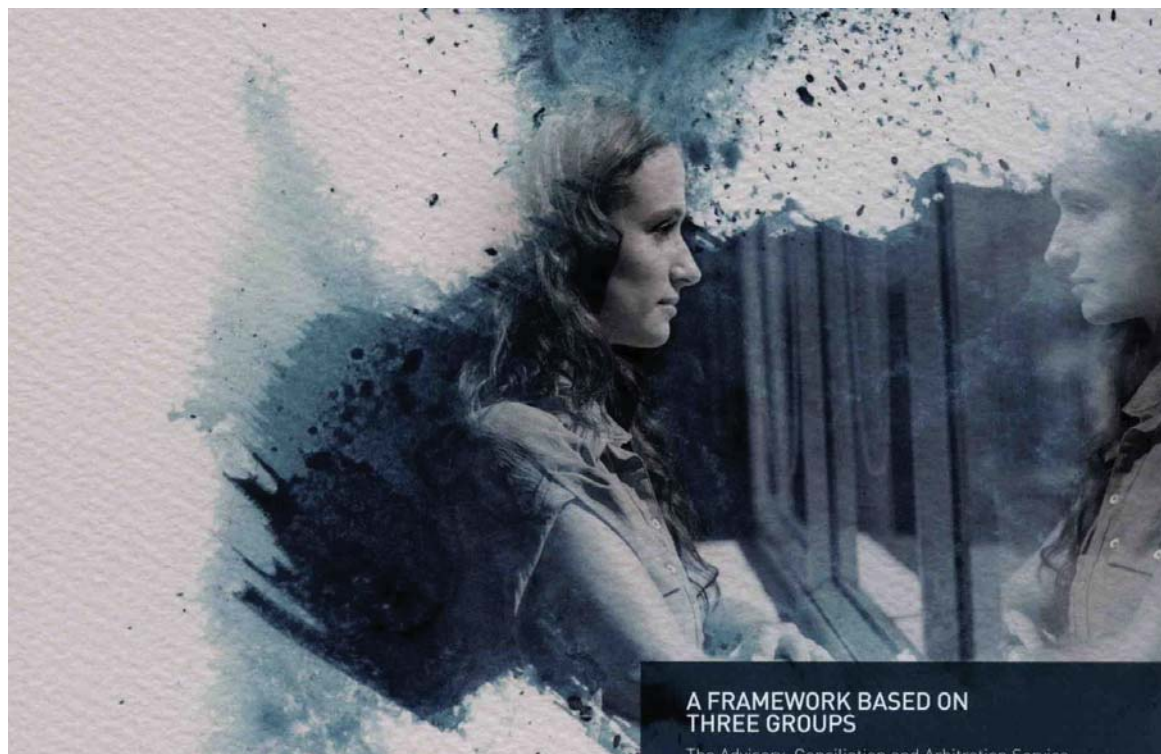
At healthcare providers Bupa, the importance of wellbeing has always been clear. 'Employee health and wellbeing is a key driver of engagement,' says Mairi Doyle, internal communications and wellbeing director. 'When people feel supported to be at their physical and mental best, everyone wins. At Bupa we take a holistic approach for our own people, focusing on developing healthier bodies, supporting healthier minds, creating healthier cultures and building healthier workplaces.'

'There is a wealth of evidence that a happy employee equals a productive employee and the cynic may argue that, if that were not the case and the bottom line wasn't impacted, large corporates would not invest in promoting wellbeing,' says Nick Andrews, business development director at internal communications specialists Sequel Group, which works with Bupa on its internal wellbeing campaigns. 'These cynics may have a point but there are an increasing number of more purpose-led organisations who genuinely want to promote wellbeing at work and have a content workforce who act as ambassadors for their organisation.'

While Thames Water, Bupa and Memiah are ahead of the curve in their approach to promote staff mental health, the tide is certainly turning as more businesses seek to improve the support they offer. 'I think since 2017 there's been a lot more discussion about mental health,' says Donoghue. The *Heads Together* campaign around the London marathon, (journalist) Bryony Gordon's podcast with Prince Harry, they all started a bigger conversation around mental health and the impact of poor mental health in the workplace, not just on individuals but on days in the office and the stress it can put on a workplace generally.'

'Wellbeing is certainly something which our clients – large corporates – are talking about more than ever before,' continues Andrews. 'We've seen a particular focus on mental wellbeing in the last year or so, and have produced a number of campaigns to highlight the issue using print, digital and film to

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communicate the key messages. The campaigns we are producing for the likes of Bupa, for example, are focused on encouraging employees to talk about their wellbeing and raise awareness of the initiatives on offer. Employers are increasingly recognising that as part of providing a great employee experience, they need to ensure their people are fulfilled at work and that there are mechanisms and support in place to combat the everyday stresses of corporate life.

'It's a wider societal challenge,' says Simons. 'Celebrities are speaking more openly about mental health, which has an impact on society, which in turn has an impact on business. You have to equip management to deal with these conversations when they arise.'


But for companies taking their first steps towards providing mental health support for employees, Simons advises 'start realistically'. He adds: 'Go to a recognised charity or organisation, such as Time to Change or Mind. Think of it as laying the carpet before you put the furniture in. They are a great source of information and knowledge.'

Donoghue agrees, adding that mental health awareness days are a good place to start, but initiatives must expand beyond that to create meaningful change. 'The first thing I would say is use awareness days but don't rely on them. Make sure there is always information about mental

A FRAMEWORK BASED ON THREE GROUPS

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), a UK public body whose purpose is to improve working life through supporting good relationships between employers and employees, has developed a bespoke framework to act as an *aide-memoire* for organisations looking to promote positive mental health. Its aim is to create workplaces where people can be productive and feel supported.

There are three important factors for achieving the 'shared goal' of positive wellbeing and productive workplaces:



- EMPLOYERS** should be visibly committed to positive mental health
- MANAGERS** should be informed and open to conversations with their staff
- INDIVIDUALS** should be self-aware and ask for help when needed

POSITIVE WELLBEING AND PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACES

34

CorpComms | March/April 2019



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health around; make it very easy for people to have that conversation,' she says. 'Make sure you talk about physical and mental health on a par basically. Acknowledge that everyone has mental health but do have those opportunities to talk about it. Normalise the conversation about wellbeing and mental health and make sure that's not just with the HR department.'

But it is also important to connect with colleagues who might feel unable to speak up. 'It is vitally important in any organisation that leaders listen to the silent voice of the majority not solely the vocal minority,' says Simons. Thames Water conducts an annual *Hear for You* employee survey, which is completed by about 80 per cent of staff. For the past four years, the statement *Thames Water takes health and safety seriously* has been the highest scoring. 'This means the silent majority are telling me we are doing the right things, so it fuels our appetite to continue the way we are going,' he adds.

With the World Health Organisation describing stress as 'the health epidemic of the 21st century', and countless surveys indicating the financial loss to companies from mental health-related absences, Thames Water could soon find other major businesses following its lead and placing mental health wellness on a parity with physical health. **CC**

For employers, it is about looking at the big picture, fighting stigma and creating better awareness and work environment,' explains Adrian Wakeling, senior policy advisor at ACAS. 'They are largely responsible for looking at causes of stress; [wellbeing] is not just a free bowl of fruit. We recommend that but it has to be embedded in a wider strategy. It is also about understanding how personal issues can affect working life. 'Managers provide a direct interface,' he continues. 'They are having the difficult conversations. If somebody discloses an issue, managers can help. They need build that empathy and dialogue to help that disclosure.' Then there is the individual. Wakeling notes that managers and employers can only help if there is a degree of self-awareness from the employee. It is important that they feel comfortable to discuss their mental health, but they need to say the words themselves. 'It can't just be down to the employer and manager,' he says. 'People know their own mental health better and know their own triggers. They need to help themselves as much as they can.' ACAS has altered the training it offers in this area in keeping with the changing research and techniques towards looking after mental health in general. The framework has been developed in response to 'an upward spiral of demand' from employers, and Wakeling notes that mental health is a subject area that is likely to continue to grow.

THE FRAMEWORK

EMPLOYERS
Lead and embed a wellbeing strategy
Reduce stigma
Tackle the causes of workplace stress
Support and train managers
Understand the impact personal issues can have on mental well being

MANAGERS
Build rapport with staff
Plan work with people in mind
Have confidence and knowledge in managing mental health
Handle difficult conversations effectively
Support work-life balance

INDIVIDUALS
Look after their own wellbeing
Use positive coping strategies
Identify personal stress triggers
Engage with managers
Take notice and support colleagues

CorpComms | March/April 2019 35