

Promoting mental wellbeing through productive and healthy working conditions: guidance for employers in small and medium businesses

Take a strategic approach

- Aim to promote the mental wellbeing of all employees, working in partnership with them. Integrate mental wellbeing into all policies and practices concerned with managing people.
- Promote a culture of participation, equality and fairness based on open communication and inclusion.
- Create an understanding of mental wellbeing and reduce the potential for discrimination and stigma related to mental health problems.
- Ensure processes for job design, selection, recruitment, training, development and appraisal promote mental wellbeing and reduce discrimination. Employees should have the skills and support to meet the demands of a job that is worthwhile and offers opportunities for development and progression. Employees should be fully supported throughout organisational change and situations of uncertainty.
- Ensure employees who might be exposed to stress (such as part-time, shift and migrant workers) are included in approaches for promoting mental wellbeing.

Owners and managers

Promote mental wellbeing of employees through supportive leadership style and management practices:

- Adopt a management style that encourages participation, delegation, constructive feedback, mentoring and coaching.
- Ensure that policies for the recruitment and development of managers encompass and promote these skills.
- Motivate employees and provide them with the training and support they need to develop their performance and job satisfaction.
- Increase understanding of how management style and practices can help to promote the mental wellbeing of employees and keep their stress to a minimum.
- Identify and respond with sensitivity to employees' emotional concerns, and symptoms of mental health problems.
- Understand when it is necessary to refer an employee to occupational health services or other sources of help.

Consider a competency framework developed by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the Health and Safety Executive and Investors in People as a tool for management development.

Flexible working

- Consider patterns of flexible working appropriate to work context.
- If reasonably practical, provide employees with opportunities for flexible working according to their needs and aspirations. Options include part-time working, home-working, job-sharing and flexitime.
- Seek to accommodate appropriate requests from employees for flexible working and ensure consistency and fairness in processing applications.

Opportunities and risk

- Have systems for assessing and monitoring the mental wellbeing of employees so that areas for improvement can be identified and risks addressed. Consider using employee attitude surveys, and information about absence rates and staff turnover, and investment in training. Provide feedback and open communication.
- Make employees aware of their legal entitlements regarding quality of work and working conditions, and their responsibilities for looking after their mental wellbeing.
- Use the Health and Safety Executive management standards for work-related stress.
- Respond to the needs of employees who are at risk of work-related stress or experiencing mental health problems. Manage absence to identify stress early. Offer support, for example, counselling or stress management training.
- Consider seeking support from organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses and Chambers of Commerce.

Why work is important to employees' mental wellbeing

Work is important for mental wellbeing. It can promote self-esteem and identity, a sense of fulfilment and opportunities for social interaction, as well as being a source of income.

Work can also have negative effects on mental health, particularly as stress. Stress is not a medical condition, but prolonged stress is linked to conditions including anxiety and depression, heart disease, back pain and headaches.

Working environments that put high demands on a person without giving sufficient control and support pose risks for mental wellbeing. Factors that lead to stress include a perceived imbalance between the effort and the rewards of the job, a sense of injustice in management processes, and physical factors such as material hazards, noise, dust and dirt.

Why employees' mental wellbeing is important for productivity and performance

Promoting the mental wellbeing of employees can have economic benefits by improving staff retention, productivity and performance, and reducing absenteeism.

The costs associated with employees' mental health problems are significant in terms of lost productivity because of absence and early retirement, and increased staff turnover. Impaired work efficiency for people with mental health problems who are working may be even more costly.

Supporting micro, small and medium-sized businesses

The guidance also calls for primary care trusts, primary care services and occupational health services, those working in government, voluntary, charitable and business sectors on national initiatives in this area and the Federation of Small Businesses to:

- Offer advice and support and services. This may include access to occupational health services (including counselling support and stress management training).
- Establish mechanisms for providing support and advice, such as risk assessment tools, human resources management and management training and development.

NICE develops public health guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention of ill health. This leaflet is a summary of NICE's guidance on promoting mental wellbeing at work. You can find more information about this guidance, and other support to help you implement it in your workplace, on the NICE website at www.nice.org.uk/ph22

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