What does an Exemplar Employer look like in relation to supporting people with mental health problems and mentally healthy workplaces?

Supporting Paper to Walking the Talk: Exemplar Employers in the Public Sector, April 2009

Background

In this work we will consider mental health in its widest sense, defining it as how we think and feel and acknowledging that it is an asset which we all own and need to protect. However, mental ill health will affect one in four people in Scotland impacting on every sphere of their lives, including their employment. The European Union Consensus group found that at any one time between one in five and one in six workers may be affected by mental health problems.

Despite this evidence, the extent of mental health problems in the workplace is largely unrecognised. A survey of 550 senior managers by Shaw Trust found that approximately two thirds of employers (71%) thought as few as 1 in 20, or less, employees might have a mental health problem, and 45% of these thought none of their employees would experience a mental health problem during their working life (Shaw Trust, 2006). These relatively low figures are likely to be related to the stigma of mental illness, which makes the disclosure of a mental health problem difficult.

The fear of stigma is well founded and is illustrated by the fact that a significant percentage of employers have admitted that they would not employ someone with a mental illness: The Mental Health Foundation found 38% of employers would not knowingly employ someone with a mental health problem and a third believed that people with a mental health problem are less reliable than other employees.

Therefore, it is not surprising that many people who have experienced mental health problems face discrimination and lack opportunities in the workplace. One study suggests 40% of people who have experienced mental health problems were denied employment as a result of a history of mental illness (NHS Confederation).
**Why you should strive to promote good mental health at work**

With 10 million workdays a year being lost as a result of stress, depression and anxiety, it is in the interest of employers, as well as individuals and society as a whole, to address the issue of supporting people with mental health problems and mentally healthy workplaces.

Poor mental health at work negatively affects the productivity and profitability of businesses. Mental health problems account for 40% of all days lost through sickness absence (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2008) and the average time off for mental illness is 21 days at a time, and a high proportion of the longer term absences are due to mental health problems (RCP, 2008).

The NHS Confederation estimates that it costs employers £9bn per year in salaries alone through not addressing mental health problems in the workplace. Long term absences can lead to long term disability claims and retirement for medical reasons which is expensive for employers and society. Mental health problems increase the risk of people leaving the workplace, with mental illness overtaking musculoskeletal problems as the leading cause of health related early retirement (RCP, 2008).

As well as increasing absence and staff turnover, mental health problems have a negative effect on people’s productivity at work and are a major cause of *presenteeism*. It is increasingly being shown that *presenteeism* decreases output and productivity at work more than actual absence.

Presenteeism: “reduced on-the-job worker productivity” – where a worker attends work but is working at a lower level of productivity (Burton et al)

It has been estimated that mental health problems annually cost UK employers:
- £335 per person because of absenteeism
- £605 per person because of presenteeism
- £95 per person because of staff turnover.

This is a total of £1,035 a year for every employee in the workforce (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2008).

As well as the business case, there are substantial additional arguments for paying attention to mental health and wellbeing at work. Promoting a mentally healthy workplace implies promoting a positive culture of partnership and openness, which has benefits for everyone. Creating a mentally healthy workplace makes your workplace more attractive to high calibre staff and it increases your reputation as an employer of choice.

Mentally healthy workplaces are being proven to have positive effects on productivity. For example BT’s mental health programme of prevention, promotion and support at work has led to reductions in sickness absence of 30% and retirement related to mental health problems of 80%.
Mentally healthy workplaces also encourage respect for diversity and support the employment of people who may have been previously excluded from the workplace, including people with lived experience of mental health problems. The importance of this to individuals, workplaces and the economy has recently been highlighted as the links between better health and work have been evidenced and promoted by the UK and Scottish Governments (Wadell et al, 2006).

Currently people with enduring mental health problems experience great inequalities in employment – only 16% of people of working age are employed compared with 43% of all disabled people of working age (Office for Disability Issues, 2008). Developing an awareness of mental health problems at work and a mentally healthy workplace will help change this situation and bring the variety of skills and experiences of people with mental health problems back into the workplace. Recent evidence suggests that workplaces that employ people with mental health problems have a positive experience, in 85% of cases (RCP, 2008).

**What is an exemplar employer for encouraging people with mental health problems into work?**

Being an exemplar employer means recognising the important role work plays on people’s general mental wellbeing:

"Work provides social identity and status; social contacts and support; a means of structuring and occupying time; activity and involvement and a sense of personal achievement...work tells us who we are and enables us to tell others who we are...The capacity to work is seen by many who experience mental health difficulties as a yardstick of recovery...Equally, returning to work significantly reduces the need to use mental health services.” (NHS Confederation, p8)

Being an exemplar employer includes developing culture, policy and practice that encourage people with mental health problems into work. Being an exemplar employer means recognising that people with lived experience of mental health problems can be valued employees and bring valuable experience to the job. Integrating people with lived experience of mental health problems into the workforce not only helps their own mental health and can contribute to the organisation, but the process can also help tackle the stigma surrounding mental health problems:

"Research tells us that the stigma of mental ill health and discriminatory attitudes are most effectively challenged when people with direct experience of mental health problems work side by side on an equal basis with others. Nothing else will change the ‘them and us’ culture so effectively as enabling service users to work as equals with other NHS staff.” (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2006)
Becoming a mentally healthy exemplar employer fits in with the Duty of Care enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act legislation. The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 (DDA) makes it “unlawful for an employer to discriminate against a disabled person” which includes someone who has, or has had, a mental health problem which had a “substantial” and “long-term” affect on their functioning. The DDA stipulates that employers should put in place “reasonable adjustments” in terms of advertising, interviewing and employment for employees or people returning to work.

Failure to comply with the DDA has led to compensation claims, and court rulings have included instructing employers to take action to promote positive mental health at work and tackle causes of stress.

Therefore, an exemplar employer encourages people with lived experience of mental health problems into work by welcoming and supporting all applications, facilitating the involvement of all candidates and making sure recruitment procedures comply with the DDA 2005. It does not discriminate against people defined as disabled, including people with mental health problems.

Some organisations use recruitment agencies to recruit new staff. An exemplar employer would ensure that any agencies they use apply these good practice recruitment procedures when advertising and recruiting new staff.

Support to individuals to return to work can also take the form of work placements which encourage people with lived experience of mental health problems into work.

**What is an exemplar employer for supporting people with mental health problems at work or returning to work?**

To be an exemplar employer, it is not enough just to encourage people with lived experience of mental health problems into work, it is also important to support them at work, or returning to work. To do this successfully it is important for an employer to understand their responsibilities.

This might be facilitated by the input of an occupational health specialist who can help an employer make reasonable adjustments for an employee coming into work, or can help spot concerning behaviour which may be a result of someone developing mental health problems. It is important for the employer to have sufficient understanding and knowledge to be able to intervene early to support an employee appropriately, and make reasonable adjustments (NHS Confederation).

An organisation can get outside help to inform this work, and training managers to recognise, support and manage mental health problems would aid early intervention and support employees’ mental health. It is imperative that when dealing with worrying behaviour in the workplace an exemplar employer deals with it in the same way as they would for any health problems affecting work performance. Being an
exemplar employer means not treating mental health problems differently (NHS Confederation).

Making reasonable adjustments to a post or working conditions are a vital part of being an exemplar employer and it means that employers are addressing an employee’s “need for employment and mental health support”. (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2006, p24). It also helps prevent an employee from losing their job by supporting them through their mental health problems. Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Phased return to work
- Flexible working hours/reduced hours
- Regular support and supervision
- Change/reduction to workload
- Change to working environment.

**What is an exemplar employer for promoting a mentally healthy workplace?**

A mentally healthy workplace is one that considers the wellbeing of all its employees. This includes supporting and encouraging the employment of people with mental health problems, but extends more widely.

An organisation is more likely to be able to support individuals with lived experience of mental illness returning to, or in work, if managers are aware of people’s mental health problems. Therefore, part of being an exemplar employer is creating a culture where employees feel comfortable enough to be honest about their mental health without the fear of reprisal. An exemplar employer increases awareness, so employees are better equipped to recognise and support people experiencing mental health problems, and to make reasonable adjustments.

A mentally healthy workplace creates a positive environment, manages stress, promotes work-life balance and creates policies that enable staff development for all staff. A mentally healthy workplace is a productive workplace. A workplace with this mentally healthy culture can be perceived of as an “exemplar employer”.

A lot of research has been done on what factors influence people’s mental health at work and it has been found that employees experience worse health at work if:

- Employment is insecure (creating stress and anxiety)
- Work is monotonous and repetitive
- Employees have little or no autonomy, control or discretion over tasks
- Employees do not feel they are being rewarded or praised for the effort they have put in or the goals they have achieved
- Employees feel that their work is not valued or they are not respected
- Employees feel there are not policy and procedures in place to ensure they are treated fairly
Employees do not feel supported.

In addition:

"Working conditions that can lead to mental health problems include a negative management style, low social support, poor communication and information, noise, work overload, time pressure, repetitive tasks, interpersonal conflict, job insecurity, lack of control and job autonomy and organisational changes. The provision of training and social support at work, and the development of empowerment can lead to improvements in competence, coping strategies, job satisfaction, work capacity and reduced stress." (IMHPA, 2005, p14)

These circumstances can negatively affect the culture of an organization and the mental health of employees. It has been argued that "In most organisations the extent of work related illness is, fundamentally, a management problem rather than a medical problem." (The Work Foundation, 2005, p22). Therefore, to promote a mentally healthy workplace and become an exemplar employer, the culture of an organisation needs to change and the causes of a mentally unhealthy workplace need to be addressed (The Work Foundation, 2005).

Part of changing the culture of an organisation and making it mentally healthy is about addressing how the organisation and its employees understand mental health problems. An exemplar employer can do this by:

- Raising employees awareness of their own mental health, and supporting them to maintain their own, and others’, mental health and wellbeing and mentally healthy workplaces
- Informing employees of what support is available to them within and outside of the organisation for promoting mental health and wellbeing, managing mental health problems and recovery
- Training people to recognise and be sensitive to mental health problems in others, being aware of dangers signs and the importance of seeking timely help (early intervention)
- Promoting good work:
  - job security
  - greater job control
  - regular job appraisals to promote a mentally healthy workplace (Foresight, 2008)
- Improving the work environment – job enrichment, lowering workload, improving role clarity and social relationships - through better communication, partnership working and conflict resolution
- Monitoring the mental health and wellbeing of staff through surveys and taking action on issues arising
- Monitoring the reasons for people being absent as a result of ill health and addressing underlying causes and issues in the workplace
- Creating a Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy and action plan for the promotion, prevention and support of mental health.
NHS – “Leading By Example”

Some organisations are already on their way to becoming exemplar employers. The NHS has called their action to become an exemplar employer “Leading by Example” which aims to “tackle discrimination and stigma, promote equality in their staff and provide the opportunities that people with mental health problems are now entitled to expect.” The NHS also recognise that including people who have/continue to experience mental health problems in the workforce “helps develop a culture that is more open and valuing, building staff confidence (job security) and the organisations ability to identify and support staff earlier, both of which can support work to prevent some cases of mental illness.” (NHS Confederation, p11). They encompass the concept of an exemplar employer in this statement:

"Having a mental health problem or having used mental health services becomes a desirable qualification for all posts. Who better to identify with and understand the mental health problems of others? The work environment becomes mentally and physically healthy. Staff who experience mental health problems are supported and retained in the workforce, with reasonable adjustments to their work where required. Recruitment is enhanced as 900,000 people across the country who currently survive on benefits because of their mental health problems become eligible for work.” (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2006, p7)

Implementing Change – Challenges

The biggest challenge to creating a mentally healthy workplace, and all that it entails, is culture. For culture to change there needs to be commitment from all levels, especially at the top of an organisation. Without the support of Directors and Chief Executives, policy and procedure will not be in place to support a culture change. As the EU Consensus paper "Mental health in workplace settings“ highlights:

"Critical to the success of any action is the need to combine interventions at both the organisational level with those targeted at improving the mental well-being of specific individuals. Effective dialogue and partnership between employers, employees and their representatives can play a vital role in this process. Mechanisms to safeguard confidentiality for people with mental health problems in the workplace can also help encourage individuals to make use of support in the workplace when required.”

The organisation as a whole has to support the implementation of change, not just say it does.

The challenge is for the workplace, as a part of society, to recognise mental health and wellbeing as a valuable resource, which needs to be protected and promoted.
Bibliography


