SERIES ON HUMAN INNOVATION

Mental Health & Wellbeing:
"A Bigger Mental Health Crisis is Brewing"
An Article by Norman Pickavance

An invisible disease

Covid-19 poses an existential threat to business. Four crises in one; first pandemic, then economic, now a grim mental health picture is emerging alongside a declining trust in governments. How can businesses build the resilience required to match the specific and growing mental health risks all now face?

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Unfortunately, we aren't starting from a good place. The UK was already facing a mental health crisis. Pre-pandemic research shows that mental ill-health is costing UK employers £42 billion every year. Pause for a moment on the productivity part of that equation. Research shows that stress - due to work, money, or family worries - increased the number of errors a person makes doing their job six-fold [i]. Now imagine that your workers are scientists working to a deadline, warehouse pickers getting orders out or care workers administering drugs to the elderly. The impact is equivalent on average to £1,560 for every single employee, but it is easy to see how the results could quite easily be catastrophic.

Businesses may think they have been doing a lot, but few have a really good grip of the complexity of the mental health challenge. When investment house CCLA surveyed all large UK corporations in 2019, the results showed a wide disparity of approaches [ii]. While some have gone above and beyond legislated minimum standards, others have made little or no progress. The best had tended to focus on smashing the stigma of mental health, raising awareness in their communications, and putting mental health first aiders in place to tackle crisis situations. And whilst these efforts should be applauded, the sad fact is, the number of employees impacted by mental health issues annually actually rose in the UK, from 38% in 2018 to 48% a year later.

Compassionate Leadership is to be admired, but it does not add up to the deep resilience we must encode within our business systems, policies, and practices if we are to underpin well being and assure long term economic performance.

Since then of course, Covid-19 has swept the globe. Over the past 12 weeks the pandemic has been characterised by confusion, fear, personal loss, economic losses, working from home, working on the front line of the disease, truncated plans for study and growth, loneliness, domestic abuse, worry for loved ones and pervasive uncertainty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has just published data showing increases in personal anxiety rising between 10% and 25%, for just the first two months of lockdown [iii]. I have spoken to many business leaders to understand how they have been shouldering the burden of what is happening. They told me that they too have been struggling to 'just keep things going', trying to find the strength to be optimistic in the face of much uncertainty. They talk of becoming kinder and more open to the pressures of their people. Such compassionate leadership is to be admired, yet it does not add up to the kind of deep resilience that we must encode into our business systems, policies and practices if we are to underpin wellbeing and assure long term economic performance.

Take care of yourself

Wake up early.
Exercise first thing.
Drink good coffee.
Stop worrying. Less screen time. Read books. Have a bowl of Coco Pops.

I believe we must start to help businesses get a better grip on why mental health and wellbeing issues are on the rise in their organisations, and use this to help form board level commitments for change.

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Based on research [iv], I have identified five key questions that will help a board navigate this process:

- First, start with your business culture. Are your people valued as people and not simply as resources? Do people's contracts of employment give them a sense of security? Does your business encourage people to support each other? Are there facilities for people to sit and have lunch together? (By the way, if you're relying on your leaders to fill the support gap, then you may need to think again. Many are feeling overwhelmed and worryingly, from our research, we know that line managers are the people an employee would least like to talk to about personal matters.)

- *To evolve your culture, you could do worse than seeking to equip people to support each other better. Demystifying the psychological support for mental health is the mission of Talk for Health CEO Nicky Forsyth. Not a big believer in mental health first aiders, which re-enforce a sense of powerlessness, Nicky wants everyone to become more effective at having the conversations that matter by giving them the tools they need.*

- Look at your business model. Do your people work under constant time pressure to deliver? How could technology be used, not simply to take out costs, but to improve lives?

- *Considering the way business models operate is something that is central to the way business entrepreneur Jason Stockwood works. Jason believes in involving people and ensuring they share the benefit of tech driven efficiencies – not only financially, but in the way jobs and work are designed. 'It creates an environment in which people can be more human' he says.*

- Have you considered the wider economic security of the people who work for you? Do your employees have the resilience to cope with financial shocks and participate in a fulfilling life? Can they save for a secure future? If not, they are likely to be in the 78% of people in the UK that the RSA found are constantly worrying about money.

- *The economic and financial factors that produce anxieties are often poorly supported by high street banks. It's why so many frontline workers end up taking on payday loans. However, the introduction of workplace savings and loans schemes has recently become widely available. The UK leader in this field, Daniel Shakhani at Salary Finance, is already deploying practical support at major corporations like IKEA. As people come off furlough, this kind of 'hardship' support could prove invaluable.*

- How are you supporting your employees in building their personal resilience? Do your people have the opportunity to take proper care of themselves, physically and mentally?

- *We could all do with help in building our personal resilience, yet people don't like being told how to run their lives. Better Space has overcome this challenge by creating an app-based platform for employers, which allows employees to choose what's right for them. It can help some to improve their sleep patterns whilst others want to learn new skills or join events. Founder Jim Woods says it's all about valuing the choices that employees make.*

- Finally:what is the social well being of the people who work for you? Do they have friends and family they spend quality time with? Are they supported by others, are they involved in other communities or social groups? Do you know?

- *This may sound invasive. But we know how many people are experiencing social isolation. To help people become proactive in building better social support, and creating a sense of purpose in looking out for each other, Camerados, a social enterprise works to support people, " in down to earth, fun and often irreverent ways" says founder Maff Potts.*

These ideas only scratch the surface. What is increasingly clear is that, while a highly infectious disease has garnered all our attention in its spread across the world, we must now start to shift our efforts to focus on an another invisible disease. If left unaddressed, mental illness will become the next global pandemic.

If we don't, then the associated human and monetary costs could be colossal. As a minimum we must now consider how we drive workplace mental health to the top of the corporate agenda, and build a substantial coalition to push for improvement and boost the mental resilience and wellbeing of workers across all sectors and industries.

Pushing for progress in workplace mental health is now a moral and economic necessity.

Bio: Norman Pickavance helps build business we can all believe in, to produce a more resilient, sustainable, and human world.

Tags: big thinking, people and place, ethics

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[i] Salary Finance Research 2019 and Money and Mental Health Foundation, Employee rates of mental health due to work-related stress (2018)
[ii] CCLA Mental Health Engagement 2019
[iii] Institute for Fiscal Studies Working Paper by J. Banks and X. Xu. 'The mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown and social distancing during Covid-19', published June 2020
[iv] Mental Health: Beyond Awareness – A report by The Work and Wellbeing Alliance,   Norman Pickavance. Published February 2020