

# ADDRESSING THE PEOPLE FACTOR

Going beyond the safety processes and procedures to ensure that people are supported is vital for organisations, writes Fiona Ramsay



# A

paradigm shift in the role of employers in tackling health and wellbeing issues is taking place, says Pamela Gellatly, Founder of healthcare firm and Strategic Development Director of HCML.

Pamela founded her organisation more than 20 years ago to develop an integrated approach to employee health management that straddles safety, health and wellbeing. She feels that there is a new drive from employers in the UK to measure the impact of things outside of their immediate control – an employee’s inactivity or relationship problems, for example – and their impact on workplace health and wellbeing, so that a wider range of support can be put in place.

“We are starting out on that journey, with the large corporates in particular looking at what they can control and support as they invest more in health and wellbeing,” she explains. “The Government and the NHS cannot afford to fund the increasing demand, so there has to be more responsibility coming from employers.”

Pamela highlights the UK Government’s new occupational health taskforce, led by Dame Carol Black, an experienced health policy advisor, to improve employer awareness of the benefits of occupational health provision – including the importance of services provided by other health and wellbeing disciplines – to empower SMEs and larger employers to tackle in-work sickness and presenteeism and help reduce NHS waiting list times.

The taskforce will produce a voluntary occupational health framework for businesses, which will include setting out minimum levels of occupational health needed to stop sickness-related job losses and help businesses better support those returning to work after a period of ill-health.

A further £64 million pilot of the WorkWell service is under way to help

people with health conditions stay in work through integrated employment and health support.

**“ WE MUST BE OPEN ABOUT IT AND LOOK AT THE DATA AND THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT NORMALLY LOOK AT FROM A RISK MANAGEMENT POINT OF VIEW ”**

“There is an issue that lots of organisations do not capture effective data, particularly that which relates to the broader causes of mental and physical health that may not be seen as ‘work-related’ but which the employer can use to help support the employee,” says Pamela.

“We need to consider the whole-person risk. It’s not just mental health, it is about

physical and psychological health, which are intertwined. If we think about age, gender, ethnicity, inactivity, excess weight, sleep and nutrition, there are some additional factors related to a biopsychosocial approach rather than the traditional risk management approach.

“A lot of safety and risk professionals will be able to identify the occupational hazards but how do they identify who can be harmed and how when some things are visible, but others are not so visible? It’s quite complex but we must be open about it and look at the data and things you might not normally look at from a risk management point of view.”



Pamela Gellatly

Continued overleaf >>

>> From previous page

## LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Pamela insists that employers should be doing a lot more to support their workforce. “They should be assessing against the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards, which help identify and manage six areas of work design which can affect stress levels, and then use risk assessments to identify potential risks and take action. But the reality is not everyone will be doing this.”

As chair of the IIRSM Emerging Risk Leaders Network, Pamela reflects that there is a lot that can be learned from discussion with peers and by looking at the work done in other countries. “It might be that existing legislation should be challenged, or that more work needs to be done to help people to comply.”

There is little doubt that recognition of the importance of health and wellbeing in the workplace has significantly increased in recent times, and across the globe.

The Psychological Safety Study from North Carolina-headquartered Workplace Options (WPO) enables leaders to understand the specific

# WORKPLACE CONCERNS

### Daily work activities

Refers to the task, responsibilities and actions of a job that can include workload, unclear objectives, clarity of role and company missions, conflicting tasks and lack of autonomy.

### Work-life balance

Conflict between job requirements and personal responsibilities, such as childcare or elder care, or with personal and relationship priorities.

### Conflict/tension with a manager

Occurs when differences surface concerning how work is performed. May include personal agendas, goals, strategy, or values.

### Job performance

Perceived inability to do good work due to conditions in the workplace or an awareness that the employee’s job performance does not meet the manager’s expectations.

### Lack of recognition

Dissatisfaction with pay or financial rewards. Perception that the employee is not noticed or appreciated for their contributions.

### Conflict of values/Ethical climate in the company/Volatility

Instability and unpredictability of an

organisation, which may include rapid changes and uncertainty. In addition, and/or when one’s personal values or beliefs do not align with the organisational culture.

### Lack of professional/career development

Lack of opportunities for skill, knowledge and career development.

### Bullying/Harassment

Experiencing any unwelcome behaviour or conduct in the workplace (which may be verbal, physical, or sexual) that intimidates, offends, belittles, threatens or humiliates.

Source: Workplace Options

challenges their employees face across regions. They can use this insight to create culture-based initiatives and programmes to reduce workplace stress and build enhanced employee engagement and psychologically safe workplaces.

WPO Director of Clinical Policy and Best Practice David Stace says: The UK is a microcosm of what is happening globally. The economy is flatlined and many companies are feeling the pinch from high inflation, which is leading to job uncertainty. The hybrid way of working takes people out of the office and away from collaborating with each other, but returning to the office has led to an increase in conflict at work between both managers and employees. It’s stressful for all concerned.

“For leaders, communication, communication, communication is the message. They need to maximise communication in today’s changed environment.”

Mindfulness programmes, wellness coaching and digital therapy apps are a popular solution for employees hoping to feel less stressed at work. But WPO insists that there needs to be another layer of support for a collectively burned-out workforce.

Advancing wellness, mental health and psychosocial safety at work may call for a significant organisational change in a company’s culture. On their own, employees can only do so much if not actively empowered by the employer. Wellbeing must be integrated into an organisation starting with leadership – mental

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health must be prioritised at the C-Suite. The responsibility of ensuring psychosocial safety in the workplace rests on the employer.

## MONITORING THE SITUATION

Mary Ellen Gornick, Founding Partner of WPO's Consulting Group, explains that WPO helps organisations to gather information around their employees' health and wellbeing through the hundreds of thousands of calls made to helplines, in addition to wellbeing risk assessments, surveys and focus groups which provide data about what managers and employees feel is helping them and enabling them to do their work in a way that their wellbeing is addressed and preserved.

"We work with clients to monitor their employees' stress levels via the calls coming into their employee assistance programmes. Through the calls, we can look at the different reasons that people are calling in for help, whether the stress they are suffering is related to their workplace and what the actual concern is. That data can vary depending on the country and the type of work and can help organisations to create a global mental health strategy.

"Data can help monitor a situation and show whether something is improving or not, getting better or worse. Is their stress related to personal issues or workplace issues? We also look at any indicators that show conflict. For example, if there are rumours of redundancy or merger, you can often see stress levels go up.

"Interestingly, we are seeing a lot of drivers that are external to the organisation, such as environmental or financial crisis, geopolitical conflict or violence in the community, that create personal anxiety. We can use all this data to create hot spots of activity. Observing these indicators can help organisations monitor what is going on within their workplace and react. As part of an overall corporate wellbeing strategy



on a global scale, it is important to create a framework that allows the cultures and practices to be considered and recognised at the local level."

WPO takes its insights on psychological safety from Australia, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Mexico, the UK and the US.

In 2021, New South Wales, Australia, introduced a code of practice for managing psychosocial risk at work. In 2022, the model work health and safety laws, on which all other states' and territories' laws are based, with the exception of Victoria, were amended, with new regulations defining what is meant by 'psychosocial hazards' and how they should be managed. Safe Work Australia also published an accompanying model code of practice for employers.

At the same time, Western Australia introduced its own code of practice for psychosocial hazards in the workplace and the following month, Victoria proposed to amend its occupational health and safety regulations to require employers, so far as

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Mary Ellen Gornick

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An estimated 1.8 million workers reported work-related ill health in 2022/23 in the UK  
Source: UK Government

# 8 million

>> From previous page

reasonably practicable, to identify and eliminate or reduce the associated risks. Queensland followed suit with its own code of practice and new laws requiring businesses to deal with psychosocial risks through the risk management provisions of the Queensland Work Health and Safety Regulations 2011.

Mary Ellen says: “We are starting to see a lot of change in several countries, which in Australia can mean criminal sanctions for employers who do not take psychosocial risks seriously. Mexico, too, is on point with working with employers, while Singapore has new national guidelines around mental health.”

According to Ipsos’ Global Health Service Monitor, close to half (46%) of Singaporeans place mental health as the biggest health problem facing the country today, followed by cancer (38%) and stress (35%).



Ashley Owens

## BEYOND WHAT IS CONTROLLED

Ashley Owens is Global Mental Health and Wellbeing Lead at KBR, which partners with government and industry clients in 50 countries to provide government and sustainable technology solutions with an emphasis on efficiency and safety. She accepts that it is difficult to make improvements to health and wellbeing when it is up to the individual, as well as their employer, to engage with the support available. “To a large extent, how we measure organisational health is related to what we can control. However, there is a lot of work going on to look beyond that.”

Ashley says that asking and observing people is key. “Talking to people often reveals a risk they were unaware of. Our behaviours are often subconscious. Safety should not be a trade secret. Mental health should not be a trade secret. So, seeing what works and sharing it among your peers and helping each other is vital.”

WPO offers individuals and organisations human-centred wellbeing solutions to address emotional, practical and physical needs. The team describes these needs as the “people factor” in organisational risk management.

Mary Ellen says: “In a practical sense, what we mean by this is going beyond the safety and operating procedures and checking in with how people are reacting to their environment. Whether they see the processes and procedures as something helpful and that they can build into their routines, or that they find cumbersome and, in some way, reject or try to avoid taking them on.

“It is important to consider how things will affect the team, how they will affect what they do, how they will affect the flow of the work, how will they affect internal communications between the teams. So, the people factor is vital to factor in. Procedures will work so much better if they are accepted, understood and embraced by the people who are making them happen.”

Ashley agrees: “Safety mandates often focus their language on a tool, a place or a threat but if we are being honest, safety is often pushed to the backs of our minds. It’s easy to take a roaring

28%

Just 28% of employers in Britain provide some form of occupational health, with large employers (89%) nearly three times more likely than SMEs (28%) to do so

Source: UK Government



## BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

### Deeper employee engagement

Greater creativity, innovation, and development of new products, services and solutions.

### Improved team performance

Open communication, collaboration and constructive feedback within teams.

### Enhanced problem solving and decision making

Open dialogue and the exploration of diverse viewpoints leads to more effective problem-solving and decision-making processes.

### Enhanced organisational resilience

Better equipped to navigate

change, uncertainty and adversity, employees feel empowered to adapt, innovate, and collaborate, creating agility and resilience in the face of external pressures.

### Improved customer satisfaction

Employees who feel supported and empowered are more likely to engage with customers in a positive and empathetic manner, leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty.

### Greater employee wellbeing

Creates a supportive

environment where individuals feel valued, respected, and cared for, resulting in lower levels of stress, anxiety, burnout, and promotes holistic health and wellness.

### Increased employee engagement and retention

Engaged, motivated, and committed to their roles and the organisation leads to higher levels of job satisfaction, lower turnover rates and greater retention of top talent.

Source: Workplace Options

lion seriously, but maybe not that trip hazard or something that might affect our mental health. For me the people factor is everything from the smallest to the largest issues that might affect somebody's safety."

Mary Ellen believes that one of the key benefits of bringing these people factor risks to light is that employers are improving psychological safety – ensuring that people feel safe enough to raise their hands and point out the issues. "If people just take on more and more, they can be stuck in a difficult burnout situation, which is not good for them, their team or their organisation."

However, Ashley explains that different people and cultures deal with exposing risks in different ways, with some feeling comfortable about "calling out" risk and others feeling uncomfortable about sharing information or raising their heads above the parapet. "There can also be a microcosm of different cultures under the manager," she says.

### FEELING COMFORTABLE ABOUT SPEAKING UP

Asked how individuals can be encouraged to speak out about risks, Ashley says: "A large part of our work at KBR is about how the physical safety and the mental health aspects can be approached and are linked. We have our Zero Harm and Courage to Care initiatives that focus on the physical – promoting an environment where employees feel comfortable speaking up and having conversations around unsafe practices. This is backed by visible leadership, with the executive leadership team doing and acting as they should, as well as an online reporting process whereby issues that are raised are applauded by leadership.

"At KBR, the MyKey Stop Work Authority means that any employee is empowered, if they see a risk, to hit that metaphorical big red button and cease all work to immediately address it."

"In addition to that, from a mental health perspective, we have been cultivating a culture through our Global Wellbeing Ambassador

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Programme, which starts with the managers – the 'celebrities', I call them – and the way in which they normalise talking about these issues and which has an impact on how others feel. The ambassadors have volunteered to take the training and are able to respond to help someone who is struggling with their mental health. It is about having that confidential point of contact and being able to signpost to support resources as appropriate."

KBR's Zero Harm safety culture centres around the belief that the goal of zero workplace incidents is achievable. KBR has seen year-over-year improvements in health, safety, security and environment performance, while the company claims that the impact has been evident beyond the workplace.

Ashley explains: "You can have rules, tools in place, a great reporting system, but if you don't have a culture that encourages people to talk about these things and mitigate them, to feel safe to come forward about seeing and talking about a risk, if we don't have that, all the other work doesn't matter.

"Zero Harm was a slow burn, including training and safe behaviours initiatives, but it is now embedded throughout the business. With our Courage to Care conversations, you can submit online conversations you have had with your co-workers in reference to risk and it teaches you how to have caring conversations about something, which supports our culture in which it is unacceptable to just walk by if you see a risk.

"It is about watching our employee workforce develop a personal relationship with safety, with a holistic view of taking care of themselves and each other. Each one of us has the responsibility to do the right thing and make decisions that count to protect our people, customers and planet. It has been inspiring to watch our workforce apply Zero Harm at work and hear how it is also being applied at home and for the benefit of the world.

"Human behaviour is the most vital factor in risk. We would all like to have a safer, more sustainable world but to still make a profit and achieve our goals – that's the perfect balance. An organisation can only really do that when they consider the people factor," says Ashley. "Building a culture around a consistent vision is the next step and can ensure that the thoughts that might lead to quick decisions are overridden by intended behaviour. This is not something that organisations can just admit exists, they must implement this culture." 🟢