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POLICY, PRACTICE AND LAW IN THE WORKPLACE

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Stress management training promotes emotional wellbeing

TOPICS:

training and development

employee relations

health and safety

training tools and techniques

employee relations challenges and tools

health and safety management
employee health

SECTORS:

public services

services (other)

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Training to cope with stress and mental health is available via the Wellness Works project, set up with the help of lottery funding; our case studies of the providers and end-users demonstrate the positive impact this training is having on employees.

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Key points

- Led by voluntary sector organisation Community First, Wellness Works secured Lottery funding to set up a project that promotes emotional and mental health in the workplace and aims to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.
- Wellness Works has so far had a positive impact on more than 60 employers in the Worcestershire area, providing advice and guidance on health-related policies, and delivering a variety of health-related training programmes.
- Its initiatives include a resilience-building programme for managers, a "mental health first aid" course, and the establishment of an employer forum on workplace wellbeing.

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According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), which has developed **guidance on stress management standards for employers** (on the HSE website), stress is one of the most dangerous risks to business.

One in five workers report feeling extremely stressed at work, according to **reports carried out for the HSE (PDF format, 5.9MB)** (on the International stress management Association UK website) and self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety account for an estimated **10.5 million lost working days per year in Britain** (on the CIPD website).

Health-risks and absence rates aside, employers have a legal duty to stay aware of stress-related issues and to address resultant problems. Despite this, the 2009 IRS survey on employers' stress management activities found that almost half the employers surveyed do not initiate action on work stress until a problem is brought to their notice. It also found that only one in four (26%) of the 110 employers' absence reduction measures include "stress management".

According to the same survey, reasons for not adopting stress management practices include insufficient resources, lack of senior management backing and a lack of relevant skills among line managers.

Wellness Works: raising awareness among employers

Against this backdrop, in 2007 the voluntary sector organisation **Community First** (external website) secured resources from the **Big Lottery health and wellbeing programme fund** (external website) to promote emotional and mental health in the workplace among Worcestershire employers.

After 18 months, the project, known as Wellness Works, has had a positive impact on more than 60 public, private and not-for-profit organisations, ranging from small local businesses to large NHS trusts. Its steering group has representatives from the NHS, the voluntary sector, local businesses and unions.

Aims of Wellness Works

Employers that seek help from the project have a variety of motivations, ranging from those that need to cope with increasing levels of stress within the organisation to those who wish to keep ahead of the game and build a reputation as an exemplary employer.

The main aims of Wellness Works are to:

- raise awareness among managers and train them to deal effectively with issues related to emotional and mental health;
- reduce the stigma attached to mental health in the workplace; and
- ensure that organisations have robust strategies and policies in place to support emotional and mental wellbeing.

The project aims to encourage a proactive and preventative approach to issues such as stress at work and to create an inclusive environment for all employees.

The Wellness Works strategy recognises that employees are less likely to experience mental health problems if they:

- work in a well-managed environment;
- are equipped with the skills they need to do their job;
- are in control of their work and their work-life balance; and
- have a supportive manager.

Part of its mission is to promote awareness of the criteria listed, and to tackle the more obvious aspects of health, such as promoting relaxation techniques and healthy living habits, and ensuring that employees with mental health problems can find the professional support they need. For examples of how Wellness Works has helped employers, see **box 1** and **box 2**.

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Box 1: Case study - Festival Housing Group

The Organisation **Festival Housing Group** (external website) owns 8,000 properties in Worcestershire and Herefordshire.

Established in 2002, the group includes Elgar Housing Association, Spa Housing Association and the Property Care Partnership. It provides affordable homes through its housing associations, oversees its own care homes and runs a property maintenance service. Its 500 employees and 20 volunteers are at various sites, including its three main offices in Droitwich, Malvern and Ledbury. The organisation was highly commended in 2008 in the **Chambers of Commerce employer of the year award (PDF format, 8.45MB)** (external website).

Approach to health and wellbeing Festival Housing Group has a well-established health and wellbeing strategy. It is committed to offering flexible working opportunities and encouraging training and development for all. With employees spread across a variety of locations and departments, it works hard to establish a positive culture across the whole organisation. As an accredited **Investors in People organisation** (external website), it has clear policies in place and regularly evaluates its approach to people management.

Input from Wellness Works Festival Housing Group worked with Wellness Works on a preventative approach to bullying and harassment, with particular focus on the more subtle forms that this type of negative behaviour can take. They devised a fun and lively drama-based event in a local theatre - for an audience of 120 employees. The forum theatre event, titled "Can't They Take a Joke?", was staged by a group of actors, who played out scenarios illustrating what could constitute bullying and harassment in the workplace. This was backed up with other training sessions, delivered by **Relate Worcestershire** (external website) and In Equilibrium, to help managers deal with bullying and ensure that all employees understand the organisation's culture and what constitutes desirable behaviour. Wellness Works also worked with Festival Housing Group on employment law workshops, resilience training for managers, and an accredited training programme in health and wellbeing management that is endorsed by the **Institute of Leadership & management** (on the institute's website).

Employer agreements

Before working with an employer, Wellness Works asks the organisation to sign up to an agreement setting out its commitment to emotional and mental health. Amanda Wright, business adviser for Wellness Works, spoke to IRS about the project and explained that the agreement is in place to show that the employer involved is committed "to the development of a culture that supports and maintains the emotional wellbeing of all staff".

The employer commitment covers:

- making sure that everyone - from the chief executive to part-time volunteers - is aware of and understands the value of wellbeing;
- minimising the risk of staff developing emotional and mental problems at work;
- providing support for staff experiencing mental health problems;
- providing mental health awareness training for managers and staff; and
- continuously improving the organisation's approach to health and wellbeing at work.

As Wright points out, compliance in these areas is broadly covered by existing legislation relating to health and safety at work and the Disability Discrimination Act, but a formal agreement helps to bring these issues to the fore. Some employers use the employer commitment as a starting point when raising awareness of health and wellbeing issues among employees.

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Box 2: Case study - NHS trusts in Worcestershire

The Organisation Wellness Works has worked on health and wellbeing initiatives with three NHS trusts in Worcestershire - the **Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust** (external website), the **Worcestershire Primary Care Trust** (external website) and the **Worcestershire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust** (external website). Together these organisations employ 10,000 employees. Approach to health and wellbeing As part of the wider NHS organisation, the Worcestershire care trusts recognise the organisational benefits of encouraging and supporting the health and wellbeing of staff, and the impact on patient care. The trusts offer extensive flexible working opportunities, and have clear policies on stress management, sickness absence, special leave for carers and return to work policies - some of which were established as part of the **NHS Improving Working Lives initiative** (external website). NHS occupational health departments offer advice and support such as counselling and subsidised aromatherapy. Volunteer workplace advisers working at the Worcestershire trusts provide support to individual employees who are experiencing difficulties. The trusts also take steps to promote awareness of employee health and wellbeing.

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Input from Wellness Works Wellness Works provides advisory support and guidance to the NHS trusts to help them ensure that health and wellbeing stays on the agenda. Their work includes identifying gaps in existing health and wellbeing provision, finding ways to enhance it, and ensuring initiatives are measured in a meaningful way. Wellness Works has helped promote health and wellbeing training opportunities more widely to the NHS staff and has delivered appropriate training. It has also broadened the scope and aims of the trusts' health and wellbeing plan to make it more meaningful for individuals. Additions include resilience training, relaxation workshops, and stress management training.

Wellness Works initiatives

One far-reaching initiative set up by Wellness Works is the "wellness employer forum". This enables employers in the Worcestershire area to come together and share their experiences and ideas around health and wellbeing in the workplace.

Other Wellness Works activities include:

- helping employers to review and revise their policies relating to health and wellbeing;
- helping employers to promote awareness and understanding among employees about mental health and wellbeing issues;
- training managers in stress management both for themselves and others, and in how to deal with difficult performance management and grievance conversations;
- providing workshops for employees to help them improve their own health and wellbeing; and
- providing training on how to recognise, avoid and/or deal with bullying and harassment in the workplace.

Two examples of the training programmes on offer to employers include "Developing resilience and managing pressure" and a mental health first aid workshop.

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Resilience training for managers

The "Developing resilience and managing pressure" one-day workshops for managers have been of particular use to organisations experiencing increased pressures in the workplace as a result of the recession. Delivered in partnership with training provider **In Equilibrium** (external website), the course aims to build emotional and mental resilience in managers.

"Resilience is something that you can learn, so you become better able to cope under pressure," explains Wright. "If your people aren't resilient then it doesn't matter what sort of business continuity plans or strategies you have in place - if people aren't able to carry those [continuity plans] out, then they are not going to work and be successful."

The course supports delegates to understand their own behaviour and influences through practical exercises and a workbook. The workbook encourages attendees to note down their own resilience development plan and build up knowledge of which "tools" they can use in their working lives to help them cope under pressure.

At the core of the training is the recognition that each person can develop their own coping mechanisms through positive thinking, networking, and by adopting some recognised approaches and tools. Delegates are given a CD, which includes relaxation and stress management techniques that they can do in their own time.

Evaluating resilience training

The resilience training course is evaluated by measuring each individual's resilience before the course and then again six months after attendance at a follow-up focus group. To achieve this measure, attendees answer carefully prepared questions that explore particular characteristics related to resilience, including their own confidence in their ability to solve problems, how well they can control their emotions, and their ability to reach out to others.

At the follow-up sessions, individuals are given the opportunity to assess how far they think they have progressed in these areas, while also getting a chance to revisit some of the areas that were covered in the workshop.

Mental health first aid

The **mental health first aid workshop** (on the National Institute for Mental Health in England website) covers a variety of conditions including anxiety, depression, eating disorders and alcohol abuse. The workshop helps people to:

- recognise the symptoms of mental health problems;
- provide initial support to sufferers; and
- guide those people experiencing problems towards appropriate professional help.

Initially, Wellness Works trains a group of individuals to deliver this training with a specific focus on the workplace. The aim of the programme, delivered to employees from several organisations, is to promote awareness around mental ill health and remove some of the associated myths and stigmas. It helps attendees understand what it feels like to have a mental health crisis, and the triggers and conditions that can lead to such a condition. It also works to reduce the fear, stigma and ignorance around mental illness and provides an impetus and focus for employers to help those experiencing difficulties.

"As well as helping people understand how they can support people, it also makes it clear that someone who has a well-managed mental health condition can actually be very effective in their life and in their work," says Wright.

Organisation profile

The **Wellness Works project** (external website) is a partnership between two charities: Community First and Relate Worcestershire. Wellness Works receives funding from the Big Lottery health and wellbeing programme fund and has a remit to deliver education, training and awareness-raising programmes to employers in the Worcestershire area to support emotional health and wellbeing in the workplace. It works with a range of organisations in the not-for-profit, private and public sectors. It is part of a regional programme of work to improve health and wellbeing in the West Midlands called **Living Well in the West Midlands** (external website).

This feature was written by **Charlotte Wolff**, researcher/writer, Employment Review.

Additional resources (subscription required)

- **Employers' stress management activities: the IRS survey** In this IRS survey, more than 100 employers share their experience of stress management, which highlights the measures used to reduce the impact of work stress, against the background of growing pressure among the national workforce as the economic crisis deepens.
- **Addressing staff wellbeing at board level** Is employee wellbeing becoming a board-level issue? Corporate responsibility group Business in the Community thinks so, and believes senior managers are finally coming round to the idea that healthy staff can help produce healthy profits, Personnel Today reports.
- **Nearly one in 10 European workers report work-related ill-health** Occupational Health reports on the occupational health aspects of the most recent European Labour Force Survey.
- **Stress: frequently asked questions** Solicitors Osborne Clarke answer questions on workplace stress as part of the XpertHR employment law resource.
- **Stress at work** (on the CIPD website) This Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development factsheet gives introductory guidance on work-related stress, including the legal position.



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