

Wellness at Work

Dr Noeleen Doherty

Steve Macaulay Workplaces aren't always healthy places to be; stress, lack of concentration, depression – these are signs that all isn't well. Now a lot of work has been done in the area of wellness at work and we are joined in the studio today by Dr Noeleen Doherty.

Now, Noeleen, what is the issue?

Noeleen Doherty Well, Steve, if you think of the workplace as a microcosm of life and people spend a large amount of time working there, then we are going to come across the range of issues in terms of wellness and mental well-being that we would in the general population.

If we think of the spectrum of mental health, it goes from at one extreme, very serious, less common problems right through to the mild to moderate types of issues such as depression and anxiety, which are now reasonably common, through to the other end which is really the end where we are talking well-being, fulfilment and individuals being able to lead a fulfilled life.

Steve Macaulay So, when we are dealing with wellness at work, somewhere along that spectrum there are a lot of days lost through illness and quite a high economic cost, isn't there?

Noeleen Doherty Yes, there can be. We have also got to remember that employers have a duty of care which is legislated for through the health and safety act of 1974. And that indicates that employers have a duty of care to ensure, as far as is reasonably possible, both the health and safety – mental and physical – of their employees. And that really underpins the idea that if employees are being cared for in the work environment, then productivity should also show positive increases.

Steve Macaulay But let's face it, at the moment times are hard. Can employers really do these things?

Noeleen Doherty Yes, indeed times are hard and in the current recession we have seen people under a lot of pressure and stress at work, but to have a knee jerk reaction to the current situation is short term. The longer term benefits of taking a more proactive approach are quite key.

Steve Macaulay So tell me some more about this proactive approach; what do you recommend?

Noeleen Doherty A proactive approach is really based on building a business case. We have lots of statistics available at the moment to show what the downsides of stress, depression and anxiety in the workplace can be. For example, a recent study by Mind indicated that a lot of people are worried about their work situation, a lot of people are consulting their

GP. About 28% of people who responded to this survey indicated that they were working longer hours and only about 38%, I believe, indicated that they felt their employers were doing enough to support them.

Steve Macaulay So what is enough? Describe what needs to happen.

Noeleen Doherty In the workplace an organisation first of all needs to recognise that this is a potential issue – and I think that can be a difficulty because it can be somewhat of a taboo subject. Employees themselves, because they're maybe, especially at the moment, under pressure to keep their heads down and work hard, might have some self denial about there being a problem for themselves.

Managers, on the other hand, as well can also find this a difficult subject to broach. Often there is a lack of training for them and when you put these two situations together you can almost have a collusion, a denial that there is an issue and that is not good business.

Steve Macaulay So give me some steps then that managers need to take to address this issue.

Noeleen Doherty Recognising that there is a potential issue is a key first step. Having tools and techniques in place so that that the organisation can audit what is happening; so they can look at the cost to business of absenteeism, sickness absence, early retirement through ill health, on that side of the equation they can look at the figures to show what the costs to business are.

They can also balance that equation by looking at the other side to see what the costs of potential support might look like, for example, health screening, interventions, employee assistance programmes. And I think the organisation needs to have that balanced view – the potential costs and also the benefits.

Steve Macaulay Give me some examples where companies have been proactive and have been successful in this area.

Noeleen Doherty A lot of organisations are now recognising the need to be proactive; the need to take steps towards encouraging wellness at work. For example, Royal Mail institutes programmes of pro-active mental well-being.

Steve Macaulay Boots, too, are another organisation that has been successful and has got some benefits from this?

Noeleen Doherty Yes, indeed and the organisations who are successful tend to take an approach which includes occupational health, GPs and training and development for managers. So it is a combined approach that looks at not just the individual, but the organisational climate and culture.

Steve Macaulay So if you were to leave me with a message, what would it be?

Noeleen Doherty Looking after the well-being of employees is not a luxury; it has a bottom line impact on business. And therefore it is something that both individuals and managers should take very seriously.

Steve Macaulay Noeleen, that is a very telling message; thank you very much.
