

How to support your menopausal workforce

Menopausal women are the fastest growing demographic in the workplace. For such a significant statistic for employers, there is still a lack of knowledge in organisations about what menopause is and how to support menopausal workers.

What is menopause?

The International Menopause Society describes menopause as the stage in a woman's life where menstruation ends either naturally or because of surgery or another medical intervention such as chemotherapy. There are around sixty-four recognised symptoms of menopause, and once a woman is in menopause, she is in it for life. The drop in hormone levels can only be rectified by interventions such as HRT.

Symptoms at work

Hot flushes are often referred to as a common symptom of menopause with desk fans cited as the solution, but research carried out by the University of Nottingham shows that for menopausal workers, cognitive symptoms are much more disruptive.

Top ten symptoms at work:

1. Poor concentration

2. Tiredness
3. Poor memory
4. Feeling low/depressed
5. Lowered confidence
6. Sleep disturbances
7. Irritability
8. Hot flushes
9. Joint and muscular aches
10. Mood swings

Although it's not a medical term, brain fog describes the general cognitive fuzziness experienced during menopause and it is a particularly disruptive symptom. An inability to concentrate combined with poor memory can impact confidence and the ability to feel comfortable in progressing a career. A recent report on menopause in the workplace commissioned by a cross party group of UK politicians contained quotes from women who said that they received a lot of negative comments about their cognitive abilities during menopause.

Performance and culture

Menopausal workers may experience a variety of symptoms and there is not a standard pattern of symptoms for everyone. Employers should think about how individual performance measures might impact menopausal workers. What is the working environment like? Are there quiet spaces for work that requires concentration? Do workers have some control over their working patterns and workloads enabling them to manage their symptoms better?

Managers should be educated in how symptoms might play out in the workplace and how to access support and resources and critically, how to have the right conversation in the right way with their colleague. Often this is as simple as asking how you are and how can I support you, giving the colleague the space to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable with.

There is evidence that menopause symptoms can become worse in a culture that does not support menopausal workers. The additional stress of having to mask symptoms and not feeling supported or valued is not conducive to thriving at work or feeling like you fit in a workplace. Creating a culture of trust where menopausal workers feel like they are valued is key to retention.

Employers should:

Understand their organisation's culture – what is it like to work for your organisation?

What is the culture like for menopausal workers?

Make sure menopause is understood and visible in your organisation.

Role model respect for mid-life women and menopause.

The mid-life talent pool

Organisations are still bemoaning the lack of availability of candidates in the talent pool, but there is an important group right under their noses. This gap has highlighted the problems faced by employers of over fifties leaving the workforce, adding to the already significant gap of talent available to fill roles. Employers can't afford for there to be a greater loss of workers. Since the pandemic, the workforce is much more vocal in sharing different expectations they have of a potential employer. It's a buyer's market out there and diversity is at the top of their shopping list and let's face it, it's the right thing to do.

Alongside the economic need to retain employees, it has long been recognised that diversity is good for business. At a very basic level, customers like to buy from people who look like them, diverse teams are more resilient in difficult economic times and diverse teams are more creative and better at solving problems. Like all the different groups of employees in the workplace, those going through the menopause transition require some differences in approach to help manage symptoms and feel included.

What does this mean for employers?

Creating an inclusive workplace means creating a culture where everyone can thrive, whatever their individual circumstances. Astute employers recognise that one size does not fit all, and cater for the differing needs of their employees, recognising that they change over time.

What can employers do?

There are practical actions that employers can take to support menopausal employees.

Framework – Having a policy is a good starting point, and this sets a framework for actions taken by the employer to support menopausal workers, and expectations of everyone involved. It says to employees 'this is the way we do things.'

Education – Educate everyone on what menopause is and how symptoms can manifest in the workplace. Many women have limited information about the menopause and may not know what is happening to them. Learning should include what menopause is, and how it affects women at work.

Recognising difference – While there are common symptoms of menopause, everyone has a different journey. Understanding the intersectionality of menopause is key. For example, research shows that Black and Southeast Asian women on average enter peri menopause 7 years earlier than white women, and symptoms of other conditions such as diabetes and differences such as neurodiversity may present more challenging symptoms.

Managing adjustments – Learning should also include how to manage adjustments in the workplace and how to have difficult conversations. Adjustments could include where someone works or their hours.

Absence from the workplace – Managing sickness absence is also crucial, ensuring managers are aware that there are potential discriminatory risks and that it is often appropriate to manage menopause absence in the same way as managing absence related to pregnancy or a disability.

Managing talent and performance. Create a culture where menopause is a normal part of the workplace and menopausal women can thrive, allowing them to continue to fulfil potential and not be written off during the transition.

Mid-life women are a vital part of a depleted talent pool. They have developed skills and experience that are invaluable to organisations, and they are difficult to replace. As we live longer and stay in the workplace for longer, more women than ever will be managing their menopause while working. Employers have a critical role to play in making menopause part of everyday working life and retaining a vitally important group of workers.

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