

Mental health and young people in the workplace: happy, productive and thriving

It's fantastic that more people than ever are talking about mental health, but I am concerned about sweeping generalisations about the reasons for increased diagnosis of mental health conditions and how people are now being vocal when they experience poor mental health.

A lot is being said about the pressures of the world we live in, particularly with our always on digital culture, but it's equally important to note that society overall is much more open to talking about mental health, understanding of mental health conditions and their causes is deepening, diagnostic tools are improving and more people are now much more likely to seek help.

Even more so, younger people, who have grown up in an environment where taking care of your well-being and talking about your mental health is part of our everyday vernacular, it is likely that younger people will be entering the workforce either with a diagnosis or with heightened awareness of their own mental health.

So, how can employers ensure they create workplaces that support the mental health and well-being of their younger employees? Here are my top tips:

Well-being at the heart

Well-being should be a part of every employer's strategy, and baked into every aspect of the employee experience—from recruitment and on boarding through to retention and progression.

Consider the impact of hybrid working

Young people coming into the workplace have not experienced the daily interactions and connections that existed pre-pandemic. Creating and maintaining a strong, positive, supportive and inclusive culture is vital, as is ensuring communication is regular, open and transparent.

Have a range of channels for talking about mental health

Whether it's through having mental health first aiders, an employee assistance program (EAP), or a dedicated well-being space, either online or in person, along with a well-being check in through the cadence of weekly one-to-ones, provide different channels for people to be able to talk about their mental health in a way that's comfortable for them.

Psychological safety is central

It's key to ensure that you provide a psychologically safe environment, where people feel able to express their thoughts, feelings, views and concerns without fear of judgement or recrimination.

Provide plenty of social and networking opportunities

The social aspect of work, through connecting, communicating and collaborating with other people, is essential for well-being at work. Make sure you provide plenty of opportunities for young people to work with colleagues, as well as having plenty of social activities and opportunities for them to build their networks.

Delegate appropriately and don't micromanage

Everyone in the workplace should feel valued and respected, but I've seen far too many times when young people are not given autonomy, are not delegated to appropriately and are micromanaged. This is not good for anyone's mental health, and makes a person feel that they are not trusted and not good enough. Take the time to delegate, with support when there is a learning curve, and clear expectations of the what, when, why, where and how.

Ask questions and don't make assumptions

Remember that young people have limited experience of the workplace, and that every workplace is different. So, don't make assumptions about what they do or don't know about the way your organisation works and what they may or may not know about the different policies, processes and procedures you have in place.

Put learning at the centre

Be mindful that young people are in the earliest stages of their careers, so need learning to be a key component. This needs to be a mix of on the job learning, learning from others and learning in a more formal setting. Investing time in their learning will not only pay off in terms of increased knowledge and skills, they will also feel hugely valued.

Think flexibly about working patterns

Different people are more creative or productive at different times during the day, or different days during the week, so it's crucial to accommodate different patterns and rhythms of working. For morning people like me, it's actually quite stressful to try to do something creative at the end of the day, so factoring in when certain tasks are done and being flexible about it can be a huge support to employee well-being.

Introduce a buddy program

When a young person is being onboarded, having a buddy can be a great support for well-being. It allows the employee the chance to ask questions and get support outside of their line management. For young people, a new line manager can be a daunting thing, so having a peer to guide them can be incredibly helpful.

Have zero tolerance for gossip

Far too many young people in the workplace get caught up in gossip or coalesce around something negative at work. Although this may seem to provide an immediate sense of connection, it is always detrimental to mental health. Having zero tolerance for gossip or talking about anyone behind their backs sets a great example.

The world of work is a complex one for all of us, and we have a responsibility to ensure that younger people entering the workforce have all of the resources available to them to thrive. Having a psychologically safe environment, where talking about mental health and well-being is the norm, and where Support is available as and when needed will provide a firm foundation.

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