



WORK IS MENTAL SO WHY DO FIRMS IGNORE AN OBVIOUS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE?

It is the last great taboo. People share their intimate experiences online with total strangers, we talk to each other about our physical illnesses and society has begun to recognise and address some of the most entrenched social injustices. However, challenges to mental health, counselling support and recognition of mental difficulties are still avoided at all cost.

It is both counterproductive and counter intuitive not to recognise when anxiety levels for employees are rising. Maybe it's because we are all too busy at work? Perhaps it's because millennials haven't developed the same resilience? It could be because Generation X's fear for their continued relevancy and job security? And does it really matter why? Mental health is as important as physical health. You eat a salad at lunchtime and use the stairs? Do you do the crossword and set realistic deadlines for your work?

Anxiety and stress are never good. They do not engender 'a missing sense of urgency', implying a person will work harder. When an employee is suffering from anxiety they often avoid certain tasks, contact with others or activity loads that might cause stress. Anxiety kills creativity and stifles intellect. It hits executive functions such as

the ability to organise and reduces effectiveness. Ultimately it undermines the ability to achieve results. Anxiety is blood pressure of the mind.

I am middle aged and have often wondered why peers openly complain about their aching knees and high cholesterol, yet no one wants to talk about their emotional wellbeing or heaven forbid the concept of counselling. I admire my millennial colleagues and their ability to speak up about the mental challenges they face. In response we are developing a programme called Physical and Mental Fitness for Life.

In addition to physical activities (that even I can manage) and nutritional guides and events (that even I can almost manage) a team of employees researched steps they and colleagues can take to support mental and physical health. They identified a total of 30 related initiatives they want to introduce this year. Simple actions like setting up a lending library for people to borrow books from. They introduced board games at lunch time which has the added social value of getting new employees and people that might otherwise not spend time together to engage in almost friendly warfare. Writing in HBR in November of last year, founder of Women Online, Morra

Aarons-Mele saw mental illness as a challenge but not a weakness. She shared that being more aware of your mental health means knowing yourself and your strengths better. Increased awareness not only means better overall wellbeing, it also enables us to be more authentic leaders and to engage more effectively with others.

As part of our wellbeing commitment, we fund external counselling for any colleague who feels they would benefit from the experience. I explain to anyone who requests this support that firstly, counselling is simply a path to being a better version of yourself, whatever better means at that time. Secondly, that I have been using counselling on and off myself for a few years. It is of enormous professional and personal value, I wish it was mandatory for everyone.

Managing the mental health of employees is an enabler, a commercial contributor. For HR and line executives it is part of the answer to challenges in TA, underperformance, engagement and other talent issues. At a time when every advantage counts, why do firms not embrace and leverage improved mental fitness to create competitive advantage and achieve improved results?