The Value of a Psychologically Healthy Workplace

We all know that work, in any form, has a significant effect on our emotional and psychological well-being for better or for worse—in particular, the quality and psychological health of the workplace environment. As research is increasingly showing, a negative work environment can lead to a number of physical and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

A toxic work environment has also been linked to insufficient sleep, which increases the risk of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, and over time has been associated with a shortened lifespan.

Not to mention the economic impact that the poor mental health of its employees has on companies and organizations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), five of the 10 leading causes of disability worldwide are mental health-related and the estimated cost to the global economy is approximately US $1 trillion per year in lost productivity:

The quality of our work environment, in any industry, has a significant impact on our emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. As is the case with any harmful condition, the best intervention is prevention. For organizational leaders, paying attention to creating psychologically healthy work environments is not only crucial to the health of the company but, more importantly, to its people.

Workplaces that promote mental health and support people with mental disorders are more likely to increase productivity and reduce absenteeism, thus benefiting from the associated economic gains. Employees' mental health problems and their impact on an enterprise's productivity and disability/medical costs are critical human resource issues. Employers' organizations, trade unions and government policy-makers are realizing that the social and economic costs of mental health problems in the workplace cannot be ignored.

Mental Health Issues

Mental health issues can manifest in a variety of ways in the workplace, including:

- Calling in sick often
- Withdrawal/isolation
- Personality changes
- Difficulty focusing and remembering details
- Difficulty organizing thoughts and tasks
- Other cognitive challenges

Workplaces that promote mental health and support people with mental disorders are more likely to increase productivity and reduce absenteeism, thus benefiting from the associated economic gains.

Employees' mental health problems and their impact on an enterprise's productivity and disability/medical costs are critical human resource issues. Employers' organizations, trade unions and government policy-makers are realizing that the social and economic costs of mental health problems in the workplace cannot be ignored.

The Vitamin Model for Mental Health

One framework for looking at how our environment affects our well-being is the Vitamin Model of Mental Health. As its name suggests, the Vitamin Model is based on an analogy of the relationship between vitamins and physical health.[2]

Warr P. Happiness and Mental Health: A Framework of Vitamins in the Environment and Mental Processes in the Person. Handbook of stress and health: A guide to research and practice. London and New York; 2016.

According to researchers Maria Jahoda and Peter Warr, the presence of certain psychological features of the environment—or "environmental vitamins" so to speak—though important for psychological well-being, will have varying effects as their level increases.

For example, vitamins such as A and D, though essential for health, can be harmful when consumed in large quantities. However, other vitamins such as C and E, which are also essential to health, can be consumed in large quantities with no adverse effects.

The Vitamin Model was originated primarily to provide a more general perspective on how the psychological features of any environment affect mental health and well-being. It has since been applied to happiness or unhappiness in settings including the work environment.[2]

The model posits that the well-being of employees and that of the organization correlates with the following 12 characteristics of a healthy workplace environment:[2]

1. Opportunity for personal control, covering variables conventionally labeled as discretion, decision latitude, participation
2. Opportunity for skill use and acquisition
3. Externally generated goals ranging across job demands, underload and overload, task identity, role conflict, required emotional labor, and work-home conflict
4. Variety in job content and location
5. Environmental clarity, role clarity, task feedback, and low future ambiguity
6. Social support, quality, and quantity of social interactions
7. Availability of money and resources
8. Physical security—working conditions, degree of hazard, and similar themes
9. Valued social position in terms of the significance of a task or role
10. Supportive supervision
11. Career outlook, either as job security, as an opportunity for advancement, or for a shift to other roles
12. Equity as justice both within one's organization and in that organization's relations with society

The Healthy Workplace

Below are some further components that have been correlated with employee and organization well-being:

- **Addressing mental health stigma:** Extending employee assistance programs, informing staff that support is available
- **Employee involvement:** Empowering employees by involving them in decision-making and giving them more job autonomy
- **Healthy scheduling:** Offering employees flexible work scheduling and other benefits such as flex time that help them manage the demands they face both inside and outside of work
- **Growth and development:** Opportunities for continuing education, tuition reimbursement, and leadership development
- **Wellness programs:** Benefits that help employees optimize their physical and mental health and develop healthy lifestyles, such as stress-management, weight-loss, and smoking-cessation programs
- **Employee recognition:** Rewarding employees both monetarily and non-monetarily through performance-based bonuses and pay increases, profit-sharing, employee awards programs and genuine expressions of thanks

Because of the stigma associated with mental disorders, employers need to ensure that individuals feel supported and are provided with the necessary resources to do their job.

Psychologist Dr. Jacinta Jiménez describes psychological safety as "a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves and one that allows employees to feel respected and included." This is especially true for teams. "If team members frequently do not feel they are in a

group that is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, motivation, morale, creativity, and even innovation can drop."

Further, says Jiménez, "Employees who work in strength-based organizations stay with their company longer, feel more engaged, learn their roles more quickly, and produce higher quality work."

> **Solutions EAP** provides free, short-term, and confidential counseling for employees and their families.
>
> Call **1-800-526-3485** for information and a confidential appointment.
>
> www.solutions-eap.com