

MARTYN ANWYL: TACKLING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: IS IT PART OF YOUR WELLNESS PROGRAMME?

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Asking an organisation to consider focussing on building greater awareness about domestic violence (DV) as well as its prevention, as one area of their health and wellness programme, often raises concerns. “That’s a HR issue” or “we don’t have an issue with domestic violence here” or “what happens outside of the office is not our concern,” are common reactions.

Whether it is factored in or not will depend on an organisations’ awareness of the impact of DV in the workplace, and what it is they are trying to achieve through their wellness programmes. Those offering basic wellness schemes which include a bowl of fruit or a cycle to work scheme may not be able to encompass the wider, less comfortable issues of wellness such as domestic violence or bullying.

Impact of domestic violence on companies

Companies that implement comprehensive wellness programmes are doing so for the benefit of employees, improving engagement, having a healthy workforce – including emotional wellbeing,

increasing productivity and reducing absenteeism. If these objectives ring true with your organisation, consider this:

Domestic violence costs UK businesses £1.9 billion per year in absenteeism, turnover and lost productivity. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men are affected by domestic violence during their adult lives; collectively about 10% of your workforce. Police receive one DV call per minute. At the extreme, two women are killed each week through domestic violence. Sharing some of these statistics with our clients, the issue of DV in the workplace starts to become more tangible. Looking at it more granularly, 58% of abused women arrive late for work 5 times a month, 53% miss at least 3 days per month and 75% of people who endure domestic abuse are targeted at work. 96% of domestic abuse survivors say that their abuse affected their ability to work.

Often the person who endures – even one that may not be living with their abuser – can easily be targeted whilst at work. Without the victim informing their employer, telephone numbers, emails and their work address remain easy ways for the abuse to continue. 87% of survivors said their abuser made harassing calls to them at work (some receiving 50-100 calls per week).

As shocking as the above figures are, the number of DV incidents are decreasing in line with general crime reduction but use of support services are increasing i.e. victims are more likely to speak out and are -needing help from public services and their employer.

What can you do?

Firstly, companies need to accept that DV is a real issue that impacts their business day in and day out. Regardless of the size of your organisation, you have to fulfil your responsibility as an employer. Companies also have a duty of care and legal requirement to keep employees physically and emotionally safe at work through the Health and Safety Acts – as well as the Equalities Act and Employment Rights Act. Finally, you also have a convincing business case to act.

Business cases that rely on reducing absenteeism and improving presenteeism generally tend to receive some scepticism, especially in companies that do not believe they have an issue related to these areas. For these, it will be a long journey to convince them about the importance of engaging with DV-related wellness strategies. For the rest, taking a leap of faith will, crucially, help those who are subject to abuse and will ultimately help a company's bottom line.

For those taking a leap of faith, the next steps should be:

- Developing a focussed and appropriate DV policy that is embedded and acted on within the corporate culture
- Ensuring support is available through accredited and specialist trained HR and practitioner professionals which is supported by a well promoted and understood

employee assistance programme (EAP) service that also has a policy and programme for their employees and understanding as to the nuances of DV

- Developing a communication programme that is linked to wellness programme

Organisations such as The Corporate Alliance Against Domestic Violence (The Alliance) provide advice and a range of services across each of the areas mentioned above. They are the only national organisation that is solely dedicated to working with employers on DV. The Alliance is a business to business charity focussing on the needs of employers taking action against domestic abuse. The Alliance also provides accredited training to managers to help identify potential signs of DV. Loss of productivity will be an obvious one but not so obvious could be changes in behaviour, wearing high necked clothing in warm weather and other more subtle signs that something is wrong. Melissa Morbeck, Executive Director of The Alliance, cites examples of people who have spoken to her after training sessions that have themselves been the subject of abuse or who now recognise the signs in people they have managed in the past.

DV is a terrible reality and the issue sits across both HR and elements of a wellness programme. HR will develop the policy in conjunction with organisations who understand the nuances of DV and workplace needs to ensure HR professionals and managers are prepared to identify issues through accredited training and provide support up to a certain level. Beyond that, the professional support of EAP providers who have been trained should be leveraged. Communication, included as part of a wellness programme, is paramount. Flyers on notice boards, desk drops, email blasts and notices placed in toilet cubicles are all methods that companies can use to let their employees know that there is support and also to raise the issue amongst its workforce. As Morbeck says, “it’s critical for people to know they are not alone and that employers know that they can respond with confidence and sensitivity in the appropriate manner and take action that is linked to direct service”.

It is important that your company can readily identify if DV is affecting an employee and has a programme in place to tackle it. With 10% of your workforce affected by DV, if you are doing nothing about it, the time to act is now.

Martyn Anwyl, Head of Health and Productivity, Buck Consultants