

Mental Health in the UK Retail Sector

Letitia Rowlin, Risk Partner, Health and Wellbeing, Willis Towers Watson

Positive mental health leads to better profits, better productivity and better corporate resilience, yet historically for many businesses, mental health has come low down on the health, safety and risk prevention agenda, that is if it was on it at all. The cost to businesses of mental ill health in the retail sector is between £777 and £989 per employee per year.¹

At a time when many employees are facing increasing pressure, mental health is emerging on to the global evolving risks landscape. Parliament has recently debated the introduction of legislation to make Mental Health First Aid mandatory for organisations like physical first aid, with leaders from the Retail Trust and the British Independent Retailers Association supporting such a move.² Some might say in the current climate there is not the appetite or money to invest in mental wellbeing, but can you really afford not to?

Sources:

¹ Thriving at Work – The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers, 2017

² The Grocer, 23rd November 2018

³ LFS self-reported estimates

Mental health – we all have it

We all have mental health. It is how we think, feel and behave, and affects us in every aspect of our day to day lives. It will fluctuate from time to time, just as our physical health does.

Analysis carried out for the Stevenson/Farmer independent review in to mental health shows that the cost of poor mental health to UK employers is between £33bn and £42bn per year. During 2017, 15.4 million working days were lost due to stress, depression or anxiety³.

Burnout in retail

The retail sector is characterised by long hours, unpredictable shifts, weekend/seasonal/holiday working and low pay. In a sector where a positive customer experience is paramount to success, often this creates a situation where strategies to enhance the customer experience include the design of processes and procedures which dictate how customer facing staff interact with consumers. Such may require front line staff to control or suppress their natural emotional and behavioural responses which may arise through dealing with difficult or challenging customers, requiring a high degree of self-management. The stress of doing so ultimately impacts the retail worker and may affect the way they are present in the workplace in terms of energy and motivation.

In a sector where good communication skills are vital to the customer experience, to what extent do retailers invest in soft skills training such as conflict resolution or dealing with difficult conversations for front line workers who face the risk of becoming the verbal punch bag for the dissatisfied customer? With the challenges of a fast paced environment, retail jobs often treated as temporary and training budgets cut amidst difficult trading conditions, the answer is probably few, and from a commercial perspective this is to some extent understandable.

Current reality

A 2016 CIPD study highlighted the impact of mental ill health on workers, noting that in those reporting stress, 48% say they are less patient with colleagues and customers, something that retailers can ill afford from a brand and reputation perspective or in creating workplace harmony.

The reality is that in the current climate, many retailers are facing the prospect of having to make further staff cuts and store closures, creating more uncertainty and financial worries for retail workers on top of other stresses. With retailers looking at ways to claw back the increase in costs from implementing the living wage, employee benefits is another perk facing cuts.

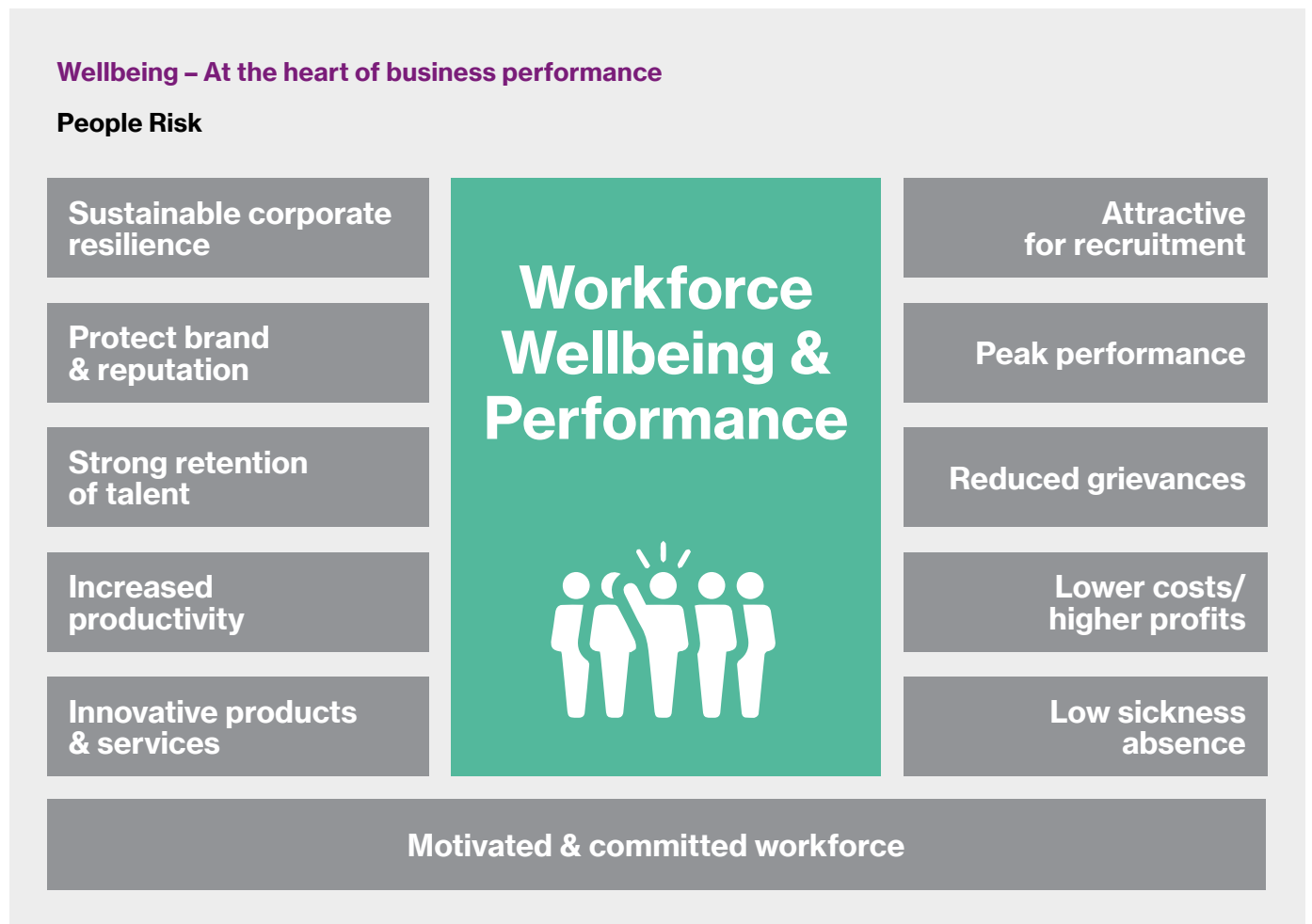
Feel well, perform well

There is a duty of care upon employers to provide a safe working environment which includes taking care of the psychological safety of the workforce. With stress the greatest threat to psychological wellbeing, it is essential that organisations seek as far as possible to create environments where people feel well and can perform well.

The responsibility for managing stress in the workplace often sits with HR but is also a health and safety issue. Historically, for many businesses, it has resulted in a mix of two approaches:

- Waiting for someone to become ill and then trying to fix them, perhaps through occupational health.
- Focussing on making workers more resilient so they can manage their own stress. Resilience is necessary to see people through hard times, but people shouldn't have to draw on their resilience to get through every day as a matter of course.

Both these approaches have their place, but fail to address the deeper issue – the causes of stress in the first place. Instead, businesses need to take a look from the perspective of prevention.



Causes of workplace stress

The six main causes of stress in the workplace defined by the Health & Safety Executive are demands, control, support, relationships, role and change, known as the Management Standards. Whilst we can generalise about causes of stress across the retail sector, the only way to know for sure what really impacts on your own workers stress and mental health is to ask them about their own experiences, and really listen to what they have to say. This data can then be used to drive wellbeing solutions, engaging with employees as to what those solutions might look like with the overall aim of improving working conditions and implementing wellbeing solutions which resonate with the workforce.

Strengthen the worker v reduce the hazards

Management standard

Demands

Workloads, work patterns, work environment

Control

How much say a person has in how they do their work

Role

Whether people understand their roles in the organisation and that roles are not conflicting

Relationships

Promoting positive working, avoiding conflicts and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

Support

Encouragement/resources from organisation, line management and colleagues

Change

How organisational change is managed and communicated

Improving mental wellbeing

Thinking in a broader sense, the 'Thriving at Work' report produced by Lord Stevenson and Paul Farmer in October 2017 set out six key recommendations for employers to implement to improve mental health awareness and support in the workplace. Education plays a key part in implementation, moving away from the 'after the horse has bolted' approach and educating to enable early conversations to take place around mental health before situations escalate to ill health and lost time. Incorporating aspects of prevention, early intervention and support for recovery in to your mental health at work plan is a must for sustainability in the long term.

Six recommendations for employers – regardless of workplace type, industry or size

1. Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan
2. Develop mental health awareness among employees
3. Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling
4. Provide your employees with good working conditions
5. Promote effective people management
6. Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing

At Willis Towers Watson, we're working with retail partners to help them lead the way in retail of the future.

If you would like to know more, please contact a member of our Client Service team, or your account manager, or contact [Kelvyn Sampson](#), our GB Industry Practice Leader – Retail and Leisure & Hospitality

This publication offers a general overview of its subject matter. It does not necessarily address every aspect of its subject or every product available in the market. It is not intended to be, and should not be, used to replace specific advice relating to individual situations and we do not offer, and this should not be seen as, legal, accounting or tax advice. If you intend to take any action or make any decision on the basis of the content of this publication you should first seek specific advice from an appropriate professional. Some of the information in this publication may be compiled from third party sources we consider to be reliable, however we do not guarantee and are not responsible for the accuracy of such. The views expressed are not necessarily those of Willis Towers Watson. Copyright Willis Limited 2019. All rights reserved.

Willis Towers Watson is a trading name of Willis Limited, Registered number: 181116 England and Wales. Registered address: 51 Lime Street, London, EC3M 7DQ. A Lloyd's Broker. Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority for its general insurance mediation activities only.