

Viewpoints

Employee mental health in Africa: A growing priority

By Melanie Birgé and Gibson Ateng



As the effects of the pandemic and regional issues such as political and economic headwinds, increasing health care costs and a fast-changing business environment continue to make themselves felt, employers in Africa are increasingly considering employee wellbeing as a strategic priority.

However, it's not just about managing the potential downside. There is a growing movement within organisations to understand the advantages of a holistic wellbeing strategy:

- Developing a culture of care can have a positive ripple effect on the workforce. Creating a positive workplace environment is essential to support employee wellbeing.
- A thoughtful approach to wellbeing, especially when coupled with an effective communication strategy, can have a positive effect on retention and help the employer to be seen as an “employer of choice” in the region.

Mental health disorders are on the rise

Mental health disorders are common in the workforce globally; around one in four (23%) employees suffer from severe stress, anxiety or depression.*

- Over 300 million people suffer from depression globally.
- One in four people is affected by a mental disorder at some point in his or her life; nearly two-thirds never seek help from a health professional.
- Global rates of depression and anxiety have increased 15% to 20% in the past decade.
- 800,000 people die by suicide each year, equivalent to one person every 40 seconds.
- Global economic losses related to mental health disorders between 2011 and 2030 are estimated to total US\$16.3 trillion, comparable to those of cardiovascular diseases and higher than cancer, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes.

*Source: Willis Towers Watson's 2019/2020 Global Benefit Attitudes Survey

■ Sources: The Lancet Global Health, Mental Health in Africa, WHO's 2014 Mental Health Atlas

Figure 1. **The four dimensions of wellbeing**



The four dimensions

As we move to a more nuanced understanding of wellbeing, four distinct areas emerge: physical, financial, emotional and social wellbeing (Figure 1).

Traditionally, the focus has been on physical wellbeing; however, as the very concept of the workplace and how work gets done changes, this approach will necessarily become inadequate. The pandemic, financial stress and the increased incidence of chronic disease are starting to highlight the other three dimensions of wellbeing – and the most drastic change may lie in emotional, or mental, health.

The [2021 Global Medical Trends Survey Report](#) found that, within the next 18 months, 40% of health insurers predict that mental and behavioural conditions will be among the most prevalent globally, and 39% predict that they will be the most expensive.

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Eye on Africa

- Africa has 1.4 mental health workers per 100,000 people, compared with a global average of 9.0 per 100,000.
- Africa performs relatively poorly with regard to the number of psychiatrists, the number of hospital beds for patients with mental illness and the coverage of outpatient facilities.
- While the global annual rate of visits to mental health outpatient facilities is 1,051 per 100,000 population, in Africa the rate is 14 per 100,000.

Sources: The Lancet Global Health, Mental Health in Africa, WHO's 2014 Mental Health Atlas

Mental health in Africa

Africa suffers from much of the same ailments as the rest of the world when it comes to stress at work and financial anxiety. However, the following issues are exacerbated in the region:

- **Stigma and taboos:** Similar to many developing markets in Asia, the social taboo around mental health in the region is even stronger than it is in Europe or the U.S. This causes many of these problems to be swept under the rug rather than tackled head-on. Suicide prevention is even more difficult on the continent; however, it is essential.
- **Social issues:** Family pressures also contribute to stress; this is often exacerbated for women who must shoulder traditional gender roles along with their occupational ones.
- **Financial pressures:** Many countries lack a social safety net for retirement or health, so much of these costs are privatised and taken on as a personal burden.



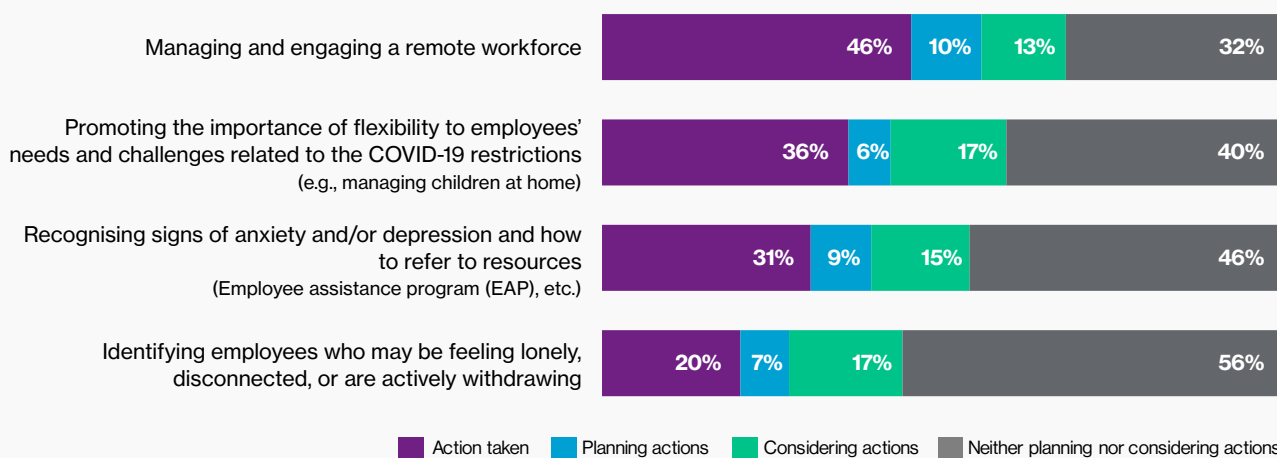
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What can employers do?

Employers can put in place a range of initiatives and programs that have a real and tangible impact on employee mental health. Some examples include:

- **Communication around mental health:** Developing awareness from all stakeholders will support preventive action and early detection.
- **Improving management style:** Supporting and creating an open dialogue and building confidence among employees helps mitigate stress and anxiety. Our study found that only 20% of companies are offering manager training to identify employees who may be feeling lonely, disconnected or are actively withdrawing, while three in 10 train managers to recognise signs of anxiety and how to refer employees to resources such as the employee assistance program (*Figure 2*).
- **Facilitate access to care:** Reviewing medical benefits to ensure they include psychiatrist/psychologist visits and identifying available practitioners close to places of both work and living are key. Implementing an employee assistance program can also contribute to supporting employee mental health, for example by providing access to telehealth mental therapy appointments for those who are struggling with their mental health, both inside and outside of work. Currently, only half of employers in the region offering or plan to offer an EAP (*Figure 3*).

Figure 2. Has your company offered or plan to offer manager training on any of the following?



Source: 2020 COVID-19 Benefits Survey, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa

Figure 3. **What actions has your organisation taken, or is planning/considering, in support employee wellbeing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

51% Offer/enhance access to employee assistance program (EAP)

55% Offer/expand access to online mental health services

Source: 2020 COVID-19 Benefits Survey, Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa

Willis Towers Watson offers a range of solutions that can help you develop and maintain your organisation's wellbeing strategy to better support your human capital in these uncertain times.

For more information, contact:

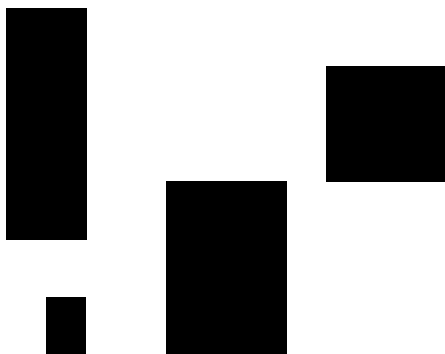
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Globally, mental health is an increasing concern, and the pandemic has made it even more challenging. In Africa, we are seeing similar trends, reinforced by some additional constraints, such as fewer mental health facilities and greater stigma; however, nowadays it is possible to act and improve employee mental health in Africa at an acceptable cost.



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