WELLBEING

Highlights from the Major Projects Association event held on 17th October 2018

> *'Whilst we shout safety, we whisper health.'*
> Jennie Armstrong, Head of Occupational Health and Wellbeing, Tideway

Major projects are risky places to work. Yet whilst we have made considerable strides in understanding and improving workplace safety, and removing or mitigating the risks of physical injury, we have only started to recognise the importance of personal wellbeing and mental health. Few organisations have established mental health and wellbeing strategies, and fewer still monitor the mental health of employees.

Creating and managing a workable wellbeing policy is complex. This Major Projects Association seminar set out to explore some of these complexities and to provide a starting point for organisations seeking to create a policy or to understand its impact.

Any wellbeing policy needs to recognise the nature of major projects and the need for employees to perform under pressure and in difficult physical environments. The upsides of a successful policy are productive, motivated and safe employees, and resilient organisations. The downsides are all risks: of accident, litigation and to reputation as well as levels of performance.

SCALE AND PREVALENCE

Poor mental fitness (as distinct from poor mental health) is a problem that is often invisible, that affects all industries and that raises challenges for major projects:

- 73% of employees surveyed by the mental health charity, Mind had experienced poor mental health in their current job, but only half of them disclosed this to their employer.
- Mental health does not have parity with physical health. The same Mind survey revealed that whereas 27% of employers would always go to work when experiencing poor physical health, that figure rises to 60% in the case of poor mental health.
- Research studies indicate: a negative relationship between organisational change and mental health; a higher rate of 'psychological morbidity' amongst temporary employees; the risk of an employee developing a common mental health problem can be predicted by low job control, high psychological demands and low occupational social support.
- 46% of men aged 50–54 who left construction said it was due to ill health. The average for all industries was just 25% (Department for Work and Pensions 2015).
- Project work often involves employees working away from their home and their common support networks.

CAUSES

> *'Outdated attitudes prevail, for example, if someone is working fine – "they must be ok." If they are not fine – "oh well, then they should not have said yes and taken so much on.'''*
> Sarah Thorne, Partner Owner, Queensbury Consulting

Poor mental fitness is driven by several factors; some personal and some organisational. At a personal level, in Anglo-Saxon culture and particularly amongst men, there is a tendency to bottle up stress, trauma or poor mental fitness thanks to the concept of 'a stiff upper lip', fear of stigma amongst peers or concerns about the consequences for employment.

At an organisational level, businesses responding to commercial, contract or time pressure may transfer that pressure onto employees in the form of unrealistic expectations, unmanaged business change and a requirement for employees to master new skills or achieve some form of certification. The increasing scale, uncertainty and complexity of major projects may place unsustainable pressures to succeed on the sponsor, the project manager or other members of the team. Poor contracting behaviour can involve clients making unrealistic demands of contractors and their subcontractors.

> *'Get the basics right before any long-term strategies.'*
> Jennie Armstrong, Head of Occupational Health and Wellbeing, Tideway

ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY

A workable health and wellbeing strategy may be represented by a hierarchy of elements that are preventive, proactive, reactive and that offer added value. It is important to start with the **preventive**, as there is little point in addressing health and wellbeing in employees who remain at risk from exposure to physical risks; from falling or crush injuries; exposure to noise, dust or vibration and so on.

Proactive elements include those associated with a worker's basic physiological and psychological needs: a fair salary, manageable working hours, family time, welfare facilities. In some physically demanding workplaces, these may include access to food and water too. But they also involve organisational arrangements associated with higher levels of psychological wellbeing; a culture that provides good communication, vision and values, respect and inclusion, recognition and status, flexible working.

Given the risks to mental fitness, organisations should make provision for **reactive** support in the event of a problem: access to occupational health and employee assistance services; mental health first aiders; wellbeing policies; training and upskilling for line managers.

Added-value services typically address personal wellbeing and include free fruit, healthy canteen food, gym membership, yoga and health checks or access to doctors or dentists from the workplace. These can all be valuable but *only if all the other elements are already in place.*

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGERIAL STRATEGY

> *'Mental fitness is the responsibility of the leadership chain.'*
> Brigadier Tim Hodgetts CBE, Senior Health Adviser, British Army

The importance of organisational culture and the need for time and resources mean that organisations should focus on securing top team buy-in – both in terms of visible support and endorsement for the policies, and by recruiting senior role models willing to share their personal, lived experience or stories of mental health challenges. No wellbeing policy will survive if the process and systems that drive it do not reflect or are out of synch with the culture of the organisation.

First-line managers are the closest to their employees and – if properly trained and supported – best able to talk to them, raise issues, observe and intervene. Working on the distinction between mental fitness and mental illness can help alleviate any embarrassment and stigma during confidential conversations with employees. Functional managers such as project or change managers have an important opportunity to contribute through the mapping of user-journeys; the design and use of prototypes and pilots to make sure they have addressed the psychological needs of system users or those involved in large-scale change; and by gathering effective user-feedback.

CHALLENGES

> *'We know far more about the causes than we do about the impact of our interventions – this needs to change.'*
> Brigadier Tim Hodgetts CBE, Senior Health Adviser, British Army

There are several organisational challenges to an investment in employee wellbeing. The lack of understanding or common metrics in relation to the impact and value of any policy, as well as the interventions associated with it, can make for a challenging investment case.

Since mental fitness fluctuates for all employees, this makes it hard to target interventions where they are needed and hard for those on the ground to recognise a problem and help the employee concerned; particularly given the stigma of mental illness and reticence amongst employees to signal problems.

Projects often involve contractors and subcontractors, so that many of those working on a given project are unlikely to be part of the client organisation's direct workforce. This means that any policy relies on the supply chain for its effectiveness. However, this feature of projects places an onus on everyone involved with this 'shared workforce' to address the problem for the benefit of the industry as a whole.

> *'We are all leaders! Are we sufficiently aware of the shadow we cast and consequences of the decisions we make? This is against the background of the three pillars (time, cost and quality) and the current economic pressures and tight margins. Poor decision-making by us as leaders, are passing problems and poor mental health to those working at all levels below!'*
> Alastair Pitcher, Project Executive, Environment Agency

POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
- How can we measure holistically the value and effectiveness of a Wellbeing Policy and of any interventions?
- How can we address Wellbeing and Mental Health in the design of the project organisation?
- How do we educate the whole workforce about their own mental health and that of their co-workers?

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