

Alan Foster: Firms must break down mental health stigma

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One in four of us will experience mental health issues in our lifetimes



While we may need a certain level of stress to push us to perform at our best, extreme work pressures leave many struggling to cope due to poor mental health. As a society, our stress levels are rising, with the Mental Health Foundation's 2018 study finding that 74% of people have felt so stressed they have been overwhelmed.

In the financial services sector, the number of stress-related absences is higher now than in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

More than 10 years on, the number of working days lost per worker per year in financial services due to stress is now 31% higher than the average between 2007 and 2010, according to analysis from employment law specialist Fox & Partners.

Even with the drive to increase awareness and take action, all of us know someone who will be affected by mental health issues during their working life.

The finance sector is a demanding environment. Volatile markets, increasing regulations, long hours and high expectations play a part, but there's also the 'stiff upper lip' culture that needs to be addressed. It is time for firms to wake up and change the working environment. They must break down the stigma around mental health, or nothing will change.

Creating an open culture

The health and happiness of our employees is hugely important to Rowan Dartington. We strive for a culture of openness that normalises mental health issues and ensures people feel comfortable asking for help.

Mental health can often be difficult to talk about, but we want people to know how important it is to be candid about the challenges they are facing.

We believe that by encouraging staff to build relationships internally and externally, it will foster a supportive environment in which mental wellbeing is discussed more openly.

Every little step helps to destigmatise mental health. And alongside the initiatives we have in place to keep people healthy and active, we have been focused on improving the way everyone at Rowan Dartington thinks about mental health.

Asking the question

Finding out what our people would like to see us doing more was one of the first and most important steps. We now get their views regularly and use their feedback to inform all of our wellbeing initiatives.

We are a people business. Employees are our most vital asset and are at the very foundation of our company culture. We wanted our culture to change, so we asked them how they would like to see it happen. This is what we came up with.

- Self-help

Not everyone will want to talk to their colleagues about their mental health but we wanted to find a way to make these difficult conversations easier.

All our employees have full access to the self-help app *My Possible Self*, which has been clinically proven to relieve the symptoms of stress and anxiety. It is not intended to be a substitute for seeking professional help but it does promote good mental health and wellbeing and provide day-to-day support.

In addition, we provide access to an Employee Assistance Programme and all staff are offered Bupa membership, regardless of seniority.

- Mental health training

Every office has a 'physical' first aider, so we are exploring applying the same principle to mental health. We have offered mental health training to our staff, and the first group who took part provided positive feedback.

We hope to roll out more mental health first-aid training to provide more staff with skills to help themselves, while also creating a supportive and collaborative environment in which people have the confidence and understanding to talk sensitively about mental health.

- Striking a balance

A work/life balance is at the forefront of our minds when we are job hunting and we advocate for it as much as we can. We are flexible wherever possible, and we encourage a supportive team approach rather than long independent hours.

We believe that if senior members of the team adhere to it, junior staff will follow suit. We've just announced a reduction in our contractual working hours and, wherever possible, we encourage individuals to limit the number of emails they send outside of work.

To put it simply, mental health matters, and we have an obligation to our staff to ensure their mental wellbeing is cared for in the same way as their physical health.

One in four of us will experience mental health issues in our lifetimes. The financial sector must step up and tackle the stigmas that surround it and care for our staff as best we can. We must talk openly and support one another. It's the only way to start addressing the very real issues at hand.

Alan Foster is head of people at Rowan Dartington