

EAP Association Newsletter

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Revealed: better management of mental health leads to business benefits

Mental health training for line managers could save companies millions of pounds every year by helping to reduce levels of employee absence.

That was the headline finding from my work with Dr Juliet Hassard of Queen's University Belfast — research that has attempted to improve understanding of the role of managers in supporting the mental wellbeing of their teams, and address the tangle of workplace issues around stress, mental ill-health and long-term absence.

With so many sensitivities and implications for productivity, relationships and costs involved, it's clear that UK employers need more insights into what works, an informed approach to wellbeing strategy and where and why to invest budgets. Reportedly, one in six workers experience mental health challenges. 12.7% of all sick days are due to mental ill-health, which is now also the most common cause of long-term absence. The estimated cost of poor employee mental health to British employers is over £50 billion annually. Practical, impactful ways of supporting mental wellbeing provide a major ROI.

We looked at anonymised survey data from several thousand companies in England collected between 2020 and 2023 by the Enterprise Research Centre at Warwick Business School as a part of a larger programme of research on workplace mental health and productivity. The survey covered mental health and well-being practices among the employers, including whether they offered mental health training to line managers.

The analysis suggested that employers providing mental health training for their line managers saw particular business benefits: there was improved staff recruitment and retention, indications of better customer service, and lower levels of long-term mental health sickness absence. (We used controls for the age, sector, and size of the companies to avoid skewed results).

So, equipping line managers with the knowledge, skills and confidence to better manage mental health at work appears to mean better business outcomes. And that's important in terms of the business case for persuading employers to continue to invest in supporting the mental wellbeing of their workforces.

Follow-up research is now ongoing into what's going on behind the headline: what kinds of training work best, what kinds of skills are being developed, and which are the most important?

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