Mental Health Intervention in the Workplace amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to examine why the mental health of employees should be prioritized in the workplace. Most employees have likely experienced a visible illness or injury at some point during their careers. It is easier to identify these physical ailments that may adversely affect an employee's performance at work, such as a broken leg or the common cold. However, there are conditions that are much less visible that negatively impact employees every day, and mental health is one of them. A person's mental health is a significant factor in their work life that should not be ignored. While it may be difficult to recognize when someone is struggling with depression, anxiety, or another form of mental illness on the surface, employers should not automatically assume their entire staff is okay. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with an increase in civil unrest in society, employers must reevaluate the way they conduct business, starting with the treatment of their employees. To aid employers with prioritizing mental health at work, this paper's objectives are to address the stigma associated with mental health issues/illness, develop recommendations for inclusive work environments, increase an employer's investment in mental health, reduce employee turnover, and normalize respect in the workplace. The findings are discussed, and recommendations are provided. Employers who intentionally prioritize and invest in their employees' mental health will significantly reduce the costs associated with attracting and recruiting new staff due to high turnover rates. Additionally, their reputation as a preferred employer will increase.

Keywords

1. Introduction

It is the employees of a company that make it successful, and flourishing companies understand and value the importance of treating their employees well. Businesses succeed based on the expertise, knowledge, and experience of their employees. It is important that an organization respects and cares for its employees, from providing appropriate compensation, creating positive work environments, and providing quality benefit packages to also considering the employees' mental and emotional well-being. Due to the unprecedented times of heightened levels of uncertainty created by the ever-evolving global Coronavirus pandemic (also known as COVID-19), impending international public health emergencies, worldwide social unrest and injustices, political divisiveness, and continuing economic woes that have left no human being unaffected, it is critical that organizations take an intentional interest in prioritizing their employees' mental health as well as their physical health [1] [2] [3].

The purpose of this paper is to examine the state of mental health in the workplace, regardless of the industry in which employees work. The questions are:

1) *How does mental health impact productivity and the employee experience in the workplace*?

2) *Can support for mental health in the workplace improve the employer-employee experience/morale, decrease turnover rate, reduce absenteeism, and attract and sustain new talent*?

During these uncharted times, mental health needs to be consistently prioritized in the workplace. If employees' mental well-being is not prioritized, it will continue to result in decreased employee loyalty, employee engagement, and retention [4] [5]. The challenge is developing an effective and pragmatic mental health intervention program for employees across multiple industries that is sustainable.

1.1. Significance of the Problem

The workplace is essential for businesses to deliver their products or services efficiently to consumers. Industry-specific workplace types vary. A workplace can be located outdoors in nature, inside an office, in a classroom, hospital, restaurant, in a factory, or remotely. No matter what the setting is, the best workplaces provide their workforce with the tools they need in a constructive and efficient environment. The ability to create a productive workplace is crucial to running a business and cultivating a positive work culture.

A drastic change has occurred in the way people live and work as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the current toxic climate of society. Due to the global pandemic, March 2020 will forever be remembered as the month when workplaces and the way businesses conduct business changed. In the wake of this unprecedented pandemic, employers and employees were forced to pivot quickly. Essential workers in industries such as healthcare, law enforcement, and

banking were forced to incorporate protective gear as part of their work attire. A countless number of employees across a wide range of industries were forced to adopt alternative working arrangements (such as remote working) with minimal to no training and adjust to abrupt shifts in their work culture and processes while simultaneously homeschooling their children, caring for sick loved ones while trying to keep themselves safe, managing worries about financial and job security concerns, and even coping with the indescribable grief of burying loved ones who perished from this deadly virus [4] [5] [6] [7].

Chronic workplace stress causes employees to burn out and suffer from adverse mental health problems, which hurt an individual's productivity and motivation. It has been over three years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the effects are still being felt by the workforce. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers developed an array of mental health and substance abuse problems nearly overnight, including but not limited to anxiety, depression, exhaustion, and fear [8] [9]. For this reason, it is essential to emphasize employee mental health in the workplace to encourage employee loyalty, engagement, and retention.

1.2. Background of the Problem

Although the terms "mental health" and "mental illness" may seem new, they have been observed throughout history. The term "mental hygiene" became popular in the medical community during the 19th century. The emotional and behavioral struggles that have existed for generations did not have an official name before this time [10]. The presence of mental illness predates the existence of names or diagnoses of specific disorders. Historically, hysteria, shell shock, psychosis, and, in some instances, demonic possession has been used to describe a range of mental disorders, including depression, PTSD, and bipolar disorder. It was not until the 20th century that society began to publicly accept mental illness and doctors started treating it.

As a result of the highly disruptive and uncertain health emergency COVID-19 and ongoing civil unrest in society, mental health challenges have intensified in the 21st century. The Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed a diverse group of adults to assess COVID-19's impact on mental health as the pandemic became a nationwide psychological trauma. In this study, about 45% of adults reported that it affected their mental health, and 19% reported it had a significant impact on their emotional health [8]. There were slightly higher percentile rates among women, Hispanics, and African Americans among the adults polled. According to the survey, it is common for people to feel scared, anxious, depressed, insomniac, or simply on edge when faced with an unprecedented event. In addition, civil unrest has become a common occurrence due to an enduring global health crisis. Individuals may feel unsafe, angry, and experience feelings of despair when they see repeated images of violence and destruction [9].

Businesses and their employees are affected by mental health issues. In the absence of good mental health and an effective stress management plan, job

performance can suffer, as can productivity and employee retention. There is, however, an opportunity in every challenge. There are significant opportunities for employers to reconsider the workplace and the flexibility, empathy, compassion, and support they offer their employees. Recognizing the importance of mental health is the key to humanizing the workplace once and for all.

1.3. Research Question

Since the United State has been slowly emerging from the pandemic and people are settling into this "post-pandemic normal", it is essential to determine how employers can prioritize the mental health of their employees, improve the employer-employee relationship, and reduce employee turnover. Companies need to figure out how to make their employees feel comfortable participating in mental health resources provided by their employer without fear of retaliation? Additionally, we need to know if employers will return to prior treatment of employees in the workplace once the pandemic has come to an end. Can mental wellness strategies be implemented in the workplace in a way that's beneficial to both businesses and employees? These questions should be considered when assessing the impact of prioritizing mental and emotional well-being in the workplace.

2. Literature on Mental Health

It is common for employees suffering from mental illness and mental health issues in the workplace to suffer in silence. In response to the increase in mental health issues over the past few years due to COVID-19, increasing political tensions, and continuous civil unrest against marginalized groups, there is an alarming need for employers to become better equipped to support the needs of their employees rather than penalizing them for being "human". In an article written by Lois Zoppi in Medical News Today, "More than 50% of U.S. adults will need mental health treatment at some point during their lifetime. In addition, 1 in 25 are currently living with a serious mental illness, such as an eating disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or major depression" [11]. Unfortunately, mental illness still carries a stigma around it, privately and publicly. That makes it difficult for people to seek help.

Stigma prevents people from seeking help when they need it the most. As a result of this internal and external conflict, mental illnesses that are often invisible usually grow worse. Organizational structures can be disrupted by stigma, and interpersonal interactions and social norms can be adversely affected. According to the National Academy of Medicine, there are three primary types of stigma in behavioral health that can have long-term and harmful effects: Self-stigma, public stigma (also called social stigma), and structural stigma (which includes workplace stigma) [12].

There are several effects associated with stigma, regardless of its type. These include internalizing negative beliefs, social isolation, low self-esteem, hopelessness, discrimination at work, and unemployment [3] [11]. When individuals in-

ternalize and accept stereotypes about themselves, they develop self-stigma which can make an intact individual feel as though they are damaged or broken inside. Public or social stigma is when society negatively views and marginalizes an individual or specific group of people. For instance, in the case of behavioral disorders, such conditions create an environment of disgrace, fear, resentment, and isolation. The term structural stigma, also known as workplace stigma, refers to systemically discriminatory practices—such as cultural norms, institutional practices, and healthcare policies that are not equivalent to other health conditions—that restrict appropriate resources and opportunities which sabotage employees' wellbeing [12].

According to an article written by Connor Holmes titled "*Overcoming Mental Health Stigma: A Guide for HR Leaders*", Holmes confirmed "Employees who experience mental health stigma in and outside the workplace are on average less happy, less likely to seek treatment, less productive, and earn less. Investing in mental health resources for employees can therefore be massively beneficial in reducing stigma and bettering treatment outcomes and productivity" [13]. Destigmatizing mental health in the workplace begins with openly discussing it. To promote healthy conversations around mental and emotional health, managers should lead by example [14]. A simple yet profound way a manager can lead by example is by encouraging their employees to take vacation time to relax and recharge time while managers model the same behavior and can be beneficial in improving mental health support in the workplace.

2.1. Consequences of Poor Mental Health

The mental health of employees is becoming increasingly recognized as an important factor in their overall health. Employees and employers suffer when deteriorating mental health is not addressed proactively and empathically. It has been proven that strained mental health and prolonged stress, personal and work-related, can negatively affect employees, as stated in an article by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) titled "*Mental Health in the Workplace.*" According to the CDC, some of the consequences of compromised mental health in the workplace are employees can't engage with their work and with others effectively, their job productivity and performance decline, and their physical capabilities get reduced resulting in a lack of physical fitness, communication gets misaligned, and their decision-making becomes impaired [15] [16] [17].

The fact that employees spend a significant amount of their time at work means that their mental health and well-being can be profoundly impacted by their work environment, regardless of the location—remote, onsite, or hybrid. As the pandemic approaches its fourth year, employers are recognizing how employees live and work has become the unique new norm, and finding ways to keep staff engaged hasn't been easy. Licensed clinical psychologist Dr. Patti van Eys, Vice President of Product for Pathways at Work, an organization that focuses on mental health and wellness for employees of various organizations, ex-

plains that "employee engagement occurs when all team members genuinely want the company's success. Employees with an emotional connection to their company demonstrate commitment to the company's goals and are deeply committed to its mission" [14]. However, the lack of employee engagement in the workplace not only hurts businesses through increased absenteeism, but according to author and writer, Kristen McPherson, for Continuum Cloud, the leading provider of cloud solutions for behavioral health and human services organizations, emphasized: "Low engagement is bad for workplace morale, not to mention it's associated with lower productivity levels among employees, and higher turnover rates for the organization as a whole" [18].

Keeping employees engaged leads to greater productivity, more satisfied customers, and higher sales because it gives them a sense of purpose. Gallup research found that high-engagement companies had a 41% drop in absenteeism and a 17% increase in productivity [14]. Their study also found that these businesses experienced lower turnover rates, higher customer ratings, and higher profits. Engaging employees is more than just making them happy. As happiness is vital to mental health and overall well-being, these concepts can easily be confused [14].

Economic uncertainty, social unrest, and disruptions caused by COVID-19 continued in 2021, and affected an even greater number of workers mentally, physically, financially, and emotionally than in 2020. As a result of these unprecedented events, many workers either left their jobs or exited the workforce entirely due to mental health issues like burnout, depression, stress, and anxiety. In his role as a senior director at Lyra Health, the world's leading provider of workforce mental health benefits, serving 10 million employees and their dependents, Joe Grasso said, "The pandemic has forced people to reflect on what truly matters to them, and if their employer does not support their ability to prioritize other values outside of work, then people may look elsewhere, or they may become burned out and frustrated" (Lyra Health, n.d.). Now that the Great Resignation or reshuffling of jobs of 2021 has settled down a bit, it is the "quiet quitting" trend that is gaining traction at a time when productivity in the United States is causing great concern. As reported by Anuz Thapa in a CNBC article, the phrase "quiet quitting" originated from a TikTok video made viral in July 2022 by Zaid Khan, a 24-year-old engineer from New York. Essentially, the trending phrase describes employees still performing their work tasks but no longer participating in the hustle culture mentality that work is their life. Per Khan, "The reality is, it's not, and your worth as a person is not defined by your labor" [19].

A mental illness or mental health issue can impair one's physical abilities. The lack of routine physical fitness can cause a person's lifestyle to suffer negatively, leading to additional sicknesses and higher medical costs. Various physical illnesses can also be caused by work-related stress, such as heart disease, back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, or migraines [20]. An employee's daily functioning can be significantly hindered by these additional illnesses, which makes it difficult for them to complete their work tasks timely

and efficiently.

2.2. Workplace Mental Health: The Cost of Ignoring It

Neglecting mental health issues employees face can be more expensive than providing sustainable resources to help them. In the workplace, depression and anxiety have been estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) to cause a loss of productivity of up to $1 trillion every year [18]. People with mental health disorders are also likely to have other physical health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, respiratory illness, and muscle, bone, and joint diseases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those with mental health disorders and other physical disorders often face 2 to 3 times the cost of those without both conditions. A combined medical and behavioral health care system could save the United States $37.6 billion to $67.8 billion annually [16].

As a result of reducing stigma, organizations can make more profit [15]. Because mental illness affects so many people, its economic and other implications can be significant. Based on a study published by the World Health Organization, for every $1 invested in expanding mental health treatment, there is a $4 return for enhanced productivity and health. Each year, untreated mental illness costs the economy $200 billion in the United States. Major depression is one of the costliest mental health issues among full-time workers, resulting in increased absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover [13]. Besides depression, when not managed proactively or effectively (as defined in **Table 1**), some of the other common outcomes of mental health that can be witnessed in today's workplace can include such issues as episodic or chronic anxiety, burnout, civil unrest, employee turnover, and stress [21]-[45]. **Table 1** elaborates on some of the traditional terms, concepts, and organizations involved in mental health literature and interventions. For example, the term "social norms" is typically found to those informal but acceptable beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are practiced within an organization or a culture [22].

3. The Intervention

To ensure a successful future for their businesses, employers around the world are recognizing the importance of protecting and supporting their employees' mental health. The employee mental health crisis has gained considerable attention from employers and employees alike due to current political tensions, economic uncertainties, increasing violence, and racial traumas against marginalized communities (*i.e.*, Blacks, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), Hispanics/Latinos, LGBTQ, etc.), social unrest, and the lingering impact from COVID-19. Despite these present-day daunting issues, employees are living and working in ways that are anything but normal. It is therefore imperative that workplace mental health interventions include prevention, early detection, confidential professional assistance, rehabilitative services, managerial and peer

Table 1. Common definitions [21]-[45].

Anxiety—when stressed, it is a natural reaction that can be beneficial. It can alert humans to dangers and help them be prepared and attentive. (psychiatry.org)

Anxiety Disorders—involve excessive fear or anxiety, which differs from normal feelings of nervousness or anxiety. Disorders involving anxiety include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, specific phobias, agoraphobia, social anxiety disorder, and separation anxiety disorder. (psychiatry.org)

Behavioral Health—a person's behavior can affect his or her physical, mental, and spiritual health. (online.alvernia.edu)

Burnout—work-related stress that involves a feeling of reduced accomplishment and a loss of identity in addition to physical and emotional exhaustion. (mayoclinic.org)

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—is the nation's largest science-based, data-driven healthcare organization that protects the health of the general public. (cdc.gov)

Chief Mental Health Officer—this is not an official C-suite job title or role as managers cannot substitute for trained clinical professionals working in the healthcare industry. Instead, this term should be considered a new personal standard for life at work. (entrepreneur.com)

Civil Unrest—according to law, it is defined as "acts of violence and disorder detrimental to public order and law. It includes acts such as riots, acts of violence, insurrections, unlawful obstructions or assemblages". (discoverymood.com)

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)—is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that can infect anyone, causing serious illness or death if contracted. (who.int)

Depression—is a common but serious mood disorder that is also known as major depressive disorder or clinical depression. (nimh.nih.gov)

Employee—is an individual who works part-time or full-time for a company or organization and receives a salary as compensation for their work. (differencebetween.net)

Employer—are the organizations or businesses that hire or employ employees. (differencebetween.net)

Employee Turnover—the number of employees leaving an organization voluntarily and involuntarily over a period of time. (netsuite.com)

Flexible Work Arrangement—an alternative working arrangement or schedule to the traditional workday and week to help America's workforce balance work/life commitments. (dol.gov)

Great Resignation—in the aftermath of the pandemic, more people left their jobs than ever before. (weforum.org)

Mental Health—is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community." (justaskpublications.com)

Mental Hygiene—the same quality care that a person gives to their body goes to the mind as well to keep the mind healthy and sharp. (businessinsider.com)

Mental Health Stigma—people with mental illnesses or seeking treatment for emotional distress, such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, or PTSD, are often subjected to societal disapproval and shame. (medicalnewstoday.com)

Mental Illness—also known as mental health disorders, refers to a wide range of mental health conditions that affect a human being's mood, thinking, and behavior. (mayoclinic.org)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—is a mental health disorder triggered by a terrifying event, whether it is experienced or witnessed. (mayoclinic.org)

Presenteeism—is when employees can't function at work because of illness, injury, or other conditions. Though the employee may be physically at work, they might not be able to do their job properly and make mistakes more often. (Investopedia.com)

Remote Working—an alternative work style that allows professionals to work outside traditional office settings. (remoteyear.com)

Continued

Social Norms—an unwritten set of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are considered acceptable in a given social group or culture. (simplypsychology.com)

Stigma—often involves putting shame on a person or group for perceived deficiencies or differences they have by acts of prejudice or discrimination. (medicalnewstoday.com)

Stress—is a feeling of tension, either psychological or physical that can be triggered by an event or thought. This feeling is the human body's natural reaction to a challenge or demand. (medicineplus.gov)

World Health Organization (WHO)—*is an organization dedicated to the well-being of all people* that oversees international health responses within the United Nations system and coordinates global health responses with partners. (who.int)

Workforce—an organization's group of employees. This term can be used to describe individuals who work for a particular company or industry, it can also refer to a specific geographical location of a city, state, or country. (peopleHum.com)

Workplace—a place or location of employment where employees do their jobs and work on tasks for their employer. (indeed.com)

support, and a commitment to healthy working conditions. As a result, employees will be more able to manage their psychological and emotional health effectively.

To adequately evaluate the current state of mental health in the workplace, employees from diverse industries and seniority levels will have to be involved. This will be done by conducting interviews and surveying employees across various lines of business. In addition, their participation and feedback will be utilized in interventions to make mental health a sustainable priority in the workplace. Employee health benefits packages will need to be reviewed by the organization's senior leadership and human resources departments, specifically benefits pertaining to mental health. If it is determined that prioritizing mental health support is necessary for the workplace, key leaders throughout the firm and human resources personnel will need to work together to consistently raise awareness of mental health, reassure employees at every level that their mental health matters, and ensure all employees are aware of the help readily available to them so they feel supported and safe in bringing their whole selves to work.

3.1. Destigmatize Mental Health in the Workplace

There is an opportunity for employers to eradicate the stigma of fear and shame once and for all about mental health in the workplace. It is good news that mental health challenges are becoming more accepted at work because of all the collective disruptions and unfathomable trauma people have experienced over the past three years due to a lingering pandemic and increased incivility in society. Yet, the workplace is the last place anyone expects to hear about mental health issues or mental illnesses because employees are afraid to discuss these life-altering psychological issues with their colleagues and supervisors. After all, they are apprehensive about losing their jobs, damaging work relationships, being discriminated against, and being misjudged by future employers.

When employees need help most, they are often silent due to the stigma associated with mental illness. However, there are many ways to overcome stigmas in the workplace, starting with managers leading by example when it comes to self-care such as: taking paid time off (PTO) to show employees that their well-being is important, do not minimize mental health issues employees' face, and taking empathetic action. Empathetic action demonstrated by any organizational leadership or management includes redesigning sick days to include mental health breaks, fostering open, honest conversations, proactively noticing when employees appear stressed, and training other teammates to do the same. Many employees just want to know they are not alone in this daily struggle and that their employers do see them as human "beings" rather than human "doings".

3.2. Develop Inclusive Work Environments

There is a close connection between mental health and diversity and inclusion (D & I) [15]. Lack of representation, microaggressions, unconscious biases and other stress factors in the work environment can affect the mental and psychological health of employees from diverse backgrounds. Because of this, initiatives that promote diversity, inclusion, and belonging can also promote mental health. Employers should make sure employees from diverse backgrounds are getting mental health support as they focus and take action on D & I and racial justice strategies.

To support minority employees, employers have a variety of options to choose from. For instance, employee resource groups can be established as voluntary, employee-led groups formed in the workplace that are based on shared interests, characteristics, or similar life experiences. Also, educating employees and ensuring inclusive language is used by company leaders are intentional ways to increase awareness and provide a sense of belonging for everyone. A more motivated, engaged, and productive workforce is achieved when employees feel valued, accepted, respected, and included at work [15].

3.3. Mental Health and the Employer's Investment

It is beneficial for businesses to invest in a mentally healthy workforce. In many organizations, mental health programs are reactive instead of proactive, which can be extremely costly as the issues unfold. Even though mental illnesses require fewer direct health insurance costs compared to physical health conditions such as heart disease and cancer, they still account for greater productivity losses if left untreated. A reduction in total medical costs, an increase in productivity, a decrease in absenteeism, a reduction in turnover rate, and a reduction in disability costs are all advantages of why employers should invest in effective and easily accessible treatment for employees' mental health issues and mental illnesses. When companies and organizations neglect providing tangible support for the psychological and emotional well-being of their employees, they risk losing a great deal of talent.

3.4. Reduce Turnover Rate Due to Mental Health Issues

Stress and burnout in the workplace play a major role in high employee turnover rates. Employees from a wide range of industries have left the workforce in droves due to the rise in mental health issues since the onset of the pandemic resulting in the "Great Resignation." People have become more conscious of their work-life balance (or the lack thereof) after working from home longer than anticipated. The pursuit of higher pay and better opportunities has led some people to leave their jobs. Women were the majority who left the workforce due to burnout due to the overwhelming and unrealistic pressures of working and taking care of their children or elderly parents concurrently during the peak of the pandemic.

The need for work flexibility among employees has never been greater, especially now when many companies are instructing their staff to return to the office. Providing mental health and wellness benefits as part of a company's regular benefits package could help recruit and retain top talent. This response would allow employers to improve their overall employee benefits coverage and implement employee retention strategies that promote work-life balance and supports emotional well-being. Employee engagement and satisfaction can be increased if mental health and wellness needs are recognized as part of a company's culture and core values.

3.5. Normalize Empathy and Kindness in the Workplace

Incorporating empathy and kindness into an organization's core values could be the vital components to prioritizing mental health in the workplace and providing a healthy work culture. Having empathy and kindness woven through a company is more essential now than ever before. In these unprecedented times where everyone has been affected in some way or another, valuing employees' contributions is imperative to respecting their humanity and navigating these uncertain times and beyond efficiently. Organizational leaders should set an example of empathy, kindness, and compassion by modeling these behaviors on others. As such, they encourage their employees to interact with one another with more compassion and kindness.

Since many businesses must change their business practices at a moment's notice at the expense of their employees' emotional, physical, and mental well-being, many organizational leaders have been forced to rethink their workforce engagement strategies. Senior leaders who authentically model empathetic and kind behaviors should hold their employees and management accountable for their actions. Leadership plays a crucial role in employees making their personal assessments about their employers based on how they are treated to determine whether working for a particular company is worth their mental and physical health, despite financial implications. An example like the Great Resignation might suffice to illustrate the importance of respect, empathy, and kindness in the workplace.

4. Methodology

To determine whether the previously mentioned objectives were met, employee surveys will be used as the primary methodology. The purpose of the surveys is to identify the role mental health plays in employee satisfaction at work. A major component of the surveys will be to investigate the facts of how each employee's mental health has been impacted in the workplace, especially since the onset of COVID-19, to validate through inspection whether the objectives were met or not. Another aspect of the survey will be to determine if the employers' current mental health benefits and resources are sufficient in meeting employees' psychological needs. Additionally, the surveys will determine the return on investment (ROI) for employers whose employees have utilized the company's benefits and resources provided. Overall, the surveys will provide how employees' mental health is impacted when mental health is prioritized in the workplace and when it is not.

4.1. Participants

All employees of Biz 2 Bank (also known as Biz 2 Bank Financial Services) will be the target participants for this study's methodology. Biz 2 Bank Financial Services has a total of approximately 60,000 employees to date. Employees in customer-facing positions (such as teller positions) and employees within non-customer-facing positions will participate. A study of all employees will be conducted, regardless of their career level.

Although a 100% participation rate is ideal, it's not realistic to think everyone will take the survey. To obtain at least 50% participation, Human Resources will ask all employees to complete a confidential survey within a designated time frame. An email will be sent to all employees and the survey will also be posted on the organization's intranet website to encourage engagement. Several reminder emails will be sent to encourage responses to uncompleted surveys.

The sample population that will be used for the survey is all permanent, full-time, and part-time employees including senior leadership at Biz 2 Bank Financial Services. These employees have access to the company's benefits and resources, regardless of their employment status or career level.

4.2. Instruments/Research Design

To obtain the necessary data for this project, a quantitative research design will be used. An emailed notification will be sent to each employee's work email address with a link so they can access the surveys. The surveys will consist of multiple-choice, open-ended, and closed-ended questions. Following each question, employees will have the opportunity to provide additional comments on their responses.

The survey questions will address stigmas surrounding mental health in the workplace, workplace environments, company mental health benefits and resources, employee turnover, and workplace culture. To ensure employee privacy,

survey responses will remain anonymous. Participants will have access to the survey for two weeks at the beginning of the third quarter, before the benefits enrollment period in the fourth quarter.

4.3. Data Collection

Following the survey period, an independent third-party vendor will review the results. Once all survey responses are verified and validated by the independent third party, they will be returned to Human Resources for further analysis. The results of the survey will be compared with previous years' data concerning mental health among employees. Upon reviewing the compiled results, Human Resources will identify the top three areas of concern and send their findings and recommendations to the senior leadership team. Once senior leadership completes their review, Human Resources will communicate the results of the survey to all employees and begin implementing the necessary changes.

5. Findings and Application

The goal of this project was to emphasize the importance of putting employees' mental health first in the workplace, especially at Biz 2 Bank Financial Services. The data collected during the research confirmed that the lack of mental health awareness in the workplace not only affects the employee's work experience, but also impacts the success of an organization. The study identified several subcategories in which prioritizing the mental health of employees would be beneficial. As the core issues have been identified, the challenge now is to develop a comprehensive plan of action for supporting mental health awareness in the workplace for all employees. Based on the raw data collected, Human Resources and senior leadership must agree on the proposed plan before implementation.

As a result of the information gathered for this study, it appears that healthy workplace conditions that promote safe working environments in which employees feel supported in bringing their whole selves to work contribute to the recovery and inclusion of employees with mental health conditions. In addition, a positive impact can be seen in employee confidence and social interactions both internally and externally. The research also revealed that respect and genuine appreciation from management along with sustained flexible work arrangements play a significant role in recruiting and retaining staff.

Based on the surveys distributed to employees across the firm, questions related to employees being treated with respect, dignity, and appreciation in the workplace ranked highest in importance. The second most significant question was about how mental health has affected employee productivity over the past two years. Most of the participants expressed concerns about the increase of civil unrest in society and expressed concerns about mental health issues they have experienced such as anxiety, burnout, and exhaustion since COVID-19's onset. Employee retention questions were ranked third in importance, followed by questions regarding the company's mental health resources and their utilization.

According to the survey results, Biz 2 Bank Financial Services is taking the right steps toward making employees' mental health a priority in the workplace. However, removing the stigma associated with psychological illness still requires improvement. The key to creating a positive work environment is to establish a sustainable, inclusive work culture, expand mental health benefits and resources, increase employee retention rates, and promote respect, empathy, and kindness among colleagues. Establishing robust mental health benefits, inclusive work environments, and normalizing respect, empathy, and kindness in the workplace are factors that should be addressed at the senior leadership level. Human Resources should effectively manage mental health benefits and resources, as well as employee recruitment and retention efforts.

Upon remediation of these findings, the employer/employee relationship will improve sustainably. Improvements would result in the firm being recognized as an employer of choice, because the more valued and supported employees feel, the more engaged they will become. Future employees will be easier to attract, and the turnover rate of existing employees will decrease. Therefore, the organization will be able to save on the cost of replacing current talent. It is expected that these changes will also be reflected in an increase in productivity.

6. Recommendations

After a thorough review of the research, there are several recommendations to address the questions of reducing the stigma associated with mental health at work, developing inclusive work cultures, expanding employee mental health benefits and resources, increasing employee retention, and normalizing respect and empathy in the workplace. If considered, the implementation of these suggestions will help Biz 2 Bank Financial Services improve its culture and reputation [20]-[45].

6.1. Destigmatize Mental Health in the Workplace

To reduce the stigma attached to mental health at work, employers must take applicable actions to shift the dialogue from shame to support. As organizations evolve their operations for the post-pandemic era, now is the time to influence this shift in the workplace [37]. The first step employers can take is to change the perception that mental health issues and illnesses are immoral. Employers can change the narrative around mental health in the workplace by ensuring that every employee receives mental health literacy training to emphasize that psychological disorders and issues can be treated, and that early intervention or prevention can assist employees in recovering and leading fulfilling lives. Additionally, managers and leaders should be trained to recognize signs of stress and burnout to identify problems early and connect employees with the appropriate resources for support.

6.2. Develop Inclusive Work Environments

Diversity and inclusion strategies should include Employee Resource Groups

(ERGs) to build and maintain an inclusive work culture [15]. An ERG is an employee-led, voluntary group within an organization that supports employee career development and personal growth. By creating safe spaces to exchange ideas and connect with like-minded peers, these open forums foster a sense of belonging among employees. Employees who participate in these groups typically share a characteristic or common interest, whether it is their gender, religious affiliation, sexuality, ethnicity, or lifestyle. The implementation of Employee Resource Groups can positively affect employee satisfaction, innovation, and employee engagement.

Additionally, due to COVID-19, many employees are now working full-time remotely for the first time, which can result in isolation from peers to whom they were once accustomed. To avoid employees developing a sense of loneliness, immediate managers should schedule regular 1:1 check-ins with their staff and encourage team members to connect via virtual lunches or virtual water-cooler breaks.

6.3. Employer's Investment in Mental Health

To improve employee retention, lower business costs, and enhance employees' productivity and performance, companies should expand their investment in mental health benefits and resources. Investing in mental health programs that can be easily accessed demonstrates an employer's concern, care, and value for their greatest asset—their employees. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), for example, offer confidential support along with coping strategies and tips for a wide range of professional and personal issues. Employers who provide their employees with these tools empower them to take control of their well-being.

When employees' mental health and well-being are neglected, absenteeism, presenteeism, medical insurance costs, and disability claims can increase, which can result in extensive financial costs to the organization. Investing in workplace health programs can help companies avoid some of these expenses.

6.4. Reduction in Employee Turnover due to Mental Health Issues

The COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the connection between mental health and job turnover. To retain top talent, organizations should develop a holistic approach to mental health and provide more affordable mental healthcare benefits packages that help employees offset out-of-pocket expenses by setting reasonable co-pays for care or adding dollars to employees' healthcare services. Further, employers must evaluate and rectify compensation gaps, excessive job requirements, and a lack of recognition and appreciation for their employees, as well as address limited opportunities for career growth and advancement.

Flexible work arrangements, which result in a work-life balance, are another way to attract and retain talented employees [28]. Additionally, employees should be provided with sufficient time off for vacation, sick leave, and family care. All employees should be encouraged to take their allotted time off as

needed to rest and recharge mentally, physically, and emotionally without fear of retaliation.

6.5. Normalize Empathy and Kindness in the Workplace

To improve the overall employee experience in the workplace, respect, empathy, and kindness should be the standard in any work environment, regardless of personal feelings [3] [4] [15]. These qualities reduce employee stress, increase productivity and collaboration, improve employee satisfaction, and create a fair work environment. Taking the time to listen to coworkers at all levels of an organization, eliminating conscious and unconscious biases, recognizing the strengths and accomplishments of others, practicing transparency, common courtesy, politeness, and speaking in a kind manner are all examples of respect and empathy in the workplace.

7. Summary

The purpose of this research was to examine the importance of why employees' mental health should be prioritized in the workplace. By addressing employee burnout and prolonged stress in the workplace, the company will decrease high attrition and turnover rates, absenteeism, and low employee morale. The challenge that needs to be met is demonstrating how mental health can be prioritized in the workplace in a way that is both favorable to the employee and the organization. The objectives were designed to serve as a blueprint for how to efficiently incorporate sustainable mental health interventions in the workplace. In achieving these objectives, companies will be able to prioritize each employee's mental health, leading to safer psychological work environments, which is both the right thing to do for humanity and a plus for business [40]. The specific recommendations were: 1) Destigmatize Mental Health in the Workplace, 2) Develop Inclusive Work Environments, 3) Mental Health and the Employer's Investment, 4) Reduce Turnover Rate due to Mental Health Issues, and 5) Normalize Empathy and Kindness in the Workplace [10] [12] [13].

In this study, the findings related to employee mental health at work validated that destigmatizing mental health, creating inclusive environments, investing in mental health benefits and awareness as well as normalizing respect, empathy, and kindness, all contribute substantially to increasing employee retention and successfully prioritizing mental health in the workplace. In the absence of effective mental health support at work, employees will continue to experience fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, increased absenteeism, difficulty interacting with customers and colleagues, or difficulties responding to major changes in their workplace if mental health issues are ignored and not effectively supported. Having such consequences can increase the organization's turnover rate and make it more costly to replace invaluable talent.

According to the literature, good mental health and well-being significantly benefit both employees and employers. Prioritizing mental health in the workplace

fosters a more positive work culture that enhances employee productivity, motivation, engagement, job satisfaction, and retention [14]. The implementation of programs that address mental health or raise awareness in the workplace can help employees feel genuinely supported and help reduce stigmas in the workplace. It is essential for businesses to promote and support the mental health and well-being of their employees both today and in the future.

In recent years, employers around the world have been realizing just how important it is to protect and support the mental health of their staff. With the world entering the fourth year of the pandemic, nothing about how anyone lives or works is normal. COVID-19, economic uncertainty, and civil unrest continue to affect the workforce's mental health at alarming rates as it adjusts to work/personal life in the "new normal" [8]. There are several mental health problems employees face, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and substance abuse [10] [11] [20]-[45].

The benefits of prioritizing mental health at work include a reduction in turnover, a reduction in costs to organizations for attracting and retaining skilled talent, a rise in employee morale, and an increase in employees feeling respected, valued, and seen. The research supports the idea that prioritizing and caring for employee mental health is not only profitable for businesses but is also ethical.

7.1. Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendation is to put into place strategies business leaders and managers can use to create a mentally healthy workplace and culture that sustains the current interventions. Among the strategies that are senior leadership must promote a work/life balance in the workplace, create safe spaces for discussing mental health, offer free screening tools and self-assessments for mental health, and encourage employees to utilize their Employee Assistance Program benefits frequently for additional support. Also, providing in-service events that employees can easily engage in as this demonstrates employer support and communicates that physical and psychological wellness can become a priority at work. The expansion of mental health assistance and incentives for participating in workplace wellness activities related to both physical and mental health would also be recommended as policy recommendations.

7.2. Further Research

A further study should be conducted to measure mental health in the workplace to determine which job functions create more stress within an organization than others. Further research in this area may help identify ways for senior leadership, management, and human resources to collaborate on ways to retain top talent by improving the employee experience. The demographic data in this study did not include age and family support, which may have an impact on mental health; as such, future researchers can use age and family support as research variables. A

study of the mental health impact of the "new normal" of hybrid and remote work should also be conducted. Due to the pandemic, numerous companies were forced into alternative working arrangements. Because of this, the lack of daily face-to-face, in-person interaction at work is all the more reason why mental health at work needs to be prioritized.

Data Collection

This study used proper institutional review board (IRB) protocols regarding data collection, which is in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix. Employee Mental Health Survey 2022

During this survey, please provide your most authentic response to each question. The number one priority is protecting your privacy. Therefore, all responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

1) At Biz 2 Bank, I feel comfortable discussing my mental health with (Select all that apply):

a) Colleagues

b) Immediate Manager(s)

c) Human Resources

d) Executive Leaders

e) None of the above

2) As a Biz 2 Bank employee, I am aware of and understand the mental health resources and services available to me.

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Neither Agree nor Disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly Disagree

3) Biz 2 Bank offers mental health benefits and resources that I have used or intend to use in the near future.

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Neither Agree nor Disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly Disagree

4) Are there any workplace factor(s) that contribute to poor mental health or burnout among Biz 2 Bank employees?

5) Biz 2 Bank's senior leadership prioritizes mental health at work.

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Neither Agree nor Disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly Disagree

6) During the past two years, how has your mental health affected your productivity at work?

7) Considering Biz 2 Bank's current support of mental health in the workplace, how likely is it that you will remain employed at the company in one year?

a) Very likely

b) Not likely

8) It is important to me as a Biz 2 Bank employee to feel valued, appreciated, and respected.

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Neither Agree nor Disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly Disagree

9) As an employer, Biz 2 Bank provides me with a flexible work schedule that allows me to meet both work and family/personal life demands.

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Neither Agree nor Disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly Disagree

10) My immediate manager cares about me as a person and creates an environment in which mental health can be discussed.

a) Strongly Agree

b) Agree

c) Neither Agree nor Disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly Disagree

11) What can Biz 2 Bank **start** doing to better support your mental health?

12) What can Biz 2 Bank **stop** doing to better support your mental health?

13) Please use the box below to provide any additional comments or suggestions regarding any of the above-referenced questions:

Demographic Information (optional):

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Gender: _____

Years of Service with Biz 2 Bank: _____

Thank you for participating.

Your feedback is greatly appreciated.