March Mental Health, Inclusion & Belonging Update

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Why HR's work to improve employee mental health is failing

Employers are noticing a troubling disconnect when it comes to employee wellbeing: Despite their increased investments in mental wellness since 2020, the mental health of the workforce continues to deteriorate.

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic began, employers rushed in to help struggling employees by expanding their behavioral health offerings in a variety of ways. And they've kept it up. This year, a stunning 91% of employers expect to invest more in employee mental health than they did in 2023, according to a survey by the employee wellness platform Wellable.

The organization polled insurance brokers with clients that employ 250 to more than 1,000 employees.

The efforts are well-founded and built on largely steadily increasing investments since 2019, when 55% of employers expected to spend more on mental health than the previous year, Wellable's data shows. However, mental health challenges among employees are persisting: Nearly two-thirds (64%) of U.S. workers struggle with their mental health, and most of those employees (91%) feel less productive at work as a result, according to a 2023 survey of 1,600 workers and HR leaders by One Medical.

Experts say that one major factor explains why more robust mental health offerings aren't improving employee mental health: cost. Because the vast majority of mental healthcare providers don't accept insurance, employees either must pay the extremely high cost of out-of-network care—an average of $500 for an initial consultation, with follow-up sessions ranging from $80-$250 each—or go without care, according to a report by Thervo, a professional services company.

"Cost has always been a barrier to care for a lot of workers. Insurance essentially gives them access to care," says Paul Fronstin, director of health benefits research at the Employee Benefit

Research Institute (EBRI). "[When] they need to go out-of-network for care, the cost may prevent them from seeking the care they need."

And that can deteriorate mental wellbeing, he says.

"I don't think a lot of corporations understand that there is a fair percentage of behavioral mental health counselors who don't accept insurance," adds Haeli Harris, a licensed marriage and family therapist and also director of clinical operations at employee mental health platform provider Nivati. Harris will present a session titled "Preparing managers to talk about mental health" at HRE's upcoming Evaluate People, Ignite Change (EPIC) conference in Las Vegas.

For example, less than half (43%) of psychiatrists and only 19% of mid-level practitioners like counselors or social workers participate in insurance networks, according to a 2022 report by the Center for American Progress. This is likely contributing to the fact that 39% of American adults say they can't afford—and therefore go without—care for such common conditions as depression and anxiety, according to the American Psychological Association.

Employers may think they are providing good mental health insurance to their workforce, but if an employee can't find a provider who will accept their insurance, the benefit lacks value, says Nicole Rapfogel, a policy analyst for health at the Center for American Progress.

She notes that employer-sponsored insurance covers a wide range of income levels, from executives who likely can afford out-of-network care to factory workers who probably can't.

"They either figure out a way to pay for out-of-network care, or they can't get the care," she says.

Although some employees may tell their employers about the struggles they face in obtaining affordable mental healthcare, many do not, experts say. Because insurance companies often lack transparency in the way they work with employers, Rapfogel says, business leaders may not have easy access to important information—such as how mental health claims are processed and what percentage fall into out-of-network versus in-network—that could help them revamp their approach to employee wellness.

Insurance: the biggest obstacle to effective mental health benefits

Solving the problem of expensive mental healthcare is challenging for employers for several reasons, experts say—primarily because of the complex insurance landscape.

Insurance companies pay mental health providers at a far lower rate than other medical providers. Psychiatrists, for example, are paid at a rate that is 27% lower than primary care physicians—and the gap is even wider for mid-level practitioners, according to the Center for American Progress report.

"Payments provided in-network to mental health providers are very, very low, especially when compared to their private pay rates," says Rapfogel. "That's why they don't want to accept insurance. In some cases, they can't. It's not enough to keep the lights on."

Additionally, 47% of the U.S. population lives in areas where mental health professionals are in short supply, according to a report by Psychology Today. As a result, such professionals have more than enough patients who can pay out-of-network rates, meaning they don't need to accept insurance, Rapfogel notes.

Nivati's Harris says that mental health providers are also required to file a fair amount of paperwork to insurance companies and can be subject to payment delays of up to a month or more. These issues can deter providers from accepting in-network insurance reimbursements, experts say.

How to improve mental health benefits

Despite these challenges, experts say there are several ways employers can reduce out-of-network costs for employees, thereby improving access to mental healthcare.

When negotiating a contract with an insurance company, request data on the number of out-of-network mental health claims and compare that to the in-network claims made to the company. That can reveal the robustness of an insurance company's behavioral health provider network, says Rapfogel.

Harris says employers also can offer stipends or other monetary support like a lifestyle spending account that employees can apply toward out-of-network behavioral health providers. Also, Flexible Spending Accounts and Health Savings Accounts can help cover the unreimbursed out-of-network costs.

Many employers are also tapping into digital mental health platforms, which have in-house mental health clinicians, says Julie Stich, vice president of content for the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans. Employers contract with the digital mental health platform provider, which avoids out-of-network issues, experts say. Contracting with such platforms can also help address the "widespread problem" of "ghost networks," which Rapfogel explains exist when providers are listed in-network but tend not to accept new patients or serve common areas where employees live.

"I think it's important to look for different ways to provide that proactive care—where we're looking at, How do we help an employee learn to take care of their mental health?" Harris says. "Unfortunately, it's things that we really have never been taught."

https://hrexecutive.com/why-hrs-work-to-improve-employee-mental-health-is-failing/

16 Wellness Perks Your Employees Will Get Excited About

When team members are happy and healthy, they're better equipped to tackle problems, think critically and contribute to the business's long-term growth and success. Many organizations are supporting their employees' well-being by creating corporate wellness programs that go beyond the basics and spark genuine excitement in their staff.

To that end, 16 members of Forbes Business Council share their top wellness program perks, policies and initiatives that empower workers to make healthy choices. With ideas for flexible scheduling, family-friendly policies and new approaches to PTO, business leaders can create opportunities for their team members and organization to thrive.

1. Offer Flexibility With Remote Work Options
Flexible working hours or remote work can be an enticing wellness initiative for employees, as it promotes work-life balance, reduces stress and enhances overall well-being. We can see this policy being adopted predominantly in Europe—but also globally—and data shows that it maximizes productivity among employees, boosts job satisfaction and fosters a positive workplace culture.

2. Provide Sabbatical Leave For Employees To Recharge
Something that I don't think most adults envision a company making available to them is sabbatical leave. At our company, we give employees three months paid vacation for every five years they work for us. This time off is pure vacation where employees don't do anything company-related. We want them to spend time pursuing their passions. Exploring life without working is, in my opinion, one of the greatest things.

3. Implement A Friendly Team Competition
We like to have a team-based approach where teams compete against others in the company. This supports team building and bonding. We have also noticed it bolsters production and team morale.

4. Provide Options For Employee Wellness
The most popular perk from our employer clients is a fitness reimbursement, which allows employees to choose what they like, such as a gym membership or home equipment, when they earn an incentive through the wellness program. Alternatively, an extra PTO day in the form of a "wellness day off" is well-received by employees who earn incentives through the wellness program.

5. Adopt Family-Friendly Policies
Companies can entice employees by allowing people to balance work and family in terms of scheduling and work time and also by being reasonable about having kids in the room when on a company meeting. Good people are smart and the work/family balance isn't difficult if everyone is open-minded.

6. Build Time Off Into Employees' Schedules

We have a mandatory "personal day" that happens on a quarterly basis. Employees have to take a day off and it can't be tied to their PTO. It's a day to rest, be with family or get those personal errands done that pile up when you're working. Most people don't have enough off time, so this gives them some forced time off for self-care or to-do list items that clutter them up mentally.

7. Provide A Budget For Employee Wellness

Instead of a generic wellness benefit, employees could receive a designated budget to spend on activities or services that contribute to their well-being, such as fitness classes, mental health apps or wellness retreats. This approach empowers individuals to tailor their wellness experiences to their unique needs and interests, making the program more personalized and engaging for each employee.

8. Offer Wellness Days And Expense Reimbursements

Company wellness programs are important to ensure employees have ample opportunity to rejuvenate and give attention to mental health. A mandatory "wellness day," whether once a month or quarter—along with reimbursed spa, meditation, yoga or gym memberships—will encourage employees to take days for themselves, which in turn will reduce stress and increase productivity.

9. Allow Employees To Adjust Their Working Hours

In my experience, implementing flexible working hours is a wellness initiative at its best for anyone. It is important to reduce stress so that people can take care of their duties in all areas of their lives. Flexible working hours foster a positive company culture and increase satisfaction and loyalty when employees are trusted.

10. Give Employees An Extra Holiday

A highly valued perk in our company wellness program is the concept of floating holidays. This flexible approach allows our employees to take off on days that are personally significant to them, in addition to the standard holiday calendar. It acknowledges and respects the diverse cultures, religions and life events of our team members, promoting inclusivity and personal well-being.

11. Look For Successful Examples To Follow

The "90% Flexible Work Program," inspired by Sweden's 90% policy, empowers employees to choose a reduced work schedule while maintaining proportional pay. The program enhances work-life balance and reduces burnout, especially among women. It helps address challenges related to work-life integration, promoting inclusivity and fostering an environment where women can thrive professionally.

12. Let Employees Adapt Their Schedule

Embracing flexibility is key. We let employees tailor work-life balance, accommodating individual schedules and promoting smarter work. This approach boosts productivity, satisfaction and mental health, aligning with our culture of respecting individuality and holistic well-being.

13. Implement Wellness Days And Summer Fridays
Two really fantastic perks are wellness days and summer Fridays. Knowing that your employees sometimes just need a day off—for whatever reason—and giving it them creates trust and support quickly. And summer Fridays, well, that speaks for itself.

14. Provide Options For Nontraditional Schedules
When working in a global environment, flexible working schedules are imperative. Not only do they benefit employees but they also benefit clients because they allow for flexibility in scheduling. As someone who enjoys a diversified work schedule, I can attest to the benefits they provide. Experiencing different parts of the day allows for a fresh perspective and leads to increased productivity.

15. Explore Options For Employee Health Coverage
We continue to identify alternatives to traditional health coverage, such as health savings accounts or nonaccountable stipends, that drive people to be accountable for and take an interest in their own health. This is because the healthier they are, the less they pay out of pocket for portions of their health care.

16. Take A Multifaceted Approach
At our company, we provide our employees with their birthday as a paid holiday. More specifically for wellness, we are trying to partner with local gyms to get reduced member rates for employees. We also promote contests and "on-the-go" walk-and-talk meetings.

https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2024/02/12/16-wellness-perks-your-employees-will-get-excited-about/?sh=3e2ca03b7f97

No Reasonable Accommodation Means No Disability Discrimination Claim

Takeaway: State disability laws and their interpretation may sometimes differ from the Americans with Disabilities Act and related federal case law. When federal and state laws both apply, there may be conflicts, and the law most generous to the employee should be followed. A ninth-grade English teacher requesting indefinite leave was not a qualified employee under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled, affirming summary judgment for a private preparatory school in Reading, Mass.

No reasonable accommodation existed that would have allowed her to perform the essential job functions, the court decided.

Three days into the start of the 2019-2020 school year, on Sept. 5, the teacher underwent hip replacement surgery and informed the school that she expected to be out for four weeks. At the time, she had accumulated the maximum 65 days of sick leave allowed under the school's sick-

leave policy. The school granted the leave of absence and hired a substitute teacher on a per-day basis to cover the teacher's classes.

Five weeks later, on Oct. 13, the teacher emailed the school to inform them that she had to have a second surgery due to a complication from the first surgery. She requested three more months of leave while she recuperated at a critical care facility and undertook physical rehabilitation, which the school approved past the end of the calendar year through Jan. 5, 2020.

The school told her that she would need to provide clearance from her doctor to return to work. The school also notified her that she qualified to apply for long-term disability benefits as of Dec. 2, at which time she would have used 59 of her 65 sick-leave days.

Following the second surgery, the teacher suffered an infection that required a third surgery on Nov. 27. On the teacher's long-term disability benefits application form, her doctor stated that the teacher would have a total temporary disability for three to six months.

The school sent the teacher's doctor an "accommodation request inquiry form" in early December 2019, informing him that the teacher had requested an accommodation under the ADA and requesting information about whether there was a reasonable accommodation that would allow her to perform the essential job functions. The school also attached a copy of the teacher's job description to the form.

The doctor's response stated that the teacher was substantially limited in several major life activities and was unable to walk, bend, use the stairs, sleep, squat, lift or drive. He explained that the teacher would have trouble performing all the functions of her job due to these limitations for three to six months. In response to the question "Do you have any suggestions regarding possible accommodations to improve job performance? If so, what are they?" he wrote, "She should be on total temporary disability."

The school contacted the teacher on Dec. 26 to inform her that her employment was terminated, effective immediately. The school explained that she had exhausted her leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), along with all her paid time off. It noted that she had been absent from work since September and was expected to be unable to return to work for another three to six months. The school said it could not provide "an extended and continuing leave of absence with no end date." The school also informed the teacher that it had submitted her completed paperwork for long-term disability insurance benefits, and they had been accepted for review.

Court Action
The teacher filed a lawsuit alleging disability discrimination in violation of the ADA and Massachusetts state law. The federal district court granted summary judgment to the school, finding that regular attendance was an essential function of the teacher's job, and there existed

no reasonable accommodation that would allow her to perform that requirement. The teacher then appealed to the 1st Circuit.

In its review, the appeals court held that it did not need to go beyond the three-step McDonnell Douglas burden-shifting framework. That framework requires a plaintiff to show that she:

- Had a disability within the meaning of the ADA.
- Was a qualified individual covered under ADA.
- Was discharged in whole or in part because of the disability.

The appeals court found that the teacher had not demonstrated that she was a qualified individual who could perform the essential job functions—in this case, regular attendance—with or without a reasonable accommodation.

The court disagreed with the teacher's argument that additional leave was a reasonable accommodation in this case. The 1st Circuit instead found merit in the district court's reasoning that an extended period of leave with no end date was not reasonable in the context of teaching and school responsibilities because of the negative impact on maintaining consistency of classroom teachers for the students. In addition, the court noted that the proposed accommodation would require the school to risk relying on a day-to-day substitute teacher who could leave at any time without notice.

The appeals court affirmed the district court's dismissal of both the ADA and state law claims.

https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/employment-law-compliance/court-report-disability-accommodation-teacher

Many People Continue to put a brave face on mental health

Seven in ten employees (67 percent full time and 69 percent part time) say that they feel the need to put a brave face on things when asked about their mental health. Half (47 percent full time and 54 percent part time) report that the reason is because bigger things are going on in the world right now and they don't wish to be a burden, whilst a quarter of full-time employees (27 percent) and a third of part time employees (35 percent) don't believe that people really want to know how they are. A quarter (26 percent full time and 27 percent part time) say they fear being judged if they open up. As a result, they are feeling withdrawn, isolated and less able to socialize.

The biggest impact on employee mental health is the cost-of-living crisis, with 52 percent of full-time employees and 59 percent of part time employees saying it is affecting them, but work also plays a role, causing mental health challenges for 40 percent of full time workers and 30 percent of part time.

The poll of 5,012 general respondents across the UK was conducted by Censuswide as part of Time to Talk Day, the nation's biggest conversation about mental health. The day is run by mental health charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness in partnership with Co-op, with the aim to spark millions of conversations about mental health in communities, schools, homes, workplaces and online across the UK.

When asked how they are the phrase 'Good thanks, and you?' is often wheeled out to deflect, by 35 percent full time employees and 38 percent part time, with 'Fine, thanks' a popular choice for 28 percent of full-time employees and 37 percent part time.

Half of employees (46 percent full time and 48 percent part time) believe that mental health is a taboo subject, demonstrating the need for employee wellbeing schemes to help normalize speaking about mental health, and opportunities for employees to open up – like Time to Talk Day.
https://workplaceinsight.net/many-people-continue-to-put-a-brave-face-on-mental-health/

How To Build A Positive Workplace Culture

In the modern business landscape, a positive workplace culture isn't just a nice-to-have, it's the only way to avoid people talking shit about you on social media (and also, the right thing to do). A healthy culture fosters engagement, boosts productivity, and attracts top talent. However, creating and maintaining such an environment requires concerted efforts from both leaders and employees. Here's a comprehensive guide for cultivating a positive workplace culture.

Leaders' Role in Shaping Culture

Set the Tone from the Top: Leadership behavior sets a precedent. Leaders have to embody the values and ethics they want to see in their employees. This includes demonstrating respect, integrity, and transparency in all dealings. And also, getting paid more—if possible, try to have this trickle down to everyone in the org.

Communicate the Vision and Values Clearly: Employees should be well-versed with the organization's vision and values. They're usually on the website, after all. Regular communication and reinforcement of these principles help in aligning individual goals with organizational objectives.

Encourage Open Communication: A culture of open dialogue empowers employees to share ideas and feedback without fear. Leaders should facilitate an environment where constructive feedback is welcome.

Recognize and Reward: Acknowledging efforts and achievements motivates employees and reinforces positive behaviors. Leaders should develop a recognition system that appreciates

both individual and team accomplishments. Invest, invest, invest (in your team. Or GameStop pre-2021). Continuous learning opportunities, mentorship programs, and career development plans not only enhance skills but also show employees that the organization is invested in their growth.

A positive culture appreciates the importance of work-life balance. Flexible working hours, mental health days, and social activities can help maintain employee well-being and job satisfaction. And if you don't think mental health days are important, well.... come talk to me, I'll show you what happens when you skip them.

A culture that encourages innovation and creativity allows employees to think outside the box and contribute unique solutions. This can be fostered through brainstorming sessions, innovation challenges, and supportive feedback mechanisms.

Employees' Role in Enhancing Culture

Embrace the Core Values: Employees should internalize the organization's values and reflect them in their daily actions and decisions. This alignment fosters a cohesive and productive work environment.

Engage in Constructive Communication: Employees should communicate effectively, offering constructive feedback, and collaborating to resolve conflicts. This contributes to a culture of mutual respect and continuous improvement.

Participate Actively: Active participation in company initiatives, events, and discussions signifies engagement and commitment. It also provides opportunities for networking and personal growth.

Support and Collaborate: A culture of teamwork and support enhances collective efficiency. Employees should be willing to help and learn from one another, creating a synergistic work environment.
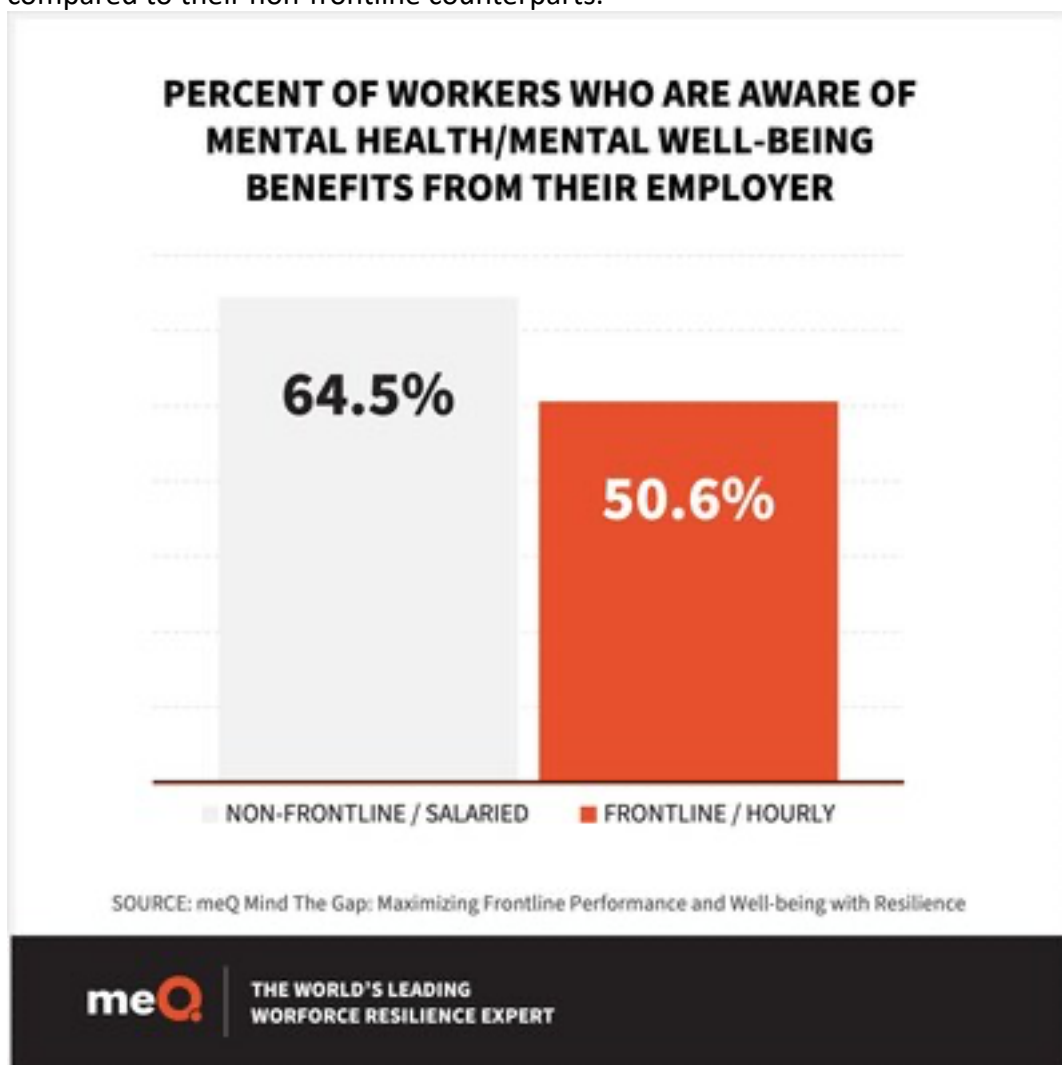
Be an Advocate for Positive Change: If employees notice practices that contradict the culture, they should feel empowered to voice concerns. Being proactive in suggesting improvements demonstrates responsibility and commitment to the company's values.

Building a positive workplace culture is a continuous journey that requires the commitment and participation of everyone in the organization. Together, a conducive work environment that promotes growth, satisfaction, and success can be established, making the organization not just a place to work, but a place to thrive.

https://www.forbes.com/sites/ginnyhogan/2024/02/05/how-to-build-a-positive-workplace-culture/?sh=6a7fe73521a4

Frontline Workers Have Greater Mental Health Needs, Yet Are Less Likely to Seek Help, Study Finds

Despite having more demanding roles tied to a higher degree of stress, frontline workers are less aware of employer mental wellbeing benefits, more likely to say they do not have a problem, and--even when they acknowledge a problem–are less likely to reach out for help than their non-frontline colleagues, according to a new meQuilibrium (meQ) study of frontline worker mental well-being released today. The study of 1,183 US-based workers revealed that rates of anxiety and depression among frontline workers are 33% and 61% higher, respectively, and when facing high stress, they are 30% less likely to seek out professional assistance, compared to their non-frontline counterparts.

PERCENT OF WORKERS WHO ARE AWARE OF MENTAL HEALTH/MENTAL WELL-BEING BENEFITS FROM THEIR EMPLOYER

64.5%

50.6%

□ NON-FRONTLINE / SALARIED   ■ FRONTLINE / HOURLY

SOURCE: meQ Mind The Gap: Maximizing Frontline Performance and Well-being with Resilience

meQ | THE WORLD'S LEADING WORFORCE RESILIENCE EXPERT

Frontline workers are often unaware of well-being benefits, says new meQuilibrium study.

STRESS PERCEPTION AND HELP SEEKING:
FRONTLINE AND NON-FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

I do not have a problem with stress:

8.2%

5.0%

I have a problem but have not reached out for help:

9.4%

5.8%

■ FRONTLINE   NON-FRONTLINE

SOURCE: meQ Mind The Gap: Maximizing Frontline Performance and Well-being with Resilience

meQ | THE WORLD'S LEADING
WORFORCE RESILIENCE EXPERT

Frontline workers have greater mental health needs, yet are less likely to seek help, meQuilibrium study finds.

"Frontline workers regularly interact with frustrated customers, work irregular shifts, lack paid time off, and have minimal autonomy over duties assigned by managers, which can contribute to higher rates of burnout, anxiety, depression, and secondary traumatic stress, compared to their corporate colleagues," said Brad Smith, Ph.D., Chief Science Officer at meQ.

"Unfortunately, frontline workers are often unaware of their well-being options and their irregular hours can impede appointment scheduling, resulting in a gap between their needs and use of relevant benefits."

Even though frontline workers are less aware of mental well-being benefits, meQ's workforce well-being research shows that frontline populations demonstrate significantly larger improvements in resilience–the skill that protects workers from burnout risk – than non-frontline populations. In a sample of more than 18,000 employees across the two populations,

these data show that frontline staff have a 42% greater improvement in resilience than non-frontline populations.

Frontline Workers Hesitate to Admit They Need Support

Despite grappling with more demanding roles and the associated impacts on mental well-being, frontline staff are not always open to support. They are 64% more likely than non-frontline peers to state that they do not have an issue with stress. Among those who recognize they have a problem; frontline employees are 62% more likely than non-frontline staff to say they have not sought help.

meQ's research confirms a significant knowledge gap between frontline and non-frontline employees regarding employer well-being benefit offerings. Awareness of relevant employer-provided benefits was 22% lower among frontline staff compared to non-frontline staff. This gap was most pronounced among younger employees where research suggests the need is highest. Three-quarters (73%) of non-frontline Gen Z staff report feeling well-informed about available mental well-being benefits and less than half (43%) of frontline workers are aware of relevant benefits.

"Given both the elevated risk factors and participation obstacles frontline employees face, organizations reliant on these essential workers must prioritize awareness and access to needed benefits across this vulnerable population," explains Dr. Smith. "Using mental well-being benefits to seek professional help should not be a move of last resort only associated with times of crisis. Unfortunately, the first line response to troublesome levels of stress, anxiety or burnout among frontline workers is to take time off from the job – which they do only reluctantly as it represents a decrease in pay."

"It's clear that frontline workers shoulder greater burdens from highly demanding roles yet are less likely to seek support," said Dr. Smith. "Employers relying on these essential employees have a vested interest in closing this gap through proactive outreach and education to improve benefit awareness and utilization around mental well-being. Given the powerful connection between mental well-being and performance, closing this knowledge gap can lead to a healthier, more productive workforce, especially among frontline workers across industries like transportation, healthcare, manufacturing, and hospitality."

https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/frontline-workers-have-greater-mental-health-needs-yet-are-less-likely-to-seek-help-study-finds-302056812.html

Older workers find a less tolerant workplace: Why many say age discrimination abounds

Older workers are everywhere these days. And so, it seems, is age discrimination.
Roughly two-thirds of adults over 50 believe older workers face discrimination in the workplace, according to a new AARP report. Of that group, 90% believe ageism is commonplace.

The finding, based on a series of surveys in 2022 and 2023, comes at a time when America's labor pool is conspicuously aging. The 65-and-up workforce has quadrupled in size since the mid-1980s. Nearly one-quarter of the workforce is 55 or older.

"Ageism is really one of the last acceptable 'isms' that society tolerates," said Heather Tinsley-Fix, a senior adviser at AARP. "We're generally speaking of a society that really values youth, not only physically, but in these beliefs that everything good is young."

Potential victims of ageism can be tricky to identify, let alone defend. Age discrimination might strike a ballplayer at 30, an actor at 40, a news anchor at 50, a law partner at 60. Federal protections kick in at 40.

For the aging worker, a reversal of fortune can be swift and devastating: negative evaluations, layoff threats, buyout offers, demotions, pay cuts.

And all of this comes on the heels of peak earning years, in workers' 40s and early 50s.

"I think we're still combating this antiquated idea of when it's appropriate for someone to retire and usher in the next generation," said Maura Porcelli, senior director of the Senior Community Service Employment Program at the National Council on Aging.

"The landscape of the labor market has changed drastically," she said, "but our attitudes have not caught up."

Episodes of ageism can be subtle. In hiring, it might surface in a job ad that seeks "digital natives," or in an application that asks for a graduation year.

In the office, ageism can be a younger colleague laughing off "a senior moment," or an organizational push to promote the "next generation," or a gradual reduction of an older worker's duties.

"You might suddenly start to get carefully sidelined, not asked to participate in more innovative projects," Tinsley-Fix said. "You might find yourself getting subtly cut out of those meetings. An employee who's had a stellar record starts to get mediocre performance reviews, where nothing has changed."

Stuart Lipper of North Plainfield, New Jersey, was cruising through his career. He worked his way up to a dream job as a business school administrator.

Lipper lost his associate dean job in a layoff in 2012, at 56. Undaunted, he went in search of a better job, as dean of students.

"And just nothing," he recalled. "Crickets. ... I remember this feeling of, 'No one's even getting back to me.'"

Lipper lowered his sights, applying for jobs with lesser titles. Still nothing. After a seemingly endless search, he landed a position at an international business school.

In 2018, at 62, Lipper was laid off again.

"I remember taking that train ride back to New Jersey and thinking to myself, 'This might really be the end for me.'"

In a way, it was. Lipper applied near and far, even trolling for jobs he had held before. No offers came. Lipper was forced into retirement at 62. He is 68 now. He had planned to work till 70.

"If I got a phone call today to take over a graduate business program or do something exciting, I wouldn't hesitate," he said.

The new AARP report draws on a series of surveys of over-50 Americans in 2022 and 2023 by AARP in conjunction with NORC, the research organization.

Among the findings:

One in 5 older adults said they had personally experienced age discrimination since turning 40. Roughly one-quarter said they had heard negative comments about an older co-worker's age. Half of older job seekers said they had been asked to provide a birthdate on an application. Many older Americans left the workforce at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some driven out by layoffs, others opting out over health concerns.

Employment dipped by 15%, or nearly 6 million workers, for people 55 and over in the early months of 2020, according to an analysis by the Economic Policy Institute.

Many have since returned to the workforce, but not without considerable effort. Older workers tend to stay unemployed longer than younger workers, AARP research has found.

Virtual work, which exploded during the pandemic, proved a blessing and a curse for older workers, experts say.

Working from home has been a boon to many older Americans, who find themselves liberated from arduous commutes and awkward water-cooler exchanges with younger colleagues.

Yet, in virtual work, "there's more technology involved. And for some older workers, that alone makes them a little more uncomfortable," said Stewart Schwab, a law professor at Cornell. For older job applicants, ageism can lie a Zoom call away.

"I think the rise in remote interviewing has harmed older candidates," Tinsley-Fix said. "If they haven't been thinking of you as an older worker, and that camera goes on, a trigger goes off."

https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2024/02/11/older-workers-see-rampant-age-discrimination/72526697007/

Most employees think it's OK to talk about mental health at work. Some still don't do it, survey finds

Thirty-seven percent of employees polled in January cited their "mental health" as a source of stress for them.

World events, work problems, illness, financial issues — there are plenty of unhappy stressors that can harm an employee's mental health.

"People are coming (into work) with a lot more than what is on their to-do list. Those stresses can affect how they're feeling and how they perform on the job," said Barb Solish, the national director of innovation at the National Alliance on Mental Illness, which seeks to dispel "negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that society holds about individuals who experience mental health conditions."

But not everyone feels safe talking about what ails them. A new poll commissioned by NAMI of more than 2,000 working adults in the United States found that nearly three-quarters (74%) of employees indicated that it is appropriate to discuss mental health concerns at work, but only 58% say they would personally feel comfortable doing so.

"The most common reasons employees cited for feeling uncomfortable discussing their mental health at work were stigma or judgment, no one else talking about their mental health, and not wanting to seem weak," NAMI said in a release.

The poll, conducted in early January, also found that a vast majority of employees say direct managers (86%), human resources (85%) and senior leaders (78%) are responsible for "helping employees feel comfortable discussing mental health at work."

From stress to burnout

Respondents were also asked to identify what had been a source of stress for them in the past six months.

The most common response was "the state of the world" (68%), followed by "your job" (48%), "your finances" (45%), "your personal life" (41%), "your physical health" (40%) and "your mental health" (37%).

More than half of the respondents (52%) reported feeling burnt out at some point in the past year because of their jobs, with more than a third (36%) saying they felt their mental health suffered due to work demands.

"Employees who are less comfortable talking about their mental health at work are more likely to report feeling burnout and their mental health suffering because of work in the past year," NAMI said.

Employers are taking note

The pandemic, growing social and political polarization, geopolitical violence and concerns about high inflation and climate change have raised employers' awareness of their workers' mental health concerns, according to HR consulting firm Mercer.

Mercer found that two-thirds (67%) of employers have said they consider depression and anxiety a concern at work, with 21% citing it as a serious concern, in its most recent health benefits survey of organizations with at least 500 employees. Roughly the same share (68%) said job-related stress is a concern and 59% cited financial-related stress.

In response, "nearly half of employers have conducted anti-stigma campaigns to help employees feel comfortable utilizing behavioral health services," Mercer said in its analysis. And, it noted, roughly a third of employers are training managers "to recognize behavioral health concerns so they can connect employees to resources before the concerns become acute."

That would be a plus in employees' eyes, judging from the NAMI survey, which focused on workers at a broader sweep of organizations (those with 100 or more on staff) than Mercer. Four in five people surveyed by NAMI said mental health training would be a positive for workplace culture, but only half said their employers offer it.

Such training can teach direct managers, executives and individual contributors how to identify signs that someone may be struggling with a mental health problem.

"If you see a change in how they feel, act, look or think [for at least] two weeks, it may be time to start a conversation with a coworker or a direct report," Solis said. "You don't have to be a clinician to talk about mental health."

And training also can make everyone more aware of the mental health benefits on offer at the organization, so anyone who needs help can be more readily directed to those resources.

How to address AI anxiety in your workplace

Throughout 2023, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of news articles, podcasts, and think pieces focused on breakthroughs in AI (possibly rivaled only by the number of headlines dedicated to Taylor Swift). For workers, this deluge of media and the introduction of powerful, consumer-facing applications like Chat-GPT are leading to a mix of wonder, anticipation – and anxiety.

In a recent survey by the American Psychological Association, 38% of employees are afraid that AI is going to replace them at work. Of those who said they were concerned about AI, 66% also reported believing that their employer thinks they have a mentally healthier workplace than they actually do.

For years, there have been debates about the coming promise and peril of AI. Now that it is here, and rapidly integrating into the workplace, it's a critical time for leaders to take steps to address the impact of AI on employee mental health. Throughout 2024, Health Action Alliance will be rolling out resources to support you as you navigate this new terrain. As Jen Porter of Mind Share Partners says, it starts as a collective responsibility:

Here are three steps to consider taking:

1. Build a culture of transparency: A new survey by UKG, a human resources and workforce technology company, reveals that 54% of employees have no idea how their company is using AI. Yet 75% said they would be more excited about AI if their company was more transparent about how they were using it.
Action: Clearly communicate your company's approach to using AI, how the tech is being used, and how worker privacy is protected. Build that transparency into your values.

2. Position AI as additive: As research shows, work overload is a contributor to burnout. What if repetitive, menial tasks could be turned over to AI, so that the employee can work on more rewarding, human-centered projects? That same survey by UKG shows that among workers already using AI, 75% say it makes them more efficient, productive, and accurate.

Action: HAA's Mental Health Playbook points to three factors to help stave off burnout: personal resilience, a culture of wellness and continuous improvement of your company's systems and workflows. Consider how AI can help with those improvements, and communicate the benefits to your employees.

3. Use this moment as an opportunity for continued skill development: Randstad's 2024 Work monitor report recently revealed that of the top five skills workers are most interested in cultivating, AI and tech literacy are the top two. Interestingly, the rest are all soft skills, including well-being and mindfulness, communication and presentation skills, as well as management and leadership skills. As AI continues to advance and integrate more and more into the workplace, these soft skills will become increasingly important.
Action: Incorporate a company training strategy to upskill and re-skill your workforce.

https://www.healthaction.org/whatsnew/how-to-address-ai-anxiety-in-your-workplace

Surge in Employee Absences and Mental Health Struggles Plague Companies

A leading employment lawyer, Nick Hurley, has observed a concerning trend of a growing number of employees, particularly in sectors with lower wages and skills, simply not showing up to work. Hurley, who serves as the partner and head of employment at Charles Russell Speechlys, revealed that his firm has witnessed a more than threefold increase in businesses seeking advice on handling unexplained absences since the onset of the pandemic.

Rising Mental Health Issues And Apathy Among Younger Staff

The surge in unexplained absences is attributed to the prevalence of mental health issues, with conditions like depression and anxiety becoming more widespread, especially among the younger workforce. This issue is particularly acute in sectors such as retail and hospitality. Hurley points out that the growing preponderance of mental health issues contributes to a sense of apathy among staff, exacerbating the problem.

Confidence In Finding Quick Alternatives Drives Increase
Hurley also notes that the increase in employees going AWOL is driven by workers feeling confident that they can easily find alternative employment, given the current high demand for labor in various sectors. The post-Covid shift to more permissive ways of working has provided a greater opportunity for employees to exploit the system for personal gain.

Economic Impact And Increased Costs For Employers
The surge in unexplained absences poses a challenge to companies already grappling with staff shortages. With the unemployment rate close to historical lows, the situation is further compounded. Employers are faced with significant costs as they seek legal advice on disciplinary options and arrange last-minute cover for absent employees.

Lack Of Official Data, But Growing Concerns
Although no official data is collected on unexplained missed days, a 2022 survey of 158 companies employing over 300,000 staff revealed that one in three workplaces took formal disciplinary action over unauthorized absences since the pandemic. Additionally, companies are seeking more advice on dealing with mental health issues in the workplace than before the COVID era.

Upskilling Trends: Gen Z Favors Classroom Learning
In a parallel development, a majority of U.S. workers are focusing on upskilling as AI transforms traditional work models. Gen Z, in particular, stands out for its inclination towards attending physical classes to acquire new skills. About 41% of the Gen Z workforce plans to attend in-person classes, a higher percentage than both Gen X and baby boomers, according to LinkedIn's Workforce Confidence survey.

Desire For Classroom Interaction And In-Person Learning
Gen Z's preference for in-person learning may stem from a desire to compensate for the lack of classroom interaction during lockdowns. The younger generation's gravitation towards hybrid and in-person schedules aligns with their work preferences, seeking more face-to-face interaction to build networks in their early careers.

The Importance Of Both Virtual And In-Person Upskilling
While the majority of workers across all generations are turning to online courses for upskilling, Dan Brodnitz, global head of content strategy for LinkedIn Learning, suggests a combination of virtual and in-person instruction. He emphasizes that this approach provides the flexibility of learning at one's own pace online while allowing the application of complex concepts in a collaborative classroom setting.

Skills-Based Hiring And The Potential For Gen Z
Younger employees, especially Gen Z, stand to gain the most from upskilling initiatives. Skills-based hiring could significantly increase the talent pool of Gen Z workers, according to LinkedIn. Brodnitz emphasizes the importance of marketable skills, with over 50% of hirers using LinkedIn relying on skills data to select applicants for open roles.

https://www.jdjournal.com/2024/02/19/surge-in-employee-absences-and-mental-health-struggles-plague-companies/

Fifth of neurodivergent workers have experienced workplace discrimination

Experts highlight business benefits of neurodiversity as CIPD research reveals a third of organisations fail to formally address it.

Employees with neurodivergent conditions are facing difficult environments in the workplace, a report by the CIPD has found, as 20 per cent said they had faced discrimination or harassment while at work.

The report, Neuroinclusion at work, warned that "very few organisations are thinking about neurodiversity or neuroinclusion", which is a "significant missed opportunity" for employers looking to address talent shortages and tackle the inequalities faced by neurodivergent people.

A third (33 per cent) of those surveyed said their experience at work resulted in a negative impact on their mental wellbeing and a fifth (21 per cent) said it had a negative impact on their ability to perform well in their job.

A further 19 per cent said it had affected their intention to stay with their employer and the likelihood that they would recommend their employer to a friend (19 per cent).

Angela Matthews, head of policy and research at Business Disability Forum, told People Management: "Today's report shows the lack of understanding that continues to exist around neurodiverse conditions and how to best support people with neurodiverse conditions in the workplace.

"In our experience, neurodivergence is not clearly defined in workplaces and employees as well as their managers are therefore struggling to know which conditions are and are not covered within a specific organisation's use of the term, and this makes it harder for everyone to get the support they need."

Firms can often have poor or unknown procedures for reporting behaviors that do not reach the threshold for a formal grievance, meaning it can be hard for workers to feel they can "recover" from negative experiences in the workplace regarding their neurodivergence.

"A comment is rarely just a comment; it takes place in a culture that either calls it out and holds people to account, or it enables further incidents without challenge, which in turns says to colleagues: 'It's fine to be like that with one another here,'" said Matthews.

More than half (55 per cent) of the 1,047 employees and 1,003 senior managers surveyed said their organisation was neuroinclusive.

In a third (31 per cent) of organisations, neurodiversity was not formally talked about by HR, senior leaders, line managers or an employee resource group. Additionally, three in 10 (31 per

cent) neurodivergent employees admitted they had not told their line manager or HR about their neurodivergence.

While 44 per cent said they had not disclosed this as it was a private matter, 37 per cent said they were concerned about people making assumptions based on stereotypes. A third (34 per cent) said there was too much stigma and 29 per cent said they were concerned about the possible impact on their career.

"Neurodiversity needs to be a key focus in an organisation's equality, diversity and inclusion work," said Jill Miller, senior equality, diversity and inclusion policy adviser at the CIPD.

"The design of workplaces and people management approaches haven't traditionally considered neurodiversity, meaning many employees may not be able to perform at their best. "Action is needed to create neuroinclusive organisations and fairer workplaces, with equality of opportunity for neurodivergent employees, free from harassment and discrimination." She said this can be achieved through good people management and providing training to line managers.

"Focusing on neurodiversity can have important business benefits, including widening the talent pool to recruit from, supporting employee wellbeing and improving employee performance and retention," Miller added.

Ed Thompson, CEO of Uptimize, said: "HR priorities are CEO priorities. Many CEOs' top priority for 2024 is retaining and engaging talent. This report makes clear that no people, talent or EDI-related ambition or commitment can be achieved without neuroinclusion – the active effort to optimise workplaces and manage people and teams to be inclusive of different brains."

Matthews said the "single most important thing" firms can do to help people with neurodiverse conditions was to "ensure the narrative about neurodiversity is not division and not 'othering'". She said: "A culture where people with, for example, autism, dyslexia or brain injuries, which says 'they are the different ones' is not going to instill the right behaviors in a workplace for inclusion.

"Diversity – neurodiversity or any type of diversity – is about the idea that we are all different to one another; not 'those people over there' are different to 'everyone else'.

"When organisations are led to 'live' the embedded attitude that 'everyone is different', practices, planning and arranging the workplace becomes flexible for people to alter in a way that suits their own bodies and brains."

https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1862106/fifth-neurodivergent-workers-experienced-workplace-discrimination-report-finds

Could AI therapy be the solution to workplace burnout and stress?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is set to augment our workforces in a myriad of complex ways. An emerging possibility in the use of this incredible technology is the role it could play in aiding the growing mental health crisis.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggest that a significant chunk of workplace sickness absence – which is at record high numbers – is caused by mental health and stress concerns, suggesting that considering mental health should be a key priority for employers, from the perspective of having a duty of care, and it having an impact on overarching business objectives.

Since the pandemic, mental health concerns have spiked tremendously. But mental health issues have been in public discourse for many years now, as taboos around these health concerns have become less stigmatized. With the aftermath of the pandemic, and employees battling through a cost-of-living crisis and recession, wellbeing is certainly going to be at the top of the list on any HR agenda.

Perhaps unexpectedly, AI might be the secret to addressing our mental health issue, despite onlookers associating the technology with 'hard skills' and not people-focused jobs – how is this possible?

AI therapy – the benefits and downfalls

Professionals are realizing that AI can help them in mental healthcare. AI can help with diagnosing patients, can enable personalized treatment for mental health issues, and is increasingly becoming more integrated into online therapy.

Moreover, AI chatbots currently on the market provide 24/7 on-demand care and use data to effectively adapt to a user's personality and needs – the impact this can have on treating individuals is profound. With mental healthcare being so grossly in-demand, with such a radical lack of resources to treat those suffering, the use of technology can make some significant changes in the wellbeing space.

Despite this, like with anything to do with AI, there could potentially be an issue of bias in the data this tech uses to make judgements – which could propagate inaccurate prejudices.

Employees don't have to tell their managers

AI also enables employees to talk about their concerns in an anonymized way – not all staff will feel comfortable in telling their manager the gory details of their personal or professional issues – robot therapists provide a solution to this issue.

The potential effectiveness of this tech is supported by research from brand and marketing company Definition, that says a fifth of UK workers talk to AI tools like a friend (21%), ask them for advice on their life (28%), finances (19%) their career (15%), and romantic relationships (9%). The same respondents said that AI makes them feel accepted (16%), comforted (16%), understood (24%), safe (17%), like they have a friend (13%), and less alone (6%) - suggesting that people already feel comfortable seeking advice and help from AI.

However, some warn that an overreliance on AI as a solution to burnout and mental health concerns oversimplifies a complicated subject. Dr Anastasia Dedyukhina, author, speaker and the founder of wellbeing training firm Consciously Digital, weighs in: "Whether it's live or online resilience training, meditation apps, or real-life yoga lunch break sessions, AI or human therapists – none of those work if applied to a single individual, while the whole structure/culture needs healing. (A simple example – you have people burning out, with panic attacks, etc., because they are digitally overloaded, because one person does a job of three due to cost-cutting, and because management doesn't have clear priorities.

"No AI or human therapist will fix it; what you really need to do is hire more people and train your managers). So the first thing to understand is that if you are going to roll out AI to help an individual without doing anything at the system level, this will be money wasted."

It's clear that there is still a way to go with the successful integration of it into organisations and the corporate world. Plus, there must be careful considerations made on the risk of AI's biased nature and the possibility of putting a plaster on more deep-rooted causes of stress and burnout. Nevertheless, there are promising possibilities when it comes to the use of AI in aiding the mental health epidemic we are currently experiencing.

https://www.hrgrapevine.com/content/article/2024-02-20-could-ai-therapy-be-the-solution-to-workplace-burnout-stress

Labor Board's "BLM" Ruling Will Require You To Review Your Dress Code and Other Workplace Policies: Your 5-Step Guide

The National Labor Relations Board just ruled that a national retailer must allow customer-facing employees who want to write "Black Lives Matter" on their uniforms to do so – and may have opened Pandora 's Box when it comes to allowing the public display of political and social causes in the workplace. The February 21 decision applies to both unionized and non-unionized companies, so all employers need to review this important development. Here is a summary and a five-step guide to compliance.

What Happened?
Antonio Morales worked for a large retailer in the Minneapolis area. He wrote the initials "BLM" on his uniform in a show of support for co-workers he believed were being treated unfairly. He and other employees discussed the alleged mistreatment among themselves and also brought their concerns to management's attention. Eventually, Morales sent an email to a group of employees and management representatives, objecting to alleged conduct and calling for a broader discussion about racial injustice and discrimination in the workplace.

Following this email, management representatives informed Morales that wearing "BLM" was in violation of the company dress code, which prohibited workers from wearing political messages unrelated to the workplace. They informed Morales that he could not work unless and until he removed the "BLM" initials. Morales refused, resigned his employment, and filed an unfair labor practice charge with the NLRB.

Labor Board Ruling Opens Pandora's Box
The NLRB held that the employer violated federal labor law by directing Morales to remove "BLM" and enforcing its dress code policy to prohibit him from wearing it. The Board also held that the employer constructively discharged Morales – essentially, that Morales had no choice but to resign.

According to the NLRB, Morales' wearing "BLM" and his refusal to remove it was protected concerted activity. The Board said the action was a "logical outgrowth" of Morales' (and other employees') prior complaints of alleged discriminatory conduct and their efforts to remedy that alleged conduct.

Dating back to at least 2008, the NLRB has emphasized that political and social messaging can be protected conduct when there is a nexus between the messaging and employees' terms and conditions of employment. That concept is not new.

What is new, however, is what appears to be a significant expansion of the required "nexus" between political messages and the workplace.

Larger Issues at Play Lead to Broad Ruling

The employer in this case argued that the Black Lives Matter movement is a larger social cause that was borne out of protesting injustices directed at and impacting the black community by law enforcement. Therefore, it argued, there is not a sufficient nexus between BLM and the workplace for Morales' wearing of BLM on his uniform to be protected.

The NLRB avoided taking a position on the origins of BLM and its immediate nexus to the workplace. However, it concluded that opposing racially discriminatory treatment in the workplace is undoubtedly protected conduct and the BLM movement, whatever its origins, certainly represents opposition to racial injustice.

The NLRB therefore concluded that Morales wearing "BLM" on his uniform was protected – but wouldn't have necessarily been protected standing alone. The key factor: because it was a "logical outgrowth" of Morales' prior conduct in opposing discriminatory treatment in the workplace. Essentially, because Morales engaged in prior protected activity (complaining about race discrimination), his wearing of "BLM" can be connected to that activity, even if it also represents a broader movement with concerns unrelated to the workplace.

Another Brick in the Wall

The Board's decision here is yet another endorsement of the General Counsel's prosecutorial agenda. You may recall that the then-Acting General Counsel issued a memorandum in 2021 specifically calling upon the NLRB's Regional Directors to "robustly enforce" the NLRA in cases involving (among other things) "employees' political and social justice advocacy when the subject matter has a direct nexus to employee's interests as employees."

In recent months, the Board and its Regional Directors have shown a penchant for adopting the views of the General Counsel's memoranda. This includes actions in cases involving employee handbooks and the employee status of student-athletes.

What Should Employers Do Now? Your 5-Step Guide

Review Your Dress Code Policy: You should immediately review your policies related to dress and appearance. The NLRB held that the employer's dress code policy was facially neutral because it prohibited political messages "unrelated to the workplace." Thus, you should review and, if necessary, revise policies to prohibit all forms of political messaging that are unrelated to the workplace. Work with your labor counsel to ensure compliant policies, including consideration of state law which might place limitations on the ability to restrict employee political speech/conduct.

Ensure Consistency in Practice: It is one thing to maintain a neutral policy. It is another thing altogether to stay consistent in enforcing the policy. The NLRB specifically noted that employees were allowed to personalize their uniforms and display certain messages which could easily be compared to the "BLM" display at-issue, including employee displays of LGBTQ pride symbols. Thus, the employer' prohibition on Morales displaying "BLM" on his uniform appeared, in the NLRB's view, to single out a particular message. You should therefore ensure that you are consistently enforcing your policies so as to avoid the appearance of disparate treatment.

Carefully Consider the Message Being Sent: The NLRB's decision represents a clear expansion of what constitutes a sufficient "nexus" between a political message and the workplace. Thus, you need to carefully and thoughtfully consider the message represented by an employee's otherwise political display. Does it touch on wages, hours, or other terms and conditions of employment? Is the employee the only one wearing this message? Have there been previous issues with or complaints by the employee (and others) which can logically be considered

connected to the political display? You should carefully consider each of these questions before taking action. When in doubt, consult with counsel.

Be Open and Honest with Employees: Let's be real – employees are going to talk about politics and social causes in the workplace. A recent survey found that approximately 50% of respondents indicated they would talk about political issues this year during election season. It is not practical or possible for employers to eliminate that fact. Thus, an early and open discussion with employees about your policies related to political discourse is a great way to get in front of this issue. Recognize that there is likely a significant diversity of opinion in the workplace and we don't want to discourage employees from having honest and respectful conversations with one another when appropriate. However, that discussion should also emphasize the importance of minimizing disruptions and your organization's stance on prohibiting discriminatory treatment.

Prepare for a Bumpy Election Year. The NLRB's decision sets the stage for what is likely to be a contentious election season. It adds an extra layer of complexity for employers looking to minimize disruptions caused by political and social disagreement while still complying with applicable law. Bookmark our Election Season FAQs for Employers to help you get through the year ahead and refer to them often.

https://www.fisherphillips.com/en/news-insights/labor-boards-blm-ruling-will-require-you-to-review-your-dress-code-and-other-workplace-policies-your-5-step-guide.html

Employee mental health challenges remain after the pandemic, research finds 7 in 10 employees say their mental health has stayed the same or worsened in the past year.

Employers will not be surprised to learn that the mental health of workers has taken a significant hit since the beginning of the pandemic.

According to the 2024 Voice of the Workplace Report from Calm, the challenges are far from over:
- 7 in 10 employees say their mental health has stayed the same or worsened in the past year;
- 61% have felt down, depressed or hopeless recently;
- 8 in 10 say they have struggled with nervousness, anxiousness and stress recently; and
- Nearly 70% are having trouble falling asleep.

The report identified five trends that are having an impact on mental health in the workplace. Financial woes are the top stressor for employees. When the rate of inflation falls, not all employees benefit equally, economists say. Employees who spend a larger share of their

paycheck on food and rent are more affected by the weight of high prices, even prices that aren't continuing to rise. Combine this reality with the spate of layoffs, particularly in the tech industry, and it's easy to see why the cost of living and financial instability top the list of employee concerns negatively affecting their mental health.

Technology is contributing to burnout. The continued evolution of workplace technology, especially in support of remote work, enables employees to be more efficient and productive. On the flipside, it also can blur work–life boundaries and contribute to stress and burnout. With smartphones, messaging apps and instant access to the cloud from anywhere, employees often feel pressure to be "always on" and respond in the moment, both during and outside work hours.

Managers are the problem and the solution. A manager can make or break the employee experience, and relationships with managers are the number one factor in job satisfaction, according to analysts. Most employees say managers significantly influence their mental health. A caring and supportive manager can improve their mental health, while a stress-inducing manager can have a negative impact.

Women need more mental health support for life stages. In recent years, employers increasingly have prioritized family forming benefits, including financial support for aspiring parents pursuing in vitro fertilization, adoption and surrogacy. Employers also are beginning to recognize the mental health implications of these life experiences for all aspiring parents and the need to provide more support, especially for women.

Gen Z is leading the charge toward change. Although feelings of stress and anxiety are running high across all generations, Gen Z is the most stressed and anxious generation, perhaps because Gen Zers have come of age during a global pandemic and in a technology saturated world.

https://www.benefitspro.com/2024/02/23/employee-mental-health-challenges-remain-after-the-pandemic-research-finds/

New Survey Reveals that Almost 80 per cent of Women Face Ageism in the Workplace

Women of Influence+, a leading global organization committed to advancing gender equity in the workplace, released its groundbreaking findings from its survey, "Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace."

Ageism is overwhelmingly present in workplaces across the globe. According to the findings, nearly 80 per cent (77.8 per cent) of women surveyed have encountered age-related discrimination in their careers, underscoring ageism as a critical yet often overlooked barrier to professional growth.

Ageism is a form of discrimination and prejudice that is directed towards individuals or groups based on their age. This social construct often leads to stereotyping and generalizing people based on their chronological age, regardless of their individual capabilities, experiences, or personal attributes. It can negatively impact individuals at all stages of their careers, leading to unfair treatment, limited opportunities, and marginalization.

"Nearly 80 per cent of women encountering ageism in the workplace is not just a statistic; it's a clear indication that we are facing a pervasive and systemic issue," said Dr. Rumeet Billan, CEO, Women of Influence+. "Our survey sheds light on the hidden barriers many self-identifying women faces, that not only hinder their career progression but also impact their confidence and well-being."

Conducted between January and February 2024, the survey received responses from more than 1,250 women across 46 countries, spanning various industries. The survey explores the nuances of ageism and its impact on women in the workplace.

A Complex Challenge Impacting Professional Growth, Wellbeing, and Organizational Culture
Not only does ageism exist, but it is also more visible than we may want to believe.

More than 80 per cent (80.7 per cent) have witnessed women in the workplace being treated differently because of their age.

Almost half (46.2 per cent) report it to be an ongoing issue.

"I have never heard comments about male colleagues being too young or too old for their work," said one respondent. "Women are either too young, too old, or may be in the age range of having children. All are viewed as negative."

While we often think of ageism as something that impacts people in the latter years of their careers, the reality is ageism can have negative implications at all ages and stages. The data revealed notable peaks in the initial decade of work and later years.

40.7 per cent of respondents experienced age-based discrimination within the first decade of their professional journey.

More than half (55.9 per cent) encountered ageism after surpassing 21 years in their career.
Why Does Ageism Exist?

Survey participants expressed the belief that age is often inappropriately correlated with perceived performance and success, a bias that disproportionately affects women. Highlighting this gender disparity, one respondent observed, "Women are never the right age. We are either 'going to get pregnant' or 'too old'." This reflects a societal tendency to place undue expectations on women.

According to feedback from respondents, the disparity is further emphasized in contrast to older men, who respondents say are often viewed as 'distinguished' or 'very experienced'. In comparison, older women may be unfairly seen as being 'past their prime' or occupying opportunities 'better suited to others'. This observation feeds into the broader narrative that workplaces perpetuate ageism, especially against women. "Workplaces were built for men," said one respondent. Another shared, "The old boys' network still exists." And a third added, "It is a carryover from the age-old belief [that] women should not be in the workplace."

Furthermore, the survey reveals that the perpetrators of ageism span all levels of seniority, implicating the HR department, co-workers, clients, managers, and executives. Respondents highlighted recruiters as another group frequently engaging in age-based discrimination.
How is Ageism Shaping Women's Experiences in the Workplace?

Ageism in the workplace manifests in various forms.
Almost 80 per cent (74.8 per cent) reported experiencing age-based stereotypes and/or assumptions.

Just more than half of respondents (50.1 per cent) said they were shown a lack of respect from colleagues.

Almost half of respondents (49 per cent) reported unfair treatment in promotion processes.
"I have white hair and I have been advised to color my hair to make me look younger as it may help me secure employment," said one respondent. "This comment came from an HR Professional."

Women also face stereotypical assumptions about their capabilities with technology and adaptability. Beyond these tangible impacts, ageism can be detrimental to a woman's overall sense of self and well-being and can have significant personal repercussions. Whether it's taking steps to appear younger or older, women are often forced to make changes to themselves to look like they're the "right age" for a job. This is often referred to as the "pink tax" — the money and time women spend on physical enhancements to meet societal expectations.

Personally, women experienced the following:
- Increased stress as a result of experiencing ageism was reported by 62.2 per cent of respondents.
- Second-guessing capabilities was reported by 61.8 per cent of respondents.
- Almost 60 per cent (59.3 per cent) shared they overcompensated or worked harder to prove their worth.
- More than half (55 per cent) said they experienced lower self-confidence as a result of age-based discrimination.

Professionally, women also report significant impacts when it comes to ageism.

- Almost 60 per cent (57.7 per cent) reported impaired career progression.
- More than half (52.1 per cent) reported a lack of sense of belonging at work.
- More than 50 per cent (50.9 per cent) reported experiencing dissatisfaction with their employer.
- Ageism and Intersectionality

The impact of age intersects with other facets of a person's identity, such as race, ability, and gender. Intersectionality can compound the negative effects of ageism, and respondents are noticing this in their workplaces. Almost 70 per cent (69.2 per cent) of respondents believe ageism disproportionately affects women. One respondent shared, "Ageism is so intertwined with sexism, so it is hard to separate the two."

We heard from participants that ageism can unfairly impact racialized women. One respondent commented, "Ageism is proportionally much higher for racialized women." Another said, "The perfect age in the workplace for a woman is a perpetual 34-years-old. But that's too young to be in the C-suite or in a senior position. Women of color need to be older, but still look full of vitality."

The actionable steps below have been compiled using information gathered in the survey. When asked what support or resources would be helpful for those experiencing ageism in the workplace, respondents weighed in. With these five actionable recommendations, change in the workplace can begin.

Raise awareness and provide training and education. The first step is to accept that ageism is a real issue and is having more of a significant impact than we think. "Recognize it and name it," said one respondent. From recognition comes action. "Educate employees," said another.

"Provide training and workshops to raise awareness about ageism and its impact on individuals and the organization. Help employees recognize and challenge ageist stereotypes and biases."

Implement preventative policies and hold people accountable. Armed with the knowledge that ageism exists, the next step is to put policies into place and adhere to them. "Understand that a policy only translates to action if it's proactively applied by senior people in an organization," said one individual surveyed. "You can have the best policies in the world, but it can still be awful for people in practice if you have inadequate or poorly trained managers who don't think discrimination is a big deal," shared another respondent. A policy is only as good as the action that follows.

Develop reciprocal mentorship programs. A call for mentorship as a solution to ageism came through loud and clear. "Have mentorship programs to ensure both ends of the spectrum can learn from each other and respect each other," said one individual. The key, said another, is "connecting on a human level to learn about different experiences." Another respondent

shared, "The C-suite needs to create a culture of multigenerational employees and mentorship for ageism to become irrelevant."

Focus on competencies over age when recruiting and hiring. What we heard repeatedly is that professionals want to be recognized for their abilities rather than their age or years of experience. It's time to look past these distracting numbers and seek out examples of success instead. "Start looking at talent, knowledge, and wisdom rather than 'years of experience' to prove that a candidate is valuable or worthy of a position," said a respondent. Individuals urge employers to restructure the hiring process by "seek[ing] skills over stereotypes."

Include ageism as a part of DEI strategy, initiatives, and programs. The need for ageism to be included as a pillar of DEI was agreed upon by respondents across the board. "Ageism [can be] as damaging as racism and sexism and should be recognized as such," said a respondent. Another added, "[Ageism] seldom forms part of DEI programs or anti-bias training." The call for action was clear: "Truly walk the talk about diversity and inclusion."

The survey, Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace, demonstrates that age-based discrimination is an issue impacting women in the workplace across countries, organizations, industries, and sectors. No organization or individual is immune to it.
For more information, to download the white paper, or to view the infographic, visit the Women of Influence+ website: www.womenofinfluence.ca/ageism.

https://finance.yahoo.com/news/survey-reveals-almost-80-per-130000408.html

Gen Z more likely to ditch work for a 'mental health' day — here's why that concerns job experts

Talk about ill-gotten gains.

As sick as it might sound, mental health issues among young people are at an all-time high. Due to the rise of Gen Zers with "common mental disorders" (CMD), such as anxiety and depression — spurred by everyday issues like breakups, meeting deadlines and the pressures of social media — employees in their early 20s are far more likely to call out of work for a "mental health day" than millennials and Gen Xers over age 40, per a February 2024 report.

Even more surprising, an alarming number of zillennials grappling with the run-of-the-mill conditions are forgoing the workforce altogether, remaining jobless in the name of mental wellness.

"It is worrying that young people in their early 20s, just embarking on their adult life, are more likely to be out of work due to ill health than those in their early 40s," study authors added.

The three-year investigation into the relationship between the mental health and work outcomes of young people found that more than 34% of Gen Zers experienced symptoms of CMD. That's a significantly higher count than the 24% of young adults who felt burned out by the internal wear and tear of daily life in 2000. Of course, at that time, the cost of living was much cheaper, and the threat of contracting a deadly worldwide virus was less.

Although the earth-quaking effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are partly to blame for the recent uptick, researchers say the increase in reported mental health problems among youngsters boomed since the mid-2010s.

Investigators attribute the increase in Gen Z mental health issues to several factors, including COVID-19 and social media.

"In the past decade, the number of young people aged 18 to 24 who were out of work due to ill health has more than doubled, rising from 93,000 to 190,000," noted the clinicians.

"Between 2020 and 2023, two in five young people (42%) who were workless due to ill health stated that a mental health problem was their main health problem."

And it's the ladies who are leading the jobless-over-stress charge.

Gen Z women are more likely to experience CMD than men, making them more likely to take time away from work to address their mental health.

"Young women today are over 1.6 times (41%) as likely to experience CMD than young men," noted the report. "This gap has increased since 2010 to 2011, when young women were only 1.4 times (28%) as likely to experience a CMD compared to young men."

The trend of Gen Z gals prioritizing mental and emotional self-care is at a fever pitch — and its positive effects are trickling down to their kids.

New Jersey mom Noel LaPalomento, 26, told The Post that granting herself and her 6-year-old daughter a "mental health" day away from their daily grinds allows for carefree mommy-and-me bonding time.

And healthcare professionals seem all in favor of the brain betterment movement.

Nicholette Leanza, a psychotherapist at LifeStance Health in Ohio, predicts that young employees will continue abandoning the "no days off" work mentality in order to support their own mindfulness.

"I see young people being significantly more open and transparent about discussing mental health at work," Leanza told Fox News late last year. "This is shifting the way we think about work-life balance and communication in the workplace."

But Resolution Foundation fieldworkers warn that skipping out on shifts or refusing to work at all during one's 20s could have long term ramifications.

Experts believe zillennials will continue valuing mental health over work in years to come, but researchers warn young people against taking too many privileges in the trend.

"The heightened prevalence of worklessness among young people with mental health problems is concerning," said the probers, referring to the adverse reaction workers can have on a country's economy.

"Spells of worklessness in early adulthood not only impact people's living standards in the moment, but also have scarring impacts on young people's future employment prospects and lifetime living standards."

https://nypost.com/2024/02/26/lifestyle/gen-z-more-likely-to-ditch-work-for-a-mental-health-day-heres-why-that-concerns-job-experts/

NWLC Reacts to Federal Court Decision Undercutting Enforcement of Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA) for Texas State Employees

The following is a statement by Emily Martin, NWLC Chief Program Officer:

"Yesterday, a Trump judge left pregnant workers employed by the state of Texas with no clear path to enforcing their right to a workplace accommodation under the newly passed Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. This is just the latest attempt to strip us of control over our lives and turn back the clock on progress for gender justice. Coming on the heels of the Alabama IVF decision, this ruling makes clear that anti-abortion extremists aren't satisfied with overturning Roe v. Wade. Pregnant people and those who can become pregnant continue to be at ever increasing risk. But we're not giving up. The National Women's Law Center led the decade-long fight to pass the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, and we'll be there fighting for pregnant workers in Texas as this case goes up on appeal."

https://nwlc.org/press-release/nwlc-reacts-to-federal-court-decision-undercutting-enforcement-of-pregnant-workers-fairness-act-pwfa-for-texas-state-employees/

Can emotional intelligence help with the rising mental health crisis at work?

Leaders need to focus on the mental health of their workers in 2024.

In a recent survey of more than 1,000 U.S. employees, 86% of the respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that employers needed to do more to address mental health needs in the workplace. And approximately 40% of U.S. employees say their job negatively impacts their mental health, according to research from Gallup.

The recent increase in mental health problems has been felt by employees and management alike, resulting in noticeable increases in anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout. The overall impact has been a loss of engagement, productivity, and overall well-being throughout entire organizations.

Emotional intelligence is a crucial factor in our psychological health, and it is a tool that organizations need to look at if they want to address the worker mental health crisis.

Increasing emotional intelligence boosts our ability to recognize and manage our emotions better. It also helps us understand what others are feeling and experiencing. It helps us to communicate more effectively as well as use empathy in our interactions with others in the workplace. Increasing our ability to empathize with others reduces stress, anxiety, and burnout. It decreases tension among coworkers and increases the positive atmosphere throughout the organization.

Self-awareness is a crucial component of emotional intelligence. People who have a high level of self-awareness are able to understand what their triggers are, and the kind of words and situations that trigger their emotions. This allows them to avoid reacting impulsively to situations that further escalate misunderstandings and increase conflict. Rather than react impulsively, people who have a high level of self-awareness are able to think things through, de-escalate conflicts, and come up with solutions. Self-awareness can also help us recognize when we are reaching the point where we need a break and have to remove ourselves from an environment or situation.

Understanding emotional intelligence, and how to use it effectively, is a valuable tool in helping us build resilience. Recognizing our emotions and the emotions of others helps build confidence in our ability to find solutions with others, and to face difficult situations as a team. The more people in the workplace who are able to do this, the more the tension levels decrease, and engagement levels go up.

Another crucial element of emotional intelligence is empathy. Empathy allows us to better understand how others are feeling. Empathy helps us break down barriers between employees and between employees and management.

In any workplace, it is crucial that leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence. Leaders need to be proactive in creating an environment that openly encourages staff to express mental health concerns as well developing resources and programs that will support staff in all areas. Leaders who are open and willing to be vulnerable and share their own struggles will demonstrate to staff that it is okay to do so.

In the past, sharing mental health struggles in the workplace has been stigmatized. Emotionally intelligent and empathic leaders have a major role to play in changing this destructive viewpoint.

https://www.fastcompany.com/91040854/can-emotional-intelligence-help-with-the-rising-mental-health-crisis-at-work