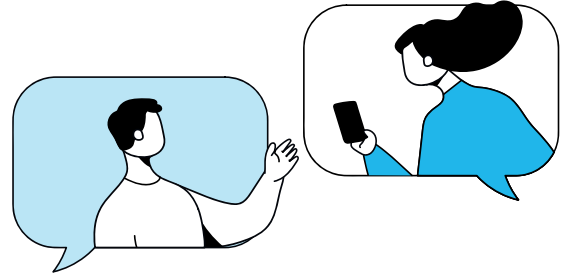


What now?

Communication, data, and leadership are key to pandemic recovery

The following is a summary of the Australia LifeWorks Employers Connect Mental Health Summit, held on 22nd February, 2022.



Australians continue to reel from more than two years of worry and uncertainty. Even as vaccinations and public health measures began to push back on the coronavirus, one-fifth of the population ended last year feeling more stressed from one month to the next.

In her summary of the LifeWorks Mental Health Index report for 2021, the firm's Global Leader and Senior Vice President, Research, and Total Wellbeing, Paula Allen noted that Australians' overall mental health is well below pre-pandemic levels, and employers need to take note.

Despite a growing focus on mental wellbeing in the workplace, half of Australians worry their career options would be limited if their employer knew they had a mental health concern. This worry creates an opportunity for organisations to focus on building strong connections at work and communicating effectively.

Paula points out that when people are anxious their need for information increases, as does the need for appreciation. Beyond recognising individual employees' contributions, employers demonstrate appreciation by investing in wellbeing to "show people that we care about them, and that's important," Paula says.

Toward mental health literacy

Building acceptance and belonging at work is a key strategy at Essential Energy, explains Cathy Connors, Manager of Wellbeing and Injury Management. "A lot of our people found difficulty in that lack of face-to-face contact," she recalls. The organisation invested in mental health literacy through communication materials that expanded beyond pandemic-specific topics. "There are a lot of resources around how to manage the barriers, the borders between home life and work life and how to support family members. It was quite well received by our people and helped to really mitigate a lot of those mental health risks." Another key communication focus was to promote the firm's employee assistance programmes (EAPs) to encourage employees to engage proactively with the resources.

At Sydney Water, James Wallace, Manager, Safety, Capability and Resilience also worked to increase utilisation of their [LifeWorks EAP](#), internally branded as My Wellbeing My Way. "We really wanted to make it a positive focus that wasn't just about 'I'm at rock bottom,'" he explains. To promote the programme as a positive, proactive resource, they sent magnets to employees' homes. "It went up on the fridge and the family would talk about it. The kids would talk about it. The people who are most likely to see that someone is struggling are going to be family members." Utilisation of the EAP quickly rose from 2.5% to as high as 20% of plan members with an open case.

Data-driven innovation

With a steady flow of data, James points out that his organisation can ensure their wellbeing programmes are having the greatest impact. "For us, it's about using the data to really focus what we do," he says. For example, the focus on mental health has reduced workers compensation claims by lowering psychosocial risks. "That has measurable benefits, and that's really helped us get those initiatives over the finish line with our board and executives." He advocates doing fewer things but doing them well and collecting and using data to set wellbeing priorities.

At Optus, tracking programme utilisation is key, and Shailendra Tripathi, Director of Health, Safety and Wellbeing, echoes the need to communicate new and innovative delivery methods. One example, is the heavy promotion of the organisation's text-based counselling service which saw good uptake, as did the overall [LifeWorks EAP](#). "For anything which is

innovative we have to go on our front foot and promote it," he observes.

Another focus for Shailendra is helping the organisation normalise new ways of working. "We have been through a lot in the last 24 months, so our goal is to bring life back to the normal," he says. His team is busy planning events and risk mitigations to welcome employees back to their campus while remaining flexible. In fact, [LifeWorks research](#) shows that two-fifths of employees say that having full choice about how, when and where they work is best for their team.

Innovating in terms of workplace flexibility, however, must also be driven by data, Cathy suggests. "Listen to your people, gather their feedback, really understand how they do what they do because we don't want to be creating wellbeing programmes that aren't going to help or make a difference," she adds. To enable successful hybrid working, her team is focusing on supporting leaders, ensuring they have the tools and best practices required to manage the unique needs of their teams.

Engaging managers

Managers will be key to normalising and innovating new ways of working in the future, and Optus is working to educate them about creating flexibility for their teams and building trust through a six-week series of briefings about the organisation's expectations in coming months.

"We build that trust. We provide that ongoing support, Shailendra says. "And it is important to look after our managers and leaders because we expect them to look after their employees." But as Paula explains, the [LifeWorks research](#) paints a troubling picture of how leaders' mental health has been affected in the past two years.

Managers are more likely to report increased job stress than non-managers and they are 40% more likely than non-managers to report the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health. Perceived stigma about mental illness persists in this group, with the majority of leaders

believing their careers would be impacted if their employer knew about a mental health issue. "That group is feeling the most traumatized in terms of their mental health," Paula explains. She adds that managers may not feel they have permission to acknowledge this trauma and seek support.

By investing in mental wellbeing, employers can support the broader pandemic recovery with greater mental health literacy, access to quality wellness resources, and cultures that celebrate flexibility, belonging, and trust.

As Australians begin to imagine a post-pandemic world, the stabilising role of work will be more important than ever. Building healthy cultures of trust and flexibility will also help employees build stronger relationships at work, which is a key pillar in better mental health. As Paula points out, "employees with a sense of belonging and acceptance at work have mental health scores that are significantly better than the national average."

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