Human Resources

Do you employ staff?

HR Update - January 2021

Supporting Mental Health in the Workplace

It goes without saying that the current coronavirus pandemic has impacted all of our lives, in many different ways. You may have heard it said that whilst we're all in the same boat, so to speak, our individual journeys are personal and unique. The impact upon employee well-being and mental health will vary, depending upon individual circumstances, including individual resilience levels. Mental health may be impacted by a sudden specific life event, or because of a gradual build up of smaller events, over time. Over the last year, many people have been impacted by the loss of a loved one, loss of income, loss of contact with family and friends and a repeated loss of normal day to day routines and freedoms. Understandably, it has been, and continues to be, a very difficult time for many with a reported increase in mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression for both those who have been susceptible to mental health issues previously, and those who have never experienced issues before.

An Employer's Legal Responsibility

As an Employer, you have a 'duty of care' towards your employees. This means you must do all you reasonably can to support your employees' health, safety and wellbeing. In summary, upholding your 'duty of care' will include;

- ensuring the working environment is safe, not just from a physical perspective, but also from an emotional and well-being perspective
- protecting employees from bullying, harassment, discrimination etc.
- carrying out general, and where necessary, personal risk assessments
- making 'reasonable adjustments' where necessary

A mental health issue may be considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010 if;

- it has a 'substantial adverse effect' on an employee's life (e.g., if they regularly cannot focus on a task, or it takes them longer to do it)
- it lasts at least 12 months, or is expected to
- it affects their ability to do their normal day-to-day activities (e.g., interacting with people, following instructions or keeping to set working times)

If an employee is deemed to have a disability, you must support them by considering to make reasonable adjustments. It would be good practice to do this anyway, even if the issue may not be deemed a disability. A failure to make reasonable adjustments may result in inadvertent discrimination. Often, simple changes to the employee's working arrangements or responsibilities could be enough to support them, e.g., allowing more rest breaks, helping them to prioritise their workload.

Lockdown and Working from Home

Whilst the initial lockdown was viewed by many individual's as positive and an opportunity for some respite, this third lockdown is now taking its toll with increased reports of the detrimental effect that the restrictions are having on individuals well-being and mental health. For many, going into work and interacting with colleagues and returning home to family thereafter is an important part of their daily structure and routine. However, the increase in 'working from home if you can' has diminished human interaction with others and for some, this has resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation and for others, feelings that it negatively impacts upon their ability to balance 'work' and 'home'. Add to this the school closures, the worry of the negative impact upon their children, the requirement to 'home school' whilst trying to focus on their own work and the pressures and stress mount up further.

Supporting your Employees

- Ensure your employees have regular one-to-ones with their Line Manager. This applies to employees who remain working within your Covid-19 Secure workplace, or those who are working remotely from home. It is easier for employees who work remotely to feel isolated and lonely so it is important that it is not a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. It is easier than ever to keep in touch with remote workers by using video technology (which may feel warmer than an email or a phone call).

- Encourage an open and honest working environment. If your employees feel they can talk openly about mental health, either to you, their Line Manager, or just in general within the workplace, then problems will be less likely to build up. This in turn could lead to less associated employee absence and improved morale in the workplace.

- As part of your regular one-to-one's and in line with having an 'open and honest' working environment, ask those who remain working within the workplace, if they have any concerns or queries about your Covid-19 Secure workplace. Your internal working practices should be regularly monitored at this time, to ensure compliance with Government guidelines. Including your employees in this monitoring process will help to alleviate any concerns or fears they may have.

- Look out for signs. Employees who are suffering from mental health issues may start to behave differently, e.g., they may become more withdrawn, their performance may start to deteriorate, they may be more emotional, they may be more abrupt, their personal appearance may change, their absence levels may increase, their time-keeping may deteriorate etc. Not everyone who experiences mental ill health will exhibit obvious signs. That is why it is important for Line Managers to hold regular one-to-ones to regularly ask their employees 'how they are doing?'

- Sensitively manage any mental health related employee absences, in line with your Company's Absence Management Policy. Maintain regular contact and again, ensure that it is not a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. When necessary seek professional advice and consider an occupational health referral or counselling support, if applicable.

- Consider implementing an Employee Well-Being Policy which may include offering an Employee Assistance Programme to employees which will provide them with a confidential counselling (employee helpline) facility which they can use to discuss personal issues that they may have.

- Consider training for Line Managers and employees, to inform them of typical triggers, symptoms and early warning signs of mental health issues developing.

Useful Resources

- **Access to work** - www.gov.uk/access-to-work - can provide advice and an assessment of workplace needs for individuals, with disabilities or long-term health conditions, who are already in work or about to start. Grants may also be available to help cover the cost of workplace adaptations.
- **Business in the Community** - www.bitc.org.uk - is a network that provides toolkits on Mental Health, Suicide prevention and Suicide postvention to help employers support the mental health and wellbeing of employees.
- **Mind** - www.mind.org.uk - is a leading mental health charity in England and Wales. It provides information and support on how to improve mental health.
- **Mindful Employer** - www.mindfulemployer.net - is a UK-wide, NHS initiative. It is aimed at increasing awareness of mental health at work and providing support for businesses when recruiting and retaining staff.
- **NHS choices** - www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth - offers information and practical advice for anyone experiencing mental ill health.
- **Remploy** - www.remploy.co.uk - offers a free and confidential Workplace Mental Health Support Service for anyone absent from work or finding work difficult because of a mental health condition. It aims to help people remain in, or return to, their role.
- **Rethink Mental Illness** - www.rethink.org - is a voluntary sector provider of mental health services offering support groups, advice and information on mental health and problems.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

The Government have updated their guidance to state that employers can (not must) furlough employees whose health has been affected by coronavirus (COVID-19) or any other conditions, including if they are unable to work from home, or working reduced hours, because they:

- are clinically extremely vulnerable, or at the highest risk of severe illness from coronavirus and following public health guidance
- have caring responsibilities resulting from coronavirus (COVID-19), such as caring for children who are at home as a result of school and childcare facilities closing, or caring for a vulnerable individual in their household

This resolves an area of uncertainty, which is whether parents who stay at home to look after school-age children are eligible for furlough. We have updated the relevant pages of our website which you can access here:

- http://hasslefreehr.co.uk/corona-virus-information/lockdown-advice/
- http://hasslefreehr.co.uk/corona-virus-information/job-retention-scheme/

January HR Tasks

As it is the beginning of the year, it is a good time to carry out some annual HR tasks, as follows;

- ensuring your employees 'personal details' are up-to-date, e.g., address, telephone number, next of kin, copies of driving licences etc.
- communicating specific 2021 holiday dates and if required, Company shut down dates
- communication of performance review/appraisal dates for the year ahead
- re-communication of important Company policies/procedures, if necessary

How Can We Help?

If you have any queries relating to the content of this newsletter, or any other HR related topic, please don't hesitate to contact us via hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk.