

India Inc takes mental health to heart but challenges remain

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Work-related stress can impact one's mental health. Which is why Saurabh Tiwari says he's fortunate that his company understands this and is doing whatever it can to help mitigate that stress.

“My company provides opportunities according to my interest, and if anyone is feeling stressed or has additional workload, they can talk with their supervisor to resolve it,” says the 31-year old who's currently working from home for a Bengaluru-based IT firm.

Not everyone's as lucky.

A Deloitte survey said employees considered workplace-related stress to be the biggest factor affecting their mental health. Poor mental health costs Indian firms a combined \$14 billion every year, the report added. Globally, it was worse. The World Health Organisation estimated that the international economy had to forego \$1 trillion in lost productivity every year.

India Inc took note of this during the pandemic in a big way. Ranging from online seminars for raising awareness to surveys and quizzes to gauge one's mental health, to no-questions-asked wellness leaves, and free access to in-house counsellors and mental well-being apps, the message from the corporate houses was clear: We take the mental health of our employees seriously.

Now, even though the Covid situation is better, firms are not abandoning these steps. Rather, some are going beyond the basics, putting their learnings of the past two-and-a-half years to use.

Tech giant Infosys is, for instance, banking on 'leave nudges' and letting people make their own choices, including when and where to work.

"The pandemic showed us that the most important need for every individual is flexibility, and the company has ensured that this is now built into our approach at work," says Richard Lobo, executive vice-president, and head-Human Resource (HR) at Infosys. "We found that by using data and analytics, we could identify teams/individuals in need of interventions. One of the top nudges we use is encouraging individuals and teams to plan their leaves in smaller units regularly," Lobo adds.

Commercial real estate services firm JLL, meanwhile, says creating ally groups within the organisation and clubs for people having similar interests gives employees a chance to connect on a deeper level.

The firm is "providing staffers flexibility in managing their work and life, supporting their career aspirations, sensitising managers against any kinds of biases, educating them to empower their teams and become true enablers, and providing employees with resources to recuperate," says Meenakshi Cornelius, head-HR, India cluster at JLL. "The stigma associated with mental health in our society continues to pose a challenge, but our focus on creating an inclusive workplace has borne fruit," she adds.

Reliance Industries found confidential one-to-one counselling with an expert to be the best mode of intervention while addressing mental health issues.

The conglomerate also created a guide to make people managers aware of signs and symptoms to look out for, and be equipped to manage any situation with compassion and empathy. The guide had sections on understanding stressors at different stages of life, and on ways to converse with people facing troubles. "Often, people managers may be the first to notice any changes in behaviour or signs of distress" among employees, the company says.

That finds an echo in aviation company IndiGo's '6E MindCare' programme, which includes customised workshops for leadership team, HR partners, and managers to equip them to address mental health issues raised by employees. "We have found that people managers have the maximum impact on employees' mental well-being," says IndiGo.

Hindustan Unilever (HUL) agrees. It has trained more than 1,300 HUL employees to become Mental Health Champions (MHCs), including over 700 shop-floor workers, who are available to listen and direct peers to appropriate resources. The FMCG major also trained 400 HR professionals as MHCs across 20 companies in partnership with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (Ficci).

Tech Mahindra, which was among the first to appoint a wellness officer, says it has launched a 'Wealth of Wellness' programme to ensure preventive, personalised, and proactive holistic wellness across eight dimensions: physical, emotional, financial, occupational, intellectual, social, spiritual, and environmental.

More people are becoming conscious of this change in the attitude towards mental health. Tata Power says it launched a well-being programme that had multiple sessions, quizzes, and surveys but realised that self-care was the most visited topic. It then launched programmes like 'caregiver to taking care'.

E-com major Flipkart says it has created a culture "where our employees are considered as important as our customers". "The most stressful thoughts relate to work.

It makes ethical sense that employers shoulder some of the responsibility of taking care of their people and reducing stress levels," says Krishan Raghavan, chief people officer, Flipkart.

In that light, real estate services company Anarock's initiative holds special significance. It has tapped its senior and experienced team members to be 'Mavens'. Their role is to be available as a sounding board to any employee facing troubles, or one who has concerns but does not want to make it "official" by going to the HR, says Sukhdeep Aurora, chief people officer, Anarock group.

Noting that it is equally important to know how to seek help in an organisational setting, video sharing app Chingari is working towards a mental wellness guideline for its employees.

What about CEOs' vulnerability?

While the start made by Indian companies seems to be positive, there's a long way to go.

"We need the topmost executives to come forward and acknowledge that mental health is important and commit to invest in it," says Yeshasvini Ramaswamy, serial entrepreneur and chief executive officer (CEO), at Great Place To Work ® India. Her organisation works with over 1,200 companies "to create high-trust, and high-performance work cultures" and she says that currently only the HR departments are organising mental health initiatives and the acceptance and participation is mostly of entry-level employees.

"We also need to see if we are creating a safe space for the C-suite, and especially the CEOs, to be vulnerable. With gender and cultural biases running deep, practising vulnerability may sometimes run the risk of low acceptance of leadership," she adds.

Experts agree that removing stigma from seeking help, amid a rise of “hustle culture”, is important.

“In younger start-ups, there is more open-mindedness. At the same time, these are the places that are high-pressure and actually cause more stress,” says Divija Bhasin, founder & psychologist at The Friendly Couch, a mental health organisation. “So, while there might be ‘less judgement’ to seek help, there is pressure to work to the optimum.”

Another issue is privacy – a prerequisite to seeking help. Many feel they can’t trust the helplines or counsellors hired by their employers. They worry whether their personal information will be shared with their supervisors and become a factor while deciding on salary hikes or promotions.

Thus, seeking the services of an external therapist seems to be a better alternative. But how many therapy sessions should the company pay for is being debated. Most experts agree that the first session should be paid for by the employer, and the employee can decide whether to pay for it from the next session onwards.

“What companies can do is create a fund for employee mental well-being and subsidise the therapy cost,” says Jayant Sundaresan, head-training and capacity building at the Indic Center, which offers multidisciplinary psychological services. He bats for normalising seeing a therapist, “like going to a dentist. Don’t wait for a toothache. Go, so that you won’t have one.”

In the end, it is all down to understanding that the one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work anymore. “Not all individuals are the same,” says Gazala Khan, a Bengaluru-based management consultant. “Using a personal approach to understand what an employee is going through – I think, that helps.”

Making a Mental Note

Infosys: Using data, analytics to identify employees in need of intervention

Reliance Industries: Has created a guide to make managers aware of signs/symptoms to look out for

JLL: Sensitising managers against biases; educating them to empower their teams

IndiGo: Holding workshops for leadership team, HR partners, managers to equip them to address employees' mental health issues

Hindustan Unilever: Has trained over 1,300 employees who help direct peers to appropriate resources

Tech Mahindra: Has launched 'Wealth of Wellness' programme

Anarock: Has tapped senior team members to be 'Mavens' – sounding boards to employees facing troubles

Chingari: Is working towards a mental wellness guideline