

The Importance of Prioritizing Employee Mental Health

MBA Capstone Project

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The subject matter in this thesis is deeply personal to me, stemming from my own experiences grappling with mental illness and attempting to navigate the workplace amidst this struggle. While the workplace often contributes to poor mental health outcomes, I want to shed light on the opportunities organizations have to promote mental well-being among their employees. As we commit such a substantial portion of our lives to our work, it is undeniable that organizations should reciprocate this dedication by safeguarding not only our physical health but also prioritizing our mental well-being.

To those reading this, please know you are never alone in your journey. Lean on those you love, reach out for help often, and know that hardship will always pass. My mother-in-law once told me that everything in life is temporary, a gentle reminder to hold on through adversity and cherish the small things.

Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of mental health and the workplace, examining the impact of employee mental health, its impact on organizational health, and the opportunities organizations have to improve employee mental well-being. In an era characterized by a surge in mental health challenges, the urgency of investigating this intersection is paramount. This thesis underscores the pivotal role of mental health initiatives in cultivating a nurturing work environment and alleviating the detrimental impacts of employee mental health crises. It explores various strategies, including heightened mental health awareness and education, comprehensive mental health benefits, and flexible work arrangements. Furthermore, the discussion extends to future research directions, emphasizing the imperative for innovative approaches encompassing culturally competent care, burnout mitigation, and industry-specific strategies. Ultimately, this thesis advocates for a cultural shift wherein mental health is acknowledged and championed, fostering benefits for individuals and organizations.

Keywords: Mental health, employee well-being, workplace, mental health initiatives, organizational health, mental health advocacy

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The Importance of Prioritizing Employee Mental Health

Introduction

Purpose and Overview

This paper aims to explain the need for organizations to prioritize the mental health of their employees. Through a thorough literature review, this exploration unfolds across three distinct dimensions. First, an overview will explore the significance of mental health within the workplace context. This overview will encompass the importance of mental health for the individual, describe the historical evolution of mental health considerations within organizational settings, and navigate the complex landscape of mental health in the workplace today. Next, this paper will describe the relationship between prioritizing employee mental health and fostering prosperous organizational performance. Finally, the literature review will describe current and emerging trends shaping employee mental health discourse. From the impact of remote work to integrating innovative mental health care, this analysis aims to understand the evolving landscape of mental health prioritization thoroughly. While the thesis primarily focuses on mental health initiatives, it recognizes the broader organizational context as a potential source of stress. The paper advocates for prioritizing mental health within organizations and equips them with actionable insights to foster healthier, more resilient workplaces.

Need for Study

Psychologists are reporting increased client demand for mental health care for the third straight year (American Psychological Association, 2023). Further, research suggests that more employees are citing mental health concerns as a reason for terminating their employment. A study conducted in 2021 revealed that 68% of Millennials and 81% of Gen Zers left their roles due to mental health reasons (Greenwood & Anas, 2021). The same study found that 91% of

respondents believed that organizations should foster cultures that support and promote the mental health of their employees. This data serves as a compelling call to action, prompting a closer examination of the need to prioritize mental health care for employees within organizational settings.

While employees are struggling to get their mental health needs met, organizations are also feeling the impact. Recent guidance from the U.S. Surgeon General suggests that prolonged working hours, restricted autonomy, and inadequate wages are not only driving the nation's ongoing labor shortage but fueling the overarching mental health crisis. It is estimated that 200 million workdays are lost each year due to employee mental health issues, which is the equivalent of \$16.8 billion lost in productivity (Novotney, 2023). Additionally, innovation and productivity tend to flourish in environments where employees feel their well-being is valued and promoted, demonstrating the importance of employee mental health (McCormack & Shropshall, 2022).

In navigating this ongoing issue, organizations possess an array of viable options to promote employee mental health proactively. The surge in remote work capabilities presents an opportunity for organizations to create flexible and supportive environments that cater to the diverse needs of their workforce. Innovative mental health initiatives can also drive positive organizational transformations, fostering a culture where mental health is prioritized through initiatives such as mental health days and peer support networks. Moreover, leveraging virtual mental health care can offer accessible and personalized solutions for employees. These proactive measures not only address the immediate challenges posed by the contemporary landscape of the employee mental health crisis but also lay the foundation for sustained and holistic change.

Literature Review

Relevant research will be analyzed to show the ever-growing need to promote employee mental health. This literature review will explain the following topics: mental health in the workplace, the impact of employee mental health on organizational performance metrics, and current and emerging trends that promote employee mental health. By analyzing key research findings, this literature review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between mental health and the modern workplace, guiding the formulation of informed strategies for fostering a work environment that sustains and uplifts its employees.

Overview of Mental Health in the Workplace

In recent years, a notable surge in social media conversations has highlighted the significance of positive mental health outcomes. These conversations are partly due to the rise of social media platforms such as TikTok, which has made seamless sharing of personal narratives and challenges proliferate. In this landscape, individuals navigating mental health journeys have found a supportive community, discovering reassurance and camaraderie in the realization that others share and understand their everyday struggles. Beyond the influence of online movements, progress in the field of psychology has elevated the comprehension and approach that mental health providers employ in tackling mental health concerns. The global pandemic only further heightened awareness of the importance of mental health, and this dialogue continues today. The following will explore the importance of mental health, provide a historical overview of workplace approaches, and offer insights into the current state of mental health in the workplace today.

Importance of Individual Mental Health

More than one in five, or nearly 58 million Americans, struggle with mental illness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). The prevalence of mental health challenges has significantly shifted, facing additional strain due to the adversities imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This global health crisis not only heightened existing mental health concerns but also revealed new dimensions of vulnerability, such as the susceptibility and fragility of individuals' mental health in the face of the ongoing crisis. This underscored the urgent need to intensify efforts in addressing the evolving mental health needs of individuals. A recent survey indicated that 90% of adults in the U.S. perceive the nation to be in the midst of a mental health crisis composed of a lack of access and an increase in mental health conditions (Panchal et al., 2023).

Mental health is characterized by emotional, psychological, and social well-being and drastically impacts how individuals think, feel, and behave. Mental health also plays a prominent role in how individuals handle stress, make choices, and interact in their relationships with friends, family, partners, and colleagues. Those struggling with mental health conditions could be a result of biological factors such as brain chemistry, a family history of mental illness, experiencing traumatic life events, as well as an accumulation of daily stressors. Some common mental health conditions include anxiety, depression, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and bipolar disorder (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023).

While positive mental health outcomes in itself are essential, it is also crucial to understand the intricate relationship between psychological and physical health. The dynamic interplay between the mind and body becomes evident as negative and anxious thoughts often

prompt physiological responses, such as increased heart rate, shallow breathing, fatigue, and a weakened immune system. This physiological reaction, designed initially to combat genuine environmental threats, can manifest in response to everyday stressors and cause immense distress to individuals who are struggling with mental health conditions (U.C. Health, 2022).

In addition to causing feelings of anguish, those with mental health conditions are also more likely to develop chronic illnesses, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, pain, Alzheimer's disease, and potentially osteoporosis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Research suggests that several factors contribute to this increased risk, including limited access to healthcare, challenges in maintaining overall health practices (such as seeking care, adhering to medication, healthy eating, and exercise), and potential long-term physiological changes associated with mental health conditions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Understanding and addressing the complex link between psychological and physical health is essential to providing comprehensive care for individuals dealing with mental health conditions and their associated health risks.

The workplace, a significant component of individuals' daily lives, is pivotal in shaping mental health outcomes. The stressors experienced in the workplace, such as workload, deadlines, colleague dynamics, and the broader organizational environment, can contribute to mental exhaustion and impact overall well-being. It is crucial to acknowledge that the demands and pressures of professional life can exacerbate mental health challenges and potentially lead to burnout, decreased productivity, and strained interpersonal relationships (Papathanasiou, 2015). The workplace, however, is not solely a source of stress; it also holds the potential to be a positive influence in supporting employee mental health.

Historical Overview of Mental Health in the Workplace

The history of workplace wellness traces back to the 17th century, with the work of Bernardino Ramazzini, who wrote about the impact of work exposure on workers and the potential for preventive measures (Rucker, 2016). During the Industrial Revolution, new health problems emerged, prompting social reformers like Robert Marcus Owen, who advocated for shorter workdays. Fast forward to the 1950s, workplace wellness gained momentum with the introduction of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), initially focusing on alcoholism and mental health. However, the inception of comprehensive workplace wellness programs occurred in the mid-1970s, coinciding with a shift in financial responsibility for healthcare from the government to employers (Rucker, 2016).

The late 1970s saw the development of worksite health promotion, aligning with occupational safety and health movement activities. In the 1980s, an emphasis on physical health emerged, while psychological well-being gained more attention in the late 1980s. At this point, initiatives addressing work-related mental health disorders surfaced, marking a shift towards holistic wellness. In the 1990s, the federal government, through initiatives like Healthy People 2000, aimed to promote widespread health promotion services. Focus areas of this initiative included substance abuse, mental health, and physical health (Rucker, 2016). This allowed employers to play a role in supporting these initiatives by implementing workplace health programs. Since the inception of the Healthy People 1990 program, successive initiatives have expanded upon its foundational framework, including Healthy People 2010, 2020, and the ongoing 2030 initiative.

Mental Health in the Workplace Today

The changing dynamics of workplaces in recent years have prompted an increased focus on workers' mental health needs and expectations. In October 2022, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy introduced the Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being, marking a significant step in acknowledging the importance of mental health support in the workplace (OASH, 2022). Results from the American Psychological Association's (APA) 2023 Work in America Survey underscore the growing significance of psychological well-being for workers. A noteworthy finding is that 92% of survey respondents prioritize working for organizations that value their emotional and psychological well-being. Additionally, 95% expressed the importance of feeling respected at work, and an equal percentage emphasized the need for organizations to respect boundaries between work and non-work time (American Psychological Association, 2023).

While a substantial majority (77%) of respondents reported satisfaction with their employer's support for mental health and well-being, areas for improvement are evident. Notably, 55% of respondents believe their employers perceive the workplace environment as mentally healthier than it is. Further, 43% worry that disclosing a mental health condition could have negative repercussions at their workplace. However, workplace stress remains a significant issue, with 77% of workers reporting that they have experienced work-related stress in the last month. Negative impacts associated with stress, such as emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, and a desire to quit, were reported by a considerable portion of respondents. Moreover, data suggests that many workers are not receiving adequate breaks, as only 35% reported having an employer encouraging breaks (American Psychological Association, 2023).

The APA survey sheds light on the current state of mental health support in workplaces. Only 43% of respondents reported that their employer provides health insurance covering mental health and substance use disorders. Furthermore, access to mental health resources and support varies, with only 29% reporting that their employer encourages employees to take care of their mental health. The potential implications for employers failing to provide adequate mental health support are evident. A dissatisfaction with mental health and well-being support corresponds with a higher likelihood of employees seeking new job opportunities. Overall, 33% of workers express an intention to look for a new job in the next year, with this number rising to 57% among those unsatisfied with their current mental health support (American Psychological Association, 2023). These results demonstrate the urgency for employers to address mental health concerns in the workplace and promote a healthier and more productive workforce.

Impact of Poor Mental Health Outcomes on Employees and Organizations

With more than half of the world's population engaged in work and over 15% of work-age adults worldwide grappling with mental illness, the topic of mental health in the workplace has become significant (World Health Organization, 2022). The implications of insufficient support for mental health conditions extend beyond individual well-being, impacting engagement, productivity, and the ability to secure and maintain employment. The economic toll of depression and anxiety alone, amounting to \$1 trillion annually, signifies the far-reaching impact on global productivity (World Health Organization, 2022). The following section will analyze the effects of poor mental health on employee performance and overall organizational health, shedding light on the quantifiable consequences of overlooking employee well-being.

Engagement and Productivity

To better understand mental health and how it impacts employee engagement, the Conference Board conducted a poll involving over 1,100 American employees. One-third of respondents reported a decline in their mental health over the past six months, with nearly 40% expressing a decrease in their sense of belonging (PSHRA, 2023). Notably, those experiencing worsened mental health exhibited a significant 70% decrease in job engagement (PSHRA, 2023).

Presenteeism refers to a loss in productivity that occurs when employees are physically present in the workplace but are not functioning at total capacity due to an illness, injury, or other condition. Presenteeism is responsible for 81% of lost productivity, and 80% of costs linked to lost productivity stem from this phenomenon, four times higher than costs attributed to absenteeism (Zambito, 2022). These numbers underscore the notion that while mental illness is linked to increased absenteeism, it also adversely affects individuals who consistently show up to work but find themselves unable to exert their full capabilities.

A University of Warwick study revealed a parallel between employee happiness and productivity. The study indicates a 12% increase in productivity among happy employees, contrasting with a 10% decrease among unsatisfied ones. Another study at the University of Oxford's Business School, encompassing 1,800 call center workers, provides further evidence supporting this phenomenon. The study revealed that happy employees showcased accelerated task completion speed and a 13% increase in sales performance compared to their less content counterparts (Broom, 2019).

Turnover

In addition to impacting engagement and productivity, employees experiencing mental health struggles also face higher turnover rates. Notably, employees grappling with depression

report a substantial 15% job loss rate, a stark contrast to the 3.5% rate observed in their non-depressed counterparts (Zambito, 2022). What compounds this issue is the fact that, typically, employers do not become aware of an employee's mental health struggles until after the employee's resignation. In a survey conducted by Harvard Business Review, of 1,500 responses from U.S. employees, nearly 60% have never discussed their mental health status with anyone in the workplace (Greenwood et al., 2019). When discussions about mental health did take place, fewer than half were characterized as positive. Further, respondents felt the least at ease when conversing with their company's human resources representatives and senior leaders.

High turnover rates wield substantial financial repercussions for organizations. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has found that replacing an employee costs a business one-half to five times that employee's annual salary (Stewart, 2017). In the U.S., it is estimated that costs associated with voluntary turnover amount to \$1 trillion annually (Midlands Technical College, 2022). Research shows a compelling relationship between content employees and retention, as happy employees experience a decreased inclination to explore job opportunities elsewhere. Companies that prioritize the well-being and happiness of their employees not only minimize turnover but also enhance talent retention, resulting in substantial cost reductions for the organization (Stewart, 2017).

Current and Emerging Trends

Recognizing the critical importance of employee mental health, organizations have been compelled to reassess their strategies for promoting employee well-being. In the wake of the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become evident that conventional paradigms of work and workplace culture are inadequate in addressing the evolving needs of employees. In response to this realization, new trends, such as remote work and innovative approaches to

mental health care, have emerged, signaling a shift towards more adaptable and responsive frameworks in the workplace.

Remote Work

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the emergence of remote work as a prevalent practice and has been hailed as a benefit for many employees as it offers both flexibility and convenience. About 16% of organizations globally operate entirely remotely, without a physical office (Haan, 2023). Remote work has received praise for its positive impact on employee productivity and job satisfaction. Studies, such as the 2022 report from Owl Labs and Global Workplace Analytics, indicate that most employees feel more productive when working remotely, emphasizing the role of flexible work arrangements in fostering a better work-life balance (Parikh, 2023). This balance, in turn, correlates with higher job satisfaction and increased retention rates within organizations.

Research further highlights these trends and offers insights into the current state of remote work. A substantial proportion of full-time employees in the United States (12.7%) currently work remotely, while a significant portion (28.2%) adopt a hybrid model combining remote and in-office work (Haan, 2023). Estimates suggest that by 2025, around 32.6 million Americans will work remotely, indicating a steady upward trajectory in remote work adoption. Additionally, most workers (98%) desire remote work, underscoring its growing appeal and benefits (Haan, 2023).

Remote work can positively impact mental health by facilitating increased sleep, reduced stress levels, and more significant opportunities for exercise. Additionally, remote work allows employees to spend more time with family and limits exposure to toxic workplace environments and workplace bullying (Kennette & Lin, 2021). However, it is essential to acknowledge that

remote work can also present challenges, including feelings of isolation and the inability to disconnect from work, which may contribute to adverse mental health outcomes (Emerson, 2020). Despite these challenges, the absence of traditional office settings can also alleviate pressure to conform to social norms, allowing employees to create environments conducive to their comfort and productivity (Parikh, 2023). In embracing remote work, organizations have the opportunity to cultivate environments that support their employees' mental health while addressing potential challenges through targeted interventions and policies.

Innovative Mental Health Initiatives

Innovative mental health support programs differentiate themselves from traditional approaches by prioritizing accessibility and personalization. Leveraging ever-evolving technology, these programs provide employees convenient access to resources, such as virtual therapy sessions, mental health webinars, online coaches, and online self-assessments. The personalization aspect of these approaches ensures that employees receive tailored support that meets their specific mental health needs (Better You, 2024). For organizations offering these mental health benefits, 67% of employees say they find these services helpful (Leonhardt, 2022).

Although most employees perceive these services as valuable, only one in five report having access to virtual therapy sessions through their employers. Even more concerning, a significant 41% state that their employer provides no therapy or related benefits whatsoever (Leonhardt, 2021). Consequently, these employees are left to bear the financial burden if they wish to seek out such services independently. Despite the growing adoption of innovative mental health practices among organizations, it is evident that employers have yet to reach the necessary level to address the mental health needs of their employees adequately.

One example of an innovative mental health initiative is a platform called Headspace. Employers utilizing Headspace provide their employees with robust mental health and well-being services to support employees and their families. This support includes unlimited access to on-demand mental health coaching, in-person and video therapy sessions, 24/7 phone support to address urgent concerns, and psychiatry services. Beyond mental health services, the platform provides extensive work-life support, including financial matters, legal issues, elder care, childcare, and identity theft. Finally, the platform includes tools and resources for mindfulness, sleep support, and enhancing focus, promoting holistic well-being among employees (Headspace, 2024).

As organizations strive to prioritize employee well-being in an increasingly complex and demanding work environment, innovative mental health initiatives like Headspace offer hope. By combining accessibility, personalization, and a comprehensive range of services, these initiatives demonstrate a commitment to supporting employees and their families on their mental health journey. However, despite the progress made, there remains a significant gap in access to such services, highlighting the ongoing need for employers to invest in and expand mental health benefits. By embracing these innovative approaches and ensuring equitable access for all employees, organizations can foster a holistic well-being culture that enhances individual flourishing and organizational success.

Solutions

Given the significant importance of employee mental health and its impact on engagement, productivity, and overall organizational health, organizations must adopt comprehensive strategies to address and improve the mental health outcomes of employees. Solutions proposed include enhanced mental health education and awareness, comprehensive mental health benefits, flexible working arrangements, and continuous feedback mechanisms. The following solutions aim to bridge the gap between adequate mental health support and employees in the workplace, fostering an environment where employees can thrive personally and professionally.

While implementing any single strategy can contribute to better employee mental health outcomes, integrating a combination of relevant strategies to create a comprehensive mental health initiative is the optimal approach. Moreover, recognizing that mental health issues affect all industries and workplaces nationwide is crucial. Although certain strategies may be more readily applicable to specific industries and work environments, it remains imperative for every sector to make progress in this area. In all, customization will be a crucial aspect of implementation.

Enhanced Mental Health Education and Awareness

Mental health education and awareness are crucial in normalizing workplace mental health discussions. By reducing stigma and fostering an environment of psychological safety, these programs empower employees to seek help and openly discuss their well-being (Van Eys, 2021). Research has shown that organizations investing in mental health training observe decreased feelings of shame among employees struggling with mental health issues, leading to higher levels of engagement (Van Eys, 2021). Mental health education and awareness equip

employees with tools to manage stressors, enhancing their daily performance and reducing the risk of mental health crises. Organizations must recognize the importance of providing time and permission for workers to engage in these stress reduction techniques, ensuring that employees have the necessary resources to prioritize their mental health. By promoting daily stress reduction techniques and encouraging healthy lifestyle changes, these programs contribute to a more resilient and engaged workforce (Van Eys, 2021).

Further, organizations prioritizing mental health awareness demonstrate their commitment to employee well-being, creating a more supportive company culture. As a result, these organizations foster a healthier work environment where employees feel valued. Research suggests that mental health education also enhances authenticity at work, leading to higher levels of engagement and lower rates of burnout (Van Eys, 2021). Employee well-being is also closely linked to workplace dynamics, with poor mental health outcomes often contributing to conflict and communication breakdowns. Mental health education programs provide employees the tools to manage stress levels, improve communication, and build trust with colleagues and managers (Van Eys, 2021). By promoting awareness and understanding of individual stressors, these programs help mitigate the risk of workplace conflict and facilitate more effective conflict resolution strategies.

While organizations have traditionally focused on physical health initiatives, mental health training programs offer a more holistic approach to employee wellness. By addressing mental health concerns and promoting stress reduction techniques, these programs contribute to better overall health outcomes and reduce the risk of chronic illnesses associated with poor mental well-being. The research underscores the importance of integrating mental health into workplace wellness initiatives to maximize employee health and productivity (Van Eys, 2021).

Comprehensive Mental Health Benefits

Ninety percent of employers have reported increasing investments in employee mental health initiatives (Vivo, 2023), recognizing the numerous advantages such initiatives yield for employees and organizations. Human resource professionals acknowledge that investing in mental health benefits can enhance productivity, increase return on investment, improve employee retention, attract new talent, and enhance employee well-being. While traditional EAPs have historically been the solution of choice, organizations are increasingly supplementing or replacing them with more comprehensive mental health benefits. However, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges of insurance limitations and bureaucratic paperwork, which can hinder employee access to mental health services. To address this, organizations can work closely with insurance providers to negotiate more flexible coverage options, explore alternative mental health support mechanisms such as telehealth services, and invest in internal resources and support systems to build a culture of mental health awareness and support within the organization. Several studies demonstrate the benefits of investing in employee mental health, such as lower health plan spending, improved talent attraction and retention, and increased productivity. Employees who receive treatment for depression report enhanced work performance and job satisfaction, with significant reductions in absenteeism and presenteeism (Vivo, 2023).

Further, for every \$1 spent on treating common mental health concerns, there is a return of \$4 in improved health and productivity, underscoring the cost-effectiveness of mental wellness benefits (Vivo, 2023). Recent analysis reveals that organizations spend an average of over \$15,000 annually on each employee experiencing mental health issues, a figure that is likely to have increased due to the surge in mental distress amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, employees experiencing mental distress incur significantly higher healthcare costs, averaging nearly \$3,000 more annually compared to their peers. The cost of days lost due to mental distress averages \$4,783 per employee per year, while turnover costs average \$5,733 per employee per year. These figures underscore the substantial financial burden placed on organizations by untreated mental health issues among employees (National Safety Council, 2021).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health benefits, not all programs are created equal. Employers should look for specific qualities to ensure employees have access to adequate, high-quality care. These include easy access to care, personalized treatment plans, evidence-based practices, peer-reviewed clinical studies supporting treatment effectiveness, and culturally responsive provider networks (Vivo, 2023). Fostering a supportive work environment and providing accessible mental health benefits contribute to happier, healthier, and more engaged employees, ultimately driving organizational success (Vivo, 2023).

Flexible Working Arrangements

A growing body of research speaks to the significance of providing employees autonomy and flexibility in their work environments (American Psychological Association, 2022). Allowing workers to choose from reasonable working hours and locations that align with business objectives and personal circumstances has several positive outcomes. For example, studies have consistently demonstrated that autonomy enhances employee motivation and performance. By encouraging employees to exert control over aspects of their work, organizations cultivate a greater sense of ownership and engagement for their employees. As a result, employees feel supported, and productivity and job satisfaction increase (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Additionally, organizations that utilize remote-friendly policies foster psychologically safe and inclusive environments where employees feel empowered to thrive and contribute. Further, research indicates that supervisors prioritizing family and work harmony contribute significantly to employee job satisfaction and retention. Recognizing and accommodating employees' caregiving responsibilities and personal circumstances helps organizations create a more supportive workplace (American Psychological Association, 2022). This is especially important in the post-COVID era, where many employees in the broader work landscape desire flexible work arrangements. According to Pew Research, in the post-pandemic landscape, 60% of remote-capable workers prefer working from home all or most of the time, an increase from 54% in 2020 (Parker, 2022). Among those currently working remotely most of the time, 78% wish to continue doing so after the pandemic, compared to 64% in 2020. The key driver behind this desire is the profound impact flexible work arrangements have on their mental and overall well-being (American Psychological Association, 2022).

Feedback Mechanisms

To effectively support employee mental health during the implementation of the above solutions, it is also crucial for organizations to establish frequent feedback mechanisms. One method for achieving this is through the utilization of double-loop learning. To understand the essence of double-loop learning, it is helpful to contrast it with single-loop learning. Single-loop learning involves fine-tuning within existing frameworks, whereas double-loop learning compels organizations to question the assumptions guiding their approach to desired changes, such as mental health initiatives (Cartwright, 2019). Through the critical evaluation of the needs and experiences of employees, organizations can uncover gaps and biases in their understanding of mental health issues and care. In this process, employers may discover that employees point

toward solutions not previously considered, such as peer support networks, mental health days, or reserved mindfulness time during the work day. This process is a natural progression as research on mental health in the workplace advances and employees continue to evolve.

Double-loop learning encourages the exploration of alternative perspectives and possibilities, which fosters a transformative shift in problem-solving approaches (Cartwright, 2019). Addressing workplace mental health challenges through double-loop learning prompts organizations to probe deeper into root causes rather than merely treating symptoms. This approach facilitates the identification of systemic issues or structural barriers, paving the way for more effective interventions. Additionally, adaptability is critical to double-loop learning, enabling organizations to continuously assess and adapt mental health initiatives based on feedback and emerging research. Organizations can continually refine their strategies by maintaining flexibility and embracing experimentation to better cater to evolving employee needs (Cartwright, 2019).

Discussion

As the prevalence of mental health issues among employees continues to rise, so does the significance of implementing effective mental health initiatives in the workplace. While the underlying causes, repercussions, and potential solutions for escalating mental health challenges within professional settings have been discussed, the subsequent sections will propose strategies for overcoming resistance and barriers to change, establishing metrics to gauge progress, and exploring avenues for future research in this domain.

Manage Resistance and Barriers to Change

Barriers and resistance may stem from various sources when implementing mental health initiatives in the workplace. These include stigma surrounding mental health, lack of awareness about available resources, organizational cultures that do not prioritize mental well-being, limited leadership support, resource constraints, workload and time constraints, and cultural or linguistic barriers. Overcoming these challenges requires proactive efforts to promote awareness, foster a supportive culture, secure leadership buy-in, allocate resources effectively, and address the unique needs of diverse employee populations. By addressing these barriers, organizations can create environments where employees feel empowered to prioritize their mental health and well-being.

Lewin's Force Field Analysis Model and Change Management Model will be used to analyze resistance and barriers to change, as well as guide the next steps for implementing change. These models provide a systematic framework for managing resistance and barriers to change by addressing the underlying factors contributing to resistance, engaging stakeholders in the change process, and creating a supportive environment conducive to organizational change.

Lewin's Force Field Analysis Model

Implementing mental health initiatives in the workplace often encounters resistance and barriers that hinder progress. These challenges can arise from a variety of sources, including stigma surrounding mental health, limited awareness of available resources, organizational cultures that do not prioritize mental well-being and resource constraints. Lewin's Force Field Analysis model can be employed to systematically address these barriers and facilitate successful implementation. This model offers a structured approach to identifying the driving forces that promote change and the restraining forces that inhibit it.

In applying Lewin's Force Field Analysis, the driving forces that support mental health initiatives and the restraining forces that impede progress can be distinguished (Reyes, 2023). Driving forces may encompass raising awareness, leadership support, and effective resource allocation while restraining forces might include stigma, lack of awareness, and cultural or linguistic barriers. Based on the insights gained from the Force Field Analysis, strategies can be developed to address and mitigate the identified barriers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Lewin's Force Field Analysis

Driving Forces	Proposed Actions	Restraining Forces
Increasing awareness surrounding mental health	Promote mental health awareness and education to challenge stigma and cultivate a supportive culture	The stigma surrounding mental health
Securing leadership buy-in	Demonstrate the value of mental health initiatives to gain leadership support and commitment	Lack of leadership support/understanding of mental health
Employee advocacy	Implement communication to raise awareness about available mental health resources and encourage utilization	Lack of awareness

Note. This figure illustrates the driving forces, proposed actions, and restraining forces for implementing mental health initiatives in the workplace.

To reduce identified restraining forces, organizations can consider several strategies. First, addressing stigma is crucial. Promoting mental health awareness and education can challenge stigma and cultivate a supportive culture. Second, securing leadership buy-in through the demonstration of the value of mental health initiatives can gain leadership support and commitment. Third, optimizing resource allocation ensures that mental health programs are both available and accessible to all employees. By proactively addressing these barriers and leveraging the insights from Lewin's Force Field Analysis, organizations can create an environment that empowers employees to prioritize their mental health and well-being, ultimately contributing to a healthier, more productive workforce.

Lewin's Change Management Model

By examining Lewin's model's unfreezing, changing, and refreezing stages, organizations can effectively manage resistance and barriers to change when introducing mental health programs that benefit their employees. The following will discuss strategies for each stage of the change process and highlight the importance of creating a supportive organizational culture conducive to mental health. While employee mental health is a critical component of organizational well-being, implementing mental health initiatives in the workplace often results in resistance and barriers to change. Lewin's Change Management Model provides a framework for understanding and addressing these challenges, offering guidance on how organizations can navigate the change process effectively.

Step 1: Unfreezing.

The first stage of Lewin's Change Management Model involves unfreezing the existing state of affairs within the organization (Mindtools, n.d.). This stage begins with assessing the organization's current state of mental health. This assessment consists of gathering employee well-being data, identifying existing mental health resources and programs, and understanding prevailing attitudes and perceptions toward mental health. Additionally, creating awareness about the importance of mental health and the need for change is crucial. This may involve utilizing various communication channels to raise awareness by sharing statistics, personal stories, and case studies to illustrate the impact of mental health on individuals and the organization as a whole. Addressing resistance to change is also essential during this stage. Anticipating and addressing concerns, dispelling myths and misconceptions, and involving key stakeholders in the change process are key strategies to overcome resistance.

Step 2: Change.

The second stage of Lewin's model involves making the necessary changes to implement mental health initiatives in the workplace, which includes developing mental health initiatives based on assessment findings and stakeholder input. Initiatives should be tailored to the organization's needs and culture. They may include offering mental health education, access to mental health benefits, and promoting work-life balance through flexible working arrangements. Providing training and support to employees and managers is also critical during this stage to ensure they have the knowledge, skills, and resources to support mental health in the workplace (Mindtools, n.d.). Resources could involve offering workshops, webinars, and tools on stress management, resilience-building, and recognizing signs of mental distress. Additionally, continuous communication about the progress of mental health initiatives, celebrating successes,

and addressing challenges or concerns as they arise are essential for maintaining momentum and commitment to change.

Step 3: Refreezing.

The final stage of Lewin's model involves refreezing the changes to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness over time (Malik, 2024). This includes embedding mental health practices into the organization's policies, procedures, and culture. Organizations should also update human resource policies to include mental health considerations, integrate mental health into performance evaluations and wellness programs, and allocate resources for ongoing support. Sustaining change requires monitoring and evaluating the impact of mental health initiatives over time, gathering employee feedback, and tracking key metrics related to mental health and well-being. Finally, celebrating success and recognizing individuals and teams that have contributed to the success of mental health initiatives reinforces the organization's commitment to prioritizing employee well-being (Mindtools, n.d.). During this final step, organizations must understand that the unfreezing stage is not static. Instead, it is a dynamic phase that continuously provides feedback, guiding ongoing and meaningful change.

Figure 2*Lewin's Change Management Model*

Step 1: Unfreeze	Step 2: Change	Step 3: Refreeze
<p>Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current mental health status • Identify existing resources • Understand attitudes and stigma toward mental health <p>Create Awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness through communication • Share statistics, stories, and case studies <p>Address Resistance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge concerns • Involve key stakeholders • Foster psychological safety 	<p>Developing Mental Health Initiatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and implement tailored mental health programs/services • Offer EAPs, manager training, counseling services, and promote work-life balance <p>Training and Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources to support mental health • Implement education to decrease stigma <p>Communicating Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain transparent communication about progress and challenges • Celebrate successes to sustain momentum 	<p>Embedding Mental Health Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalize mental health practices into policies, procedures, and culture • Allocate resources for support <p>Sustaining Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor and evaluate mental health initiatives • Adjust for effectiveness <p>Celebrating Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize achievements in promoting mental health • Reinforce commitment to employee well-being

Note. Adapted from Lewin's Change Management Model, this figure outlines the three-step process of implementing mental health initiatives in the workplace.

Metrics for Monitoring Change

Monitoring change in implementing mental health initiatives requires a comprehensive approach beyond merely tracking the effectiveness and impact of the initiatives. It is essential to understand the sources of mental stress within the workplace and assess change indicators to ensure organizational practices are evolving to support employee well-being. One crucial aspect is measuring employee engagement through surveys, feedback sessions, or pulse checks to gauge perceptions and utilization of mental health initiatives (Meyer, 2023). It is equally important to identify sources of workplace stress through employee feedback, such as high workload, lack of

work-life balance, or poor management practices. Monitoring changes in these stressors can help organizations understand whether their practices contribute to employee stress and mental health issues. Additionally, monitoring utilization rates of mental health resources like EAPs and counseling services offers insights into employee engagement and participation.

Another critical metric is tracking absenteeism and presenteeism to assess changes in workplace productivity due to mental health initiatives. Regular mental health screenings can identify shifts in employees' mental health status and measure the effectiveness of intervention strategies. Moreover, monitoring employee retention rates helps evaluate the impact of mental health initiatives on satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment. Finally, analyzing the return on investment of mental health initiatives helps quantify the financial benefits of improved well-being and reduced healthcare costs. Organizations have an obligation to use this data to identify and address practices that may be exacerbating mental health issues, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and support for employee mental health.

Future Research

This thesis aims to illuminate the significance of employee mental health and its ramifications on individual well-being and organizational health. However, further research is warranted in this domain. More specifically, research regarding intersectionality within mental health initiatives, workplace stress and burnout, and industry-specific mental health outcomes would be advantageous to understand this topic better.

Intersectionality within Mental Health Initiatives

Future research on mental health initiatives should focus on understanding and addressing the role of intersectionality in shaping mental health experiences, access to care, and outcomes. Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations, such as

race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and disability, which create overlapping systems of discrimination and disadvantage (Fagrell et al., 2019). Future research should explore how intersecting identities influence the prevalence and manifestation of mental health disorders. Additionally, future studies should investigate the barriers marginalized individuals encounter in accessing mental health services and support, such as systemic inequalities, including financial constraints, lack of insurance, and limited availability of culturally competent care. Finally, this research should focus on developing culturally responsive interventions that recognize community diversity and tailor treatment modalities to meet individuals' specific needs. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to creating more equitable and inclusive mental health policies and interventions that promote the well-being of all individuals.

Workplace Stress and Burnout

Future research should not only explore the effects of shorter work weeks and lighter workloads on employee mental well-being but also examine how organizational structures and cultures contribute to workplace stress and burnout. Excessive workloads and long hours, often exacerbated by organizational practices, pose significant challenges for individuals and organizations across various industries (American Psychological Association, 2023). Employees grappling with overwhelming tasks may experience heightened levels of distress, leading to physical symptoms like headaches and fatigue, as well as psychological symptoms such as depression and insomnia (American Psychological Association, 2023). Prolonged exposure to unmanageable workloads can culminate in burnout, emotional exhaustion, and diminished personal accomplishment.

Moreover, extended work hours disrupt work-life balance, depriving employees of rest and leisure time, further exacerbating mental health issues. Organizational structures that

promote a culture of overwork and neglect employee well-being contribute to these challenges, impacting both individual well-being and organizational productivity, evidenced by reduced job satisfaction and increased absenteeism (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Investigating the impact of flexible work arrangements, promoting healthy work habits among managers, and fostering a supportive organizational culture could create a positive work environment conducive to mental well-being. By examining the outcomes of such initiatives, future research can advance evidence-based practices that promote mental health and organizational success while addressing systemic issues contributing to workplace stress and burnout.

Industry-specific Mental Health Initiatives

Future research should also explore industry-specific mental health initiative approaches, as different industries necessitate tailored strategies to address the unique challenges faced by their employees. One such sector worthy of attention is the healthcare industry, where professionals dedicate themselves to caring for others but may neglect their mental well-being. Healthcare workers face high levels of stress, trauma, and emotional strain in their daily work. The demanding nature of their roles, coupled with long hours, high patient volumes, and the pressure to make critical decisions, can take a toll on their mental health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Future research should examine developing industry-specific mental health initiatives tailored to the needs of healthcare workers, such as peer support programs, counseling services, and mental health awareness training designed to address the unique stressors and challenges prevalent in healthcare settings. Additionally, exploring innovative approaches like teletherapy and virtual support groups could enhance accessibility to

mental health resources for healthcare professionals, particularly those working in remote or underserved areas.

Moreover, examining the effectiveness of organizational policies and practices in promoting mental well-being within healthcare institutions is crucial. This could involve investigating the impact of workload management strategies, workplace culture initiatives, and leadership support programs on reducing stress and burnout among healthcare staff. Furthermore, addressing the stigma surrounding mental health organizations and promoting a culture of openness and support-seeking behavior is essential. By identifying best practices and evidence-based interventions, as well as working towards destigmatization, healthcare organizations can better support the mental health needs of their employees.

Conclusion

This thesis has described the critical intersection of mental health and the workplace, exploring the multifaceted dynamics that influence employee and organizational well-being. Through a thorough review of the literature, the significance of mental health initiatives in fostering an efficient and healthy work environment has been highlighted. By examining various strategies, including enhanced mental health education and awareness, comprehensive mental health benefits, and implementation of flexible work arrangements, organizations can take proactive steps to prioritize employee well-being. Future research should continue exploring innovative approaches to promoting mental health in the workplace, considering the evolving nature of work and the broader socio-cultural context. Ultimately, by fostering a culture of well-being, organizations can enhance employee satisfaction and productivity and contribute to a healthier and more equitable society as a whole. As the complexities of the modern workplace

continue to change, organizations must strive to create environments where mental health is valued, supported, and prioritized for the benefit of all.

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