

Increasing performance and profitability the psychological way

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Organisations that use occupational health psychology and its associated tools are able to work more smartly, become more effective and deliver a wide range of benefits, as Professor Derek Mowbray explains.



The role of psychology and its positive contribution to an organisation's wellbeing and profitability is often under-estimated and invariably understated. Nevertheless, it represents a potentially powerful force which can be harnessed effectively to transform behaviour and relationships in the workplace, thereby increasing performance and profitability.

Consequently, we need to reappraise psychologists' potentially vital contribution in, and to, the workplace today, for they are supremely qualified to deal with issues arising from the study of the mind, a science that seeks to understand how the mind operates and how a person's behaviour, emotions and attitudes are influenced or determined by its working.

Psychology applied to work and organisations focuses on any activity or event that involves a person or people. Sometimes psychologists describe themselves in ways which categorise their interest, for example occupational psychology, business psychology, and organisational psychology.

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Most commonly, people work in an organisational setting where more than one person interacts with another to achieve a common purpose. Organisations can be categorised and described in an infinite range of ways, from a bus queue, dinner party, pub gathering to the more popularly understood idea of an organisation as the vehicle for a business or service where gainful employment takes place.

Negative stress is most visibly manifested in companies and other organisations and is caused by pressure that goes beyond personal control and which has a constantly debilitating effect on the health and performance of individuals and ultimately on the organisation itself, unless remedial action is taken.

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Breakdowns in communication

Ultimately, work-related stress is caused by a failure in the interaction between two or more people. Some causes are more readily identifiable, for example bullying, harassment, excessive demands, discrimination and it is in these areas that HR policies and procedures are to be found. Their application is mainly focused on the management of an event or activity once it has occurred. Of course, once an event has occurred it is already a threat to the performance and profitability of the organisation.

Psychologists have five strategic purposes in the application of psychological theories and principles, in order to:

- Prevent something from happening
- Prevent a person from deteriorating once something has happened
- Restore someone back to their normal level of independent life and beyond
- Help those who cannot return to their normal level of independent life by easing their journey
- Ensure that psychological interventions are sustainable over time

Most larger businesses and services have strategies in place to support employees who exhibit work-related stress. These strategies are developed through:

- Awareness training programmes
- Employee assistance programmes
- Occupational health services, and
- Absence management systems

When these services are first introduced they can have a significant impact on identifying and mitigating the levels of stress as measured by sickness, absence, stress risk assessment surveys and staff turnover. However, if they do not tackle the root causes of the problems which can be addressed more effectively through psychological input, the improvements will not be sustained.

Prevention is better than cure

A major and significant role for psychologists in seeking to stem the haemorrhaging of valuable organisation resources is in the prevention of negative work-related stress. There are several points of entry into primary prevention.

One is to promote commitment, trust and the psychological contract as these have been proven as having arguably the greatest impact on staff retention, sickness absence and staff turnover. Using an organisation development framework as a guide, psychologists can use their influence to clarify and develop the purpose and ethos of the organisation which has been shown to encourage and sustain commitment and loyalty.

Some branding ideas can achieve the construction of organisational architecture that promotes commitment and trust – the flatter the structure the less risk of negative work-related stress; the development of good working standards, policies and procedures which encourage behaviour that produces commitment and trust; the processes of how employees are trained and developed to behave and work within their organisation.

Another point of entry into primary prevention is through leadership development – the process of creating leaders who inspire commitment and trust in their followers. A significant leadership skill to be developed is that of 'seduction' – the ability to entice someone to do something they might not otherwise want to do.

Seduction is largely based on the psychological notion of attentiveness which can be applied to influence the behaviour of people in a positive direction. Another point of influence is to focus on the interaction between management and their employees.

Lead by example and create a positive environment

One of the key factors in achieving a strong psychological contract is the ability of leaders and managers to provide employees with encouragement, the confidence to take risks and a clear sense of personal worth to the organisation.

People change. Everyone is capable of acting according to the context in which they are 'performing'. A role for psychologists is to shape the context of organisations to encourage behaviour that fosters commitment, trust and a robust psychological contract. Psychologists can also help people to think about the implications of their own behaviour and attitudes as a first step to improving relationships, thereby developing commitment and trust between the parties.

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This can be started but cannot be fully accomplished through unrelated single day training courses (single loop learning) – instead what is required is a commitment to an in-depth training and development programme required ideally to be run over a number of months and comprising a combination of assessment, workshops, learning sets, projects, feedback (double loop learning), coaching, support and consultancy (triple loop learning), so that individuals and groups can progress from awareness of issues towards transforming themselves and others in the workplace.

Each stage of this psychological approach will reinforce the key behaviour messages that result in commitment and trust which lead to consistently higher levels of performance and profitability.

The 'added value' that psychology brings to the whole area of organisation health is a proper, in-depth understanding and appreciation of the underlying behaviours of individuals which can be harnessed to secure a complete transformation of the workplace and all its employees through high levels of motivation, commitment, loyalty and wellbeing - all of which can be accurately measured by proven methodologies.

Professor Derek Mowbray, who is the driving force behind OrganisationHealth, is an Organisation Health Psychologist and one of the UK's leading authorities on the management and prevention of stress in the workplace.

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