

The strain of managing mental health at work

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Long hours and too much stress at work can lead to mental health problems, according to health experts, but employers and employees do not agree on how best to deal with it. (Envato Elements pic)

PETALING JAYA: The image of the executive still typing away on his keyboard at the office late into the night is easy to visualise.

Many people know too well that there never is enough time in the eight-hour day to finish all the work, so putting in the extra hours becomes the norm.

Health experts agree that spending an extended period of time at work is an unhealthy practice that can lead to mental health problems.

But views on the real issue and how to deal with it differ between workers and employers. For workers, it concerns their well-being, while employers worry about the impact on productivity.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) has proposed that leave be granted to enable workers to deal with the mental stress that they feel at the workplace.

MTUC president Effendy Abdul Ghani said employers have to understand that their workers have other responsibilities outside of work, too.

“There is a stigma surrounding mental health and psychiatric problems and this should be dealt with immediately,” he told FMT Business.

“The attending physician who assesses the employee should be the authority to recommend time out to rest,” he said.

He stressed that work-life balance is important. “Malaysia should look to countries such as France and Finland that have figured out ways to enable employees to disconnect and rest,” he added.

Mental stress at work is a global problem. A Sept 28, 2022 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) said an estimated 15% of working-aged adults had a mental disorder in 2019.

Globally, about 12 billion work days are lost annually to depression and anxiety. This works out to a US\$1 trillion (RM4.7 trillion) loss in productivity each year, the WHO report said.

However granting leave on company time to deal with a mental problem may not be so cut and dried.

While employers agree that poor mental health should be properly dealt with, they prefer a process to monitor the employee’s health.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) president Syed Hussain Syed Husman said poor mental health could trigger human errors that could result in accidents and, by extension, loss in productivity.

He said that if an employee has to be let go, the company would lose a skilled employee and replacing such individuals would be difficult and time consuming.

“We believe a holistic approach to mental health at the workplace must be considered at all stages of employment, beginning from the recruitment process,” he told FMT Business.

If necessary, he said, employees should be given counselling or be put on support programmes and occupational health services.

Mental health is already covered under the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Act 1994.

Syed Hussain suggested that companies adopt recommendations available in the "Guidance for the Prevention of Stress and Violence at the Workplace" guidebook published by the occupational safety and health department in 2002.

"Companies should also work closely with OSH providers and implement a voluntary OSH management system that covers mental health," he added.

At the end of the day a holistic approach, as proposed by clinical psychologist Joel Low, is perhaps the best way forward.

This, Low told FMT Business, would engender understanding and awareness about intentions on both sides.

He added that if mental health deteriorates, it could cause an increase in "presenteeism", that is being present at the workplace but not actually working.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai pointed out that mental health is not an issue to be brushed aside.

"There should be efforts to recognise early signs and symptoms of stress in employees," he said.

"Otherwise, there is a risk of employees resorting to unfavourable coping methods or developing more serious mental disorders like depression and anxiety disorders," he added.