techUK data centre programme
COVID-19: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Overview of initiatives taken by operators plus links to useful resources

May 2020

Purpose and scope of this document

Operators are taking steps to address the challenges that COVID-19 is presenting to the mental health and wellbeing of staff. During our regular calls, we have compared notes and experiences. Although there are initiatives that seem to help across the board, there is no standard response because the impact of lockdown and associated restrictions varies depending on circumstances. For those in their twenties sharing an urban flat which in the past they rarely frequented other than to sleep, lockdown is far more life-changing than those living with families in a nice house with a garden and an Ocado account.

So we have collected together some of the actions being taken in the sector to protect the mental health of our workforce. These observations are prefaced by links to formal resources and guidance on mental health and wellbeing provided by third parties. This information, from specialist organisations such as the Mental Health Foundation, HSE, ACAS and WHO should be your first port of call. Operators are making good use of these resources.

This document is not advisory, it is just a summary to help operators struggling with these issues access information, benchmark themselves informally and share experiences.

1) **Links to third party guidance and information sources**

2) **Guidelines and processes**

3) **Dealing with isolation**

4) **Dealing with workload**

5) **Dealing with stress**

6) **Identifying those particularly at risk**

7) **Issues still needing resolution**

8) **Contacts**

1   Links to third party Information and guidance

Mental Health Foundation
- Mental Health Foundation resources on coronavirus
- Mental Health Foundation: how to look after your mental health

Government and agency guidance
- Guidance for the public on mental health and wellbeing relating to COVID-19
- Guidance and support for employees during Coronavirus
- ACAS advice on coronavirus
- Guidance from the Health and Safety Executive on coronavirus

WHO guidance:
- Coronavirus: Mental health considerations
- Technical guidance on mental health and COVID-19

2   Guidelines and processes

Operators are reviewing and revising policies and procedures. Typical approaches include:

a. <u>Policies, guidelines and procedures:</u>
   - Risk assessments for home working developed and implemented
   - Guidance issued to staff to help them work from home safely and productively
   - Best efforts made to equip staff adequately where feasible – second screen, chairs, headphones, wifi and/or mobile signal booster packs
   - Support and acknowledgement of home working frictions and conflicts: lack of personal space, lack of boundaries, feral children, multiple demands, noise
   - Staff health status checks carried out weekly, in some cases daily for those considered at risk
   - Reports maintained by HR. Traffic light system used to trigger intervention/ step up support
   - Regularity of communication stepped up and traditional lines shortened to ensure inclusion and formality varied to mimic office interactions

b. <u>Resources:</u>
   - Confidential employee assistance and wellness programme from third party providers such as LifeWorks / Employee Care paid for by employers
   - Insurers who provide mental health and wellness support as part of their corporate packages, such as "we care" stress resilience toolkit from Canada Life, with 24/7 GP services, mental health support and get fit programmes
   - Private health providers like AXA PPP and Medicash tend to include things like virtual clinical support plus mental health and wellbeing resources in their packages
   - Provision of self-help training through company training programme / third party providers
   - Provision of mental health awareness and support training to help line managers identify potential issues in their teams at an early stage so they can step up support

Processes and policies are important but need to be tested. Is anybody using the third party support services? Are they aware they exist? Do staff feel they can raise issues without compromising their (or a colleague's) career? Is senior management really listening? Putting a process in place should always enable genuine engagement, not be a substitute for it.

3   Dealing with isolation

Isolation is not just about being alone; it can be a sense of exclusion from discussions, being disconnected from decision making, or of working under constraints that other people don't experience, don't understand and therefore don't make allowances for. There is moral and strategic isolation and without daily face to face interactions divisions can grow rather than be bridged. At a practical level, having poor internet or mobile connectivity is a fast-track route to a sense of isolation in a world when our dependency on digital communications is more important than ever before, and for many with perfectly good connections but without the digital skills to use internet tools, frustration and loneliness are all too common. The other factor is time; while many of us will be able to take advantage of relaxed restrictions to get out, there are many for whom there is no end in sight because they are at risk themselves or are shielding family members. Operators are taking the following steps to try and address isolation:

a. <u>Connectivity:</u> Upgrading wifi and mobile access (as above)
b. <u>Providing remote IT support:</u> ensuring support staff can access equipment remotely to fix problems
c. <u>Buddy system:</u> staff assigned a buddy – a colleague with whom they do not usually interact. Buddies communicate informally several times a week through phone calls. The remit is social
d. <u>Socials:</u> – regular social fixtures via videocall- book club, quizzes, "pub nights", speciality gin or craft beer sessions, "cuppas"– calls with no business content to provide the equivalent of office chat
e. <u>Monitoring engagement:</u> regular checks on participation / roll calls in all hands calls and other online meetings to ensure people are not gradually drifting away
f. <u>Continuing training:</u> much training can be delivered online and helps keep staff engaged. For those with reduced workloads this is a good opportunity to catch up on or augment training

4   Dealing with workload

Excessive workload is a guaranteed route to stress and likely to be injurious to mental health, particularly if prolonged. Data centre staff are already thinly spread so operators have to be vigilant. Sensitivity is critical here: people swamped with work will be unreceptive to trivial or spurious requests for information and unscheduled sales calls from people trying to fill empty diary space. They may seem cruelly unsympathetic to the plight of those struggling with boredom. The most common actions operators are taking include:

   a. Monitoring team strength: regular reviews of team strength: sickness, isolation, childcare demands, households shielding family members, additional workload - for instance sourcing supplies or dealing with compliance issues when official agencies have shut down[1]
   b. Valuing staff: Ensuring staff know they are valued. This isn't just important for morale; it also boosts productivity
   c. Holidays: flexibility for staff to defer holiday is critical – many have had to cancel or reschedule Holiday carry-over is being extended across the board, for instance up from one week to four and carry-over for up to two years.   While time in lieu for long hours worked during the crisis may be helpful to some, for those working flat-out with only a backlog to look forward to once restrictions are lifted, the offer of more holiday that they can't take may be insensitive, and moreover will suggest to them that their employer is unaware of, or unwilling to acknowledge, their workload
   d. Overtime: for those working long hours overtime payments or other incentives and rewards might be a good way to recognise effort. Not all companies will be a financial position to provide this
   e. Internal client: while this has not been flagged as a major issue within the sector, feedback from other sectors suggests that internal bureaucracy can be a source of frustration for individuals under additional pressure and working long hours. Operators are therefore reviewing their internal structures to ensure the burden on staff is minimised

5   Dealing with stress

The links above provide the best information for informal and formal approaches to managing employee stress, and should be the first port of call. Anecdotally, however, we have feedback from operators that the steps below have been helpful

   a. Encouraging openness: providing neutral interactions to encourage staff to raise and share anxieties before they magnify
   b. Recognition that adapting to change is difficult and that having to manage a new working environment without the usual equipment and support and being subject to interruptions and different distractions is also stressful. For those who already work from home the job suddenly involves online learning support for children and getting Granny on Zoom without being able to call the IT helpdesk. Employers are acknowledging that a lot of additional paddling is happening below the surface and are making allowances
   c. Mentor system: mentoring between junior and senior staff who are not in the same reporting line has been effective in building understanding of the different causes of stress and how variably it is manifested and handled
   d. Formal support: providing easy access and signposting to resources, providing formal and/or informal support in-house or via specialist providers

6   Identifying those particularly at risk

Operators are working hard to identify individuals who are most likely to be at risk and ensure additional support measures are in place. Nobody is immune to mental health issues but predisposition can be affected by the following factors:

   a. Age: clinical evidence suggests that those in their 20s and early 30s are more at risk from mental health problems
   b. Career: There is higher incidence of mental health issues for those in jobs in ICT and finance

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[1] A number of operators have reported that EU ETS requirements and reporting dates were not relaxed despite the fact that the official administrative, support and registration functions were closed for business in some jurisdictions

c. <u>Health status:</u> those with underlying health issues, or who have been designated at risk, those struggling to control addictive behaviour like gambling and need a structured environment

d. <u>Lifestyle:</u> junior staff in urban flats or HMOs (houses of multiple occupancy) for whom lockdown is a major life change

e. <u>Domestic circumstances:</u> Individuals living alone, those shielding family members, those who have realised that they don't really like their flatmates / husband / wife / house/ job / body anymore

7   Issues still needing resolution

Operators reported a number of issues they were struggling to resolve. These include:

a. <u>Denial:</u> Most employees are very reluctant to raise stress or mental health issues with HR until it is clearly too late. "Go away, I am absolutely FINE". Different routes are needed

b. <u>Recovery time:</u> Employees who have been managing critical environments and working flat out are now looking ahead at a large backlog of work. These individuals need recovery time. Existing technical staff shortages in the data centre sector make this particularly problematic for operators

c. <u>Furlough tensions:</u> while furlough is rare in the sector, it is more common in the supply chain and we have heard that employers are having to manage tensions between those retained (taking on extra workload but secure in a job), and those on furlough ("sitting at home doing nothing for 80% of pay", but anxious about their future)

d. <u>Fairness:</u> Equably allocating workload in critical environments where tasks cannot be shared due to social distancing requirements. If prolonged this can lead to resentment and loss of motivation

8   Contacts

For more information

visit COVID-19 data centre hub: https://www.techuk.org/covid-19-information-hub/data_centres

or read a guest blog on alleviating mental health issues when working remotely, from 4D Data Centres

Or get in touch…

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