

MINDFUL EMPLOYER: Improving employer support for staff with mental health conditions



An Evaluation

Executive Summary

People who have a mental health condition often have access to considerable support for themselves. The Mindful Employer initiative has sought to address the question, 'Who supports their employer?'

The increased prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions, their effect on the workplace, and the need for employers to provide appropriate support for those affected have been increasingly recognised. Mindful Employer was launched in October 2004 by Workways, a Vocational Rehabilitation Service of Devon Partnership NHS Trust. The aim was, and remains, to provide employers with easier access to information and support for employees with mental health conditions. Workways considered it important to allow the initiative, which has since spread UK-wide, to become well-established rather than attempt to assess its effectiveness too early: hence this evaluation.

This evaluation focuses on current practice and remedial actions by employers who have submitted a review of their commitment to the Mindful Employer Charter for Employers who are Positive About Mental Health. The Key Principles of Mindful Employer underpin the Charter, which is a set of 6 aspirations for employers to work towards. This aspirational, rather than target-driven or quality standard approach, recognises that changing attitudes towards mental health conditions takes time. The evaluation revealed that employers demonstrate a degree of confidence in providing non-judgmental and proactive support and with 87.3% of signatories achieving at least 3 aspirations across most or the whole of their organisation there are clear signs that employers are at least going in the right direction.

Looking across all the aspirations and the range of current practice and planned remedial actions recorded, the evaluation revealed that increasing the availability and provision of both information and training are recurring themes. In times of economic stringency, training budgets are often the first to suffer and yet equipping managers to be able to provide support is vital for the wellbeing of staff and thus the running of the business. The evaluation and the literature also demonstrated a need for increased awareness of legal responsibilities. The existence of policies are also common among the current practice and the evaluation also showed that clearer communication and the sharing of good practice are important, for it is by this that others can develop their skills and capacity in supporting both managers and staff. As may be expected, small and medium-sized employers generally find it easier to achieve aspirations due in part to shorter lines of communication with larger organisations experiencing more barriers. Focussing on a sample of employers who had completed a Review, the evaluation revealed a wide range of current practice and a willingness to address those areas which needed improvement, together with practical remedial action. The findings collated in Tables 9 and 10 will be particularly useful as a 'quick guide' for employers wanting to relate the aspirations of the Charter to their business demands and staff support requirements.

Recommendations for employers include further development of policies, investing in training, sharing good practice and increasing staff support facilities. The evaluation also makes recommendations for the development of the Mindful Employer initiative itself.

Despite no current funding, Mindful Employer has established its place alongside other, much larger, employer-focussed mental health initiatives. Its distinctive approach complements government programmes and proposals and offers a forum to provide employers with easier access to information and local support, and a facility through which businesses and organisations can share good practice. The findings presented in this evaluation can be developed by employers to suit the requirements of their organisation and employees. This evaluation affirms that a voluntary, long-term and non-target driven approach is appropriate to this complex area and that there are a variety of ways in which improvements can be implemented and achieved.

The full evaluation can be downloaded from www.mindfulemployer.net and www.workways.org.uk

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The author confirms that the identity of employers, service users, interviewees and staff has been protected. Devon Partnership NHS Trust and Workways have given their consent to be identified.

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