

Mental Health Matters

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Mental Health in the Workplace

There is never a greater time to address the importance of mental health awareness, be it within or outside the workplace. Work can be good for mental health as it provides a sense of purpose, inspiration, and excitement. However, a toxic working environment can cause severe mental health problems.

Globally, an estimated 264 million people suffer from depression, one of the leading causes of disability, with many of these people also suffering from symptoms of anxiety. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), depression and anxiety have a significant economic impact. The estimated cost to the global economy is a massive US\$ 1 trillion per year in lost productivity.

Workplaces that emphasise mental health and support employees with mental disorders are observed to have reduced absenteeism, increased productivity and benefit from related economic gains. This article discusses the main causes of mental health issues at workplaces and solutions adopted by organisations to mitigate the effects of these issues.

Causes of Mental Health Issues in the Workplace

Since 2020, mental health support went from a nice-to-have to a true business imperative, largely due to a greater awareness of workplace factors that can contribute to poor mental health (Harvard Business Review, 2021).

There are various risk factors for mental health that may be present in the workplace. For instance, most risks relate to workload, the organisational and managerial environment, the skills and competencies of employees, unclear tasks or organisational objectives and the support available for employees to carry out their work.

Most recently, the inflexibility of workplace arrangements and the safety and health protocols in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated mental health issues at the workplace. (Society for Human Resource Management).

Effects from Mental Health Issues in the Workplace

Malaysians are not immune to mental health problems. It is estimated that as many as 500,000 Malaysian adults were suffering from depression, based on the National Health and Morbidity Survey report findings in 2019.

However, due to the insufficient number of psychiatrists, there are not many avenues of support for those with mental health issues. The number of psychiatrists in Malaysia until March 2017 was only 381, namely from the Ministry of Health (207), Public Universities (84), Private Universities (22), Armed Forces (5) and the Private Sector (63).

According to University Malaya Specialist Centre (UMSC), the normal psychiatrist-to-population ratio is 1: 10,000. However, in Malaysia, the ratio is 1 to 100,000 and what is more worrying is that mental health issues are also affecting more youngsters.

Depression, if left untreated, may have a significant impact on work performance, self, and others. It contributes to a lack of engagement, absenteeism, and poor performance. It can also negatively impact social interactions with other employees. If the depressed employee is moody, co-workers may avoid them, leading to isolation, conflict, and poor communication. It may also unfavourably impact other employee performance areas, including affecting their focus and decision-making, time management, and task completion. Like most other health conditions, early detection and effective treatment can lessen the condition's severity and impact.



An estimated **264 million** people suffer from depression in this world.



USD 1 trillion/year - the cost of depression and anxiety to the global economy.



Mental health issues cause **absenteeism** in the workplace, **reducing productivity**.



Mental health support is now a business priority.



Heavy workload is the main cause of mental health problems at the workplace.

Tackling Mental Health Issues at the Workplace

More companies are enhancing their mental health benefit offerings for employees to tackle mental health issues. For example, Ernst & Young (EY) covers the cost of online support tools to help employees better manage stress, and training, and to recognise if someone in their network is struggling (Ernst & Young, 2022).

Apart from that, the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA) is promoting "first aid" for mental health which refers to a person who will become the first responder.

"First aid" will play an important role in identifying signs of behavioural distress or crisis and provide assistance for mental health problems. The first aid knowledge will provide persons with the ability to help someone with a mental health problem or crisis until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis is resolved.

The initiative is a patented programme under Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Australia, which has since been exported under licence to over 20 countries throughout the world.

In addition, companies such as Allianz kickstarted the year by partnering with the Malaysian Medical Relief Society (MERCY Malaysia) and Thrive Well, to support their mental health programmes. This is in line with the company's objectives to promote social inclusion, as well as to address a pressing societal need to aid the public, particularly the vulnerable, and low-income communities.

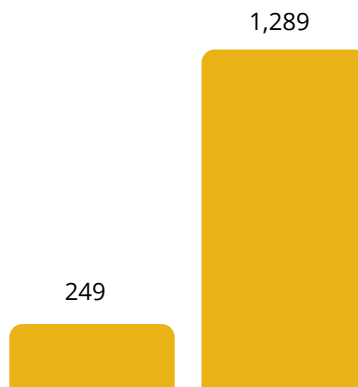
HRD Corp's Role in Supporting Mental Health

As a statutory authority responsible for upskilling and reskilling Malaysian talents, Human Resource Development Corporation (HRD Corp) has recorded a significant increase in the emphasis given by employers towards their employees' mental well-being, in line with comparable international trends.

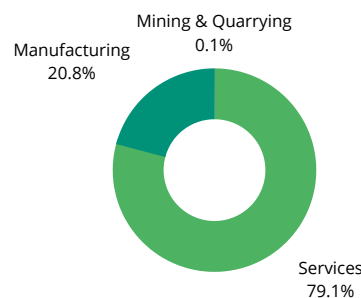
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were only a handful of training courses related to mental health conducted each year, based on internal HRD Corp data. This scenario took a turn in 2020 due to the outbreak, with 249 training courses related to mental health conducted.

In 2021, this figure increased by more than five-fold to 1,289. The majority of employees enrolled in courses to improve their mental health came from the services sector (79.1%), followed by the manufacturing sector (20.8%). Indeed, investing in improving employee mental health and early detection programme is a wise investment (Forbes, 2021).

No. of Training Places in Year 2021



2021 Training Places by Sector



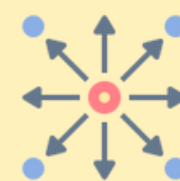
An estimated **500,000** **Malaysian** adults suffer from **depression**.



1-to-100,000 - Psychiatrist-to-Population ratio in Malaysia.



Depression is **detrimental to performance** at the workplace.



Mental health issues affect other employees, causing isolation, conflict and poor communication.



The "first aid" for mental health programme is exported under licence to more than **20** countries worldwide.

Conclusion

We have to acknowledge that mental health issues exist in every workplace. If these issues are not dealt with swiftly, they might have far-reaching ramifications. Many causes of mental health issues at work can be avoided if necessary mental health support is in place. Ideally, policymakers must promote strategies and policies to spread the importance of mental well-being nationwide.

More importantly, employers should craft programmes to identify those most at risk and propose treatment as well as support to help employees manage and reduce stress. It is crucial for employers to implement and enforce good practices that promote and protect mental health in the workplace. A platform for communication between employees and management teams is a must. By investing in mental wellness programmes at the workplace, employers can reduce absenteeism and healthcare costs for their businesses and employees, ultimately driving up productivity and economic gains.

References

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Enrolment in training courses related to mental health increased **five-fold** in 2021 compared to 2020.



79% of employees that enrolled in training courses related to mental health were from the **services sector**.

Top 5 Courses Related to Mental Health in 2021

1. Stress and Mental Health Management
2. Mental Health and Productivity
3. Awareness Workshop: Stress & Mental Health
4. Artificial Intelligence in Mental Health Management
5. Mental Health and Productivity @ Work!