

Why Mental Health is Central to Your Business Continuity Plan

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Covid-19 has shown us many things – most importantly, that large-scale, unexpected business disruptions can happen anytime, anywhere. How we prepare for these disruptions sets the course for how businesses maintain continuity and ultimately thrive. I've learned that mitigating potential disruptions comes down to building a strong foundation that can flex with whatever crisis, bottleneck or challenge comes your way.

But another factor has entered this resiliency equation: mental health. With global uncertainties related to not just the pandemic, but also climate change, supply chain challenges, the world political landscape, social/racial injustice and fluctuations in the economy, many are still struggling to grapple with the constant disruption to daily life, as well as how these events impact business operations.

Let's look at some numbers: The American Psychological Association (APA) has reported that nearly eight in 10 adults (78%) say the coronavirus pandemic is a significant source of stress in their life. And, two in three adults (67%) say they have experienced increased stress throughout the pandemic. Other data shows that 53.8% of adult parents report pandemic-related traumatic stress disorders, and 39% have had suicidal

thoughts. It's clear that Covid-19, among other stressors, has compounded feelings of isolation, stress, depression and anxiety for many, whether during work hours or non-work hours.

When it comes down to it, building a strong, agile foundation for business continuity begins and ends with the well-being of a company's employees. As leaders, it is our responsibility to acknowledge and address mental health in the workplace (whether work from home or work from office), and employers must prioritize ensuring their workforce is supported before they can help drive the business forward. Here are some ways business leaders can help boost mental health within your organizations.

Addressing burnout and video fatigue

Burnout is an ongoing issue for many organizations with employees working longer, more continuous hours from home or navigating a hybrid in-person/remote schedule. In a recent study, 25% of employees reported working longer hours since they began working remotely full-time during the pandemic, and one-third reported not taking a break during the workday.

Organizations can work to combat burnout in several ways, including encouraging employees to take breaks throughout the day to minimize stress and maximize time away from their computers. Those breaks could mean taking a short walk or standing up to stretch for a few minutes. Establishing "no meeting" days or mornings to give employees time to catch up on work and stay off video is also effective. When doing this, make sure you are mindful of time zone differences as you want to avoid accidentally creating an unforeseen burden on one team. Taking this one step further and adding extra company-wide holidays – even if it's just one or two days – is another way employers can give their workforce the necessary time to

decompress.

At the end of the day, embracing a true, flexible culture that allows employees to set their own schedules and helps them be their best selves both at work and home is the most effective way to address burnout. And speaking of work and home, make sure to encourage employees to separate the two by building in “screenless time” and setting boundaries in their day so they don’t feel like they need to constantly be “on.”

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Leading with empathy and transparency

During difficult times, it is especially important to take the time to understand your employees and be open, transparent and empathetic in your communications. This can come in a large range of shapes and sizes, but at the end of the day leading with kindness in everything you do is critical. Making sure you leave time for small talk – whether inside or outside of meetings – is also a good way to get to know your colleagues better and give insight into what they may be dealing with on a personal level.

Listening is also key. I have found that holding virtual open forums or regular “ask me anything” sessions helps create an open channel for communication and transparency between employees and leadership. I also believe it’s important to distribute regular employee sentiment surveys to get a better sense of employees’ needs so you can address them accordingly. Overall, be consistent and transparent in your communication. It’s your responsibility as a business leader to keep your employees informed.

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Don't leave new employees behind

Employees who were onboarded remotely during the pandemic can struggle with feeling connected to their new company and colleagues. But strong onboarding experiences can mitigate this potential disconnect. In fact, data shows that organizations with a strong onboarding process improve new hire retention by 82% and productivity by over 70%.

To accomplish this, as simple as it sounds, make sure that you and your teams are checking in with new employees regularly to ensure they feel included and connected to their colleagues. Remember that their onboarding experience was likely different from many of their team members who were onboarded in person, so be extra communicative and detailed in your interactions. Further, setting up virtual coffee dates or other fun one-on-one meetings can be a great way to help them form real connections with their coworkers. As we enter 2022, and more and more offices begin to reopen, leaders should also think about coordinating in-person meetings or networking activities to help build connections.

I won't pretend that I know the solution to the mental health issues the workforce is currently facing, but I do know that these strategies can help in some way – either large or small. As business leaders, we're often laser-focused on driving business growth and success, and it can be easy to lose touch with the people that make that happen. We need to empower employees with the support and tools they need to be their best version of themselves at home and at work if we want any chance of building strong and agile teams to ensure ongoing business continuity.

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