

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING AT THE WORKPLACE — ARE WE AT THE TIPPING POINT?

Malaysia's Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality 2018 survey shows that about half of the participants still face at least one dimension of work-related stress.

"While it is a slight reduction from 2017's 53%, it still shows that half of the Malaysian workforce are facing some form of work-related stress which, in the larger scheme of things, indicates a real concern for workplace productivity," Anusha Thavarajah, CEO of AIA Bhd, says in an interview with *The Edge*.

Against this backdrop, the survey shows that about 20% of employees were subject to bullying at the workplace, of which 4% indicated that they were bullied often or always. On the financial front, about 18% of employees noted that they had a lot of financial concerns. This was marginally lower than 2017's 20%.

The results of the survey, which highlighted issues of mental health in the country, are also reflective of the projection that mental illness is going to be the second largest health issue in Malaysia after heart disease by 2020.

According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2015 (NHMS 2015), 3 in 10 Malaysians were indicated as having mental health issues.

Associate Professor Dr Wee Lei Hum, health behavioural specialist at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Faculty of Health Sciences, tells *The Edge* that few people realise that mental health symptoms include what might seem to be normal daily occurrences such as having trouble sleeping, poor anger management, relationship issues, isolation and even overeating.

"Productivity issues and rebellious attitudes — these are early signs that line managers and supervisors need to understand and be aware of," says Wee.

She adds that Malaysians, in general, need to understand that mental health is

just as important as physical health when addressing an individual's total well-being.

"Because of stigma, [mental health issues] are usually swept under the carpet. It is considered a taboo subject. But once we get the ball rolling, hopefully people will understand more about how crucial it is to take care of their mental health."



Edwards: Communication is vital in business

Wee believes the timing is right for AIA to talk about the subject as it would encourage more corporate players to join in the conversation. Indeed, the 2018 survey shows that there has been an increase in employee participation in at least one workplace mental well-being intervention compared with in 2017.

AIA's Anusha, however, feels that this is only the tip of the iceberg. "The survey helps to broach the subject, and to help open the door for people to start thinking and talking about it. Overall, mental health well-being is a critical topic that is very real and has far-reaching implications for employees and organisations. By itself, the topic has some stigma, so we need to have more conversations and visibility so that more positive action can take place."

Dr Christian van Stolk, Vice-President of RAND Europe, concurs, pointing out that



Wee (second from right) and her team of researchers

"The survey helps to broach the subject (mental health), and to help open the door for people to start thinking and talking about it."

— Anusha

the first step to address mental health is to remove the stigma attached to the subject.

"Employees need to feel comfortable discussing their mental health and reporting it within an organisation. At the same time, awareness of mental health has to be broadened across employees and their line managers. This requires a clear message from the top, role models or champions within an organisation and more active engagement at board level with this topic," he says, adding that employees need to feel that they have the required support to have discussions on the subject.

Following that, line managers need to be able to identify mental health issues and address them in a way that benefits employees.

"In some ways, line managers could be both the problem and the solution. Line managers can take action to support employees, but they typically also cause many of the issues that we see in employees," says van Stolk.

He stresses that the more the issue of mental health is normalised in an organisation, the more employees will be open to reporting such matters.

SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE



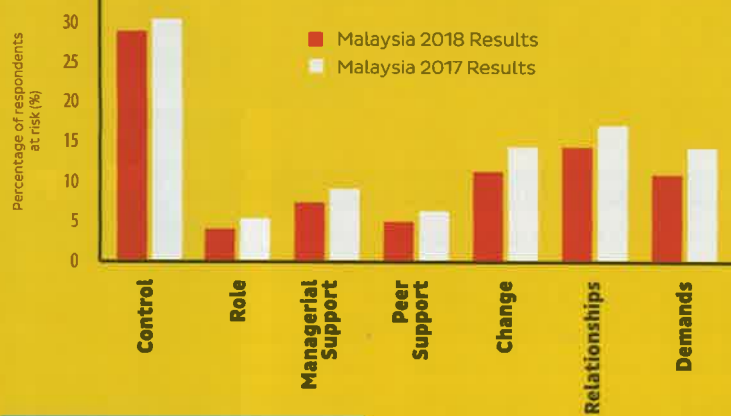
MALAYSIA'S HEALTHIEST WORKPLACE BY AIA VITALITY 2018 SURVEY FINDINGS

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

THE SURVEY SHOWS THAT
1 IN 2
EMPLOYEES FACE AT LEAST ONE STRESS FACTOR AT WORK



BREAKDOWN OF WORK-RELATED STRESS INDICATORS



ALL ABOUT THE MONEY...

18.2% HAVE A LOT OF FINANCIAL CONCERNS

“So, removing the stigma may lead to an increase in mental health issues being reported. This is normal but makes monitoring improvement more difficult. Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests that those employees who have poor mental health in the UK and report it to their employer still face disciplinary action in the vast majority of cases (over 80%). This suggests that there is still a long way to go,” says van Stolk.

On the global stage, 2018 has seen an increase in media coverage of mental health, according to Nomura’s Health and Fitness Programme Director Ian Edwards. Nomura was the winner of the Britain’s Healthiest Workplace survey in 2014, 2016 and 2017 for the large organisation category.

He says the highlighting of mental health issues has come a long way in the last two years. “I feel most corporates are more open minded to this and are taking it as a great opportunity not only for the employees to feel valued and supported but also for the employers to create a communitive, harmonious and productive workforce.”

A journey to address mental health and wellbeing in the workplace

Anusha says more conversations and discussions about this topic will help spark deeper awareness and an appreciation for the matter.

“These are not new issues — they have always been present. However, it is only now that we are beginning to see them come to light. One of the critical things needed is to create a ‘safe space’ for employees to speak about these issues, and provide training for employers and organisations to manage these conversations,” she says, adding that awareness of the matter will lead to appropriate actions being taken, namely policy-making, regulations, medical and psychological support and so on.

AIA Malaysia has invested significantly in recent years in establishing an integrated health and wellness agenda that covers fitness, nutrition, mental well-being, events and corporate social responsibility, to support its employees and communities in having better engagement with their health,



Harris (left) and Blackwood believe in maintaining positive training environments at Tottenham Hotspur

and promote a more positive workplace environment.

“In addition, we are also in the midst of exploring mental health support as part of our integrated health and wellness agenda. This includes connecting employees with psychologists or psychiatrists so they can get the help they need,” says Anusha.

Indeed, counselling is important to help patients facing mental health challenges to recover.

According to Deputy Women, Family and Community Development Minister Hannah Yeoh, while going for counselling could be seen as a failure by some people, it is important for the country to change its mindset.

“We need to start talking about counselling in a positive manner. We need to introduce it to people,” Yeoh was quoted as saying in September during a forum on mental health awareness and suicide prevention policy.

van Stolk agrees and adds that it is critical that the awareness created be translated into action. He says employees with greater control and autonomy typically report better health.

“The line manager is critical in

“We need to start talking about counselling in a positive manner. We need to introduce it to people.” — Yeoh



LOW YEN YEONG/THE EDGE PROPERTY

granting such control and autonomy. In Asia, where we see a greater number of hierarchical workplaces where workers are expected to be at their desk for a long period of time (sometimes without breaks), there may be more challenges when it comes to changing the work culture.

“However, in Europe, we are now starting to get worried about the flip side of this approach. With more people working flexible hours and working from home, we are worried that more employees will become disconnected from the workplace and isolated,” says van Stolk.

As for Nomura’s Edwards, he believes that there should be a focus on the issues of connection, activity and learning in the work environment. Management and employee training is a great way to connect the workforce.

“Communication is vital in business and, as humans, it’s important to forge new friendships and alliances, be open with how you feel and relaxed in the company of others. Managers should focus on how they talk to employees so that they really listen. They would be amazed at the outcome,” says Edwards.

He agrees that while being able to work from home is a great option for employees, it can lead to loneliness and disconnection. “It really is about moderation and having managers or specialists who are able to spot the right path for each individual.”

Anton Blackwood and Shaun Harris, International Development Coaches at Tottenham Hotspur, believe one of the ways to help their players who are feeling the pressure to perform week in, week out, is to ensure that their training sessions are fun and purposeful.

“We try to give a lot of encouragement to maintain positive training environments. This builds players up mentally and gives them a lot of confidence to try new things and not worry about making mistakes.”

They say that football and corporate workplace is not so different. Whether on the field or at the workplace, it should be a positive place where players or employees should enjoy going everyday.

MALAYSIA’S HEALTHIEST WORKPLACE BY AIA VITALITY 2018 SURVEY FINDINGS

ABSENCE, PRESENTEEISM & PRODUCTIVITY

The link between an organisation’s productivity and employees’ health and well-being can be explored through two measures — absence and presenteeism.

28%

WORKING HOURS LOST A WEEK

73.1 DAYS LOST

PER EMPLOYEE PER YEAR IN MALAYSIA

ABSENCE

7.7 DAYS

Actual absence from work

PRESENTEEISM

65.4 DAYS

Attends work but unproductive



THE COST

RM2.27 MILLION

LOST PER YEAR PER COMPANY ON AVERAGE