



# Annual survey report 2014

## Case study – Unilever

in partnership with

A large, blurred photograph of a crowd of people walking away from the camera on a city street. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent pink and red gradient that covers the bottom half of the page. The text 'ABSENCE MANAGEMENT' is printed in white on the red portion of the gradient.

# ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

# FOR

## Unilever case study: Mind, body and heart

Unilever's purpose – to make sustainable living commonplace – applies as much to its people as the wider world. Employee well-being is a key part of delivering on this purpose and being a responsible employer.

Employee well-being has been a key focus at Unilever for some years now, both in the UK and globally. However, well-being initiatives have predominantly focused on physical issues. The company is now moving to manage mental health with the same openness and priority as they manage physical health, to provide a holistic view of general health and well-being. Whether it is help and support on nutrition, sleep, exercise, mindfulness, they can all help improve an individual's day-to-day well-being.

Mental health problems are common. Research shows that in the UK one in four people experience some form of mental health problem in the course of a year, but there is a stigma associated with mental health problems which deters many people from seeking help or even talking about their situation. Research also shows that 45% of people with physical health problems experienced mild to moderate depression but were more worried about telling their employer about their mental health issues than their physical health problems. People are often reluctant to discuss mental health issues with their family and friends because of the stigma attached. With 7,500 employees in the UK, the onus was on Unilever to try and create an environment where it is 'good to talk'.

### Mental well-being is owned by the whole business

In Unilever, HR and occupational health lead on this work, drawing on their specialist experience, but it's crucial that people across the business also take ownership and buy into its importance through a common framework with a common set of tools.

Unilever developed a four-pillar programme for supporting mental health for its UK employees.

**Tim Munden, VP HR UK & Ireland,** explains:

*'The first thing we did was to assemble a team of senior leaders who really backed the programme and our model.'*

*'Then we've engaged with our site leaders. I did three sessions with the HR community across the country, presenting the programme and discussing how to signpost people to support.'*



## The four-pillar model

### 1 Leadership and management

Increasing leadership and management awareness of mental health issues and ensuring they have the capability and the confidence to support employees who need it is vital. An individual's work experience is hugely dependent on their line manager. So at Unilever line managers are being trained to better understand mental health matters, spot potential issues and be able to advise people about where to go to get help.

Every line manager is expected to complete an entire training module, and in priority sites to attend a half day of face-to-face training, which focuses on spotting signs of mental health issues and how to respond. This isn't about asking line managers to diagnose but to become more aware of the issues and signals.

### 2 Culture and communication

Focusing on culture and communication is essential to break the stigma which can be associated with talking about mental health.

Unilever has built a dedicated portal on its intranet which houses online tools for employees and managers. There is a video wall of stories and testimonials from senior business leaders, an Olympic gold medal winner, a politician and colleagues from around the UK. Business leaders, including the chief HR officer of Unilever worldwide, the chief marketing officer, and the UK VP of HR, all talk about the importance of good mental health and telling their own stories. It is about showing that mental health issues can affect everyone and that we all need to be aware of the importance of looking after ourselves and each other. The objective of all the communications activities is to make talking about mental health easier and more acceptable within the business and at home.

Communication needs to be a continuous process, with constant reinforcement, to have the desired cultural impact, as opposed to the programme being seen as a one-off initiative. The communication strategy is closely linked to the overall goals of the company. For example, one of the communications themes was, *'You can do anything; but you can't do everything.'* This strap-line clearly linked health and well-being to the company's goal of simplification and prioritisation.

### 3 Prevention

This pillar is about giving people access to tools that can help them stay fit and healthy as well as deal with issues that they may encounter. There is a team-based tool, implemented via external providers. Everyone in the team is asked to fill in a survey and the data is anonymised, collated and a facilitator has a conversation with the team and their leader about the main sources of pressure the results have highlighted and how they could be managed better within the team. This is about having honest conversations and taking actions that the team is committed to which can really make a difference.

There is also an individual personal resilience tool that can be accessed through the portal and provides people with a personalised report based on their responses. People are made aware at the start of the tool that, as a result of their responses, they might get contacted by a qualified mental health practitioner who can then help them further if required. For example, this might include counselling funded by the company.



The organisation is keen to provide people with tools and techniques they can use to manage their own mental health. Unilever has recently launched Headspace's mindfulness app to give employees free access to mindfulness techniques, which has proved very popular. Cognitive behaviour therapy is currently being piloted and will soon be available for people to access online too.

#### 4 Support

The final pillar of Unilever's model for building mental well-being is concerned with how the company can best support employees who have a mental health problem. Their view is that whatever the cause of the problem, the company can be part of the solution. The medical and occupational health team provides this support. The philosophy is no one should be more than one conversation, click or call away from help and support. For example, everyone has access to an employee assistance programme (Lifeworks), which includes counselling, as well as support for other everyday challenges such as financial and legal.

Tim summarises, *'What we're very clear about is that this is a programme, not an event. It will never be totally solved and we will need to keep refreshing our approaches in line with a changing world. We'll adapt to what we see happening in the world around us and in our company.'*

*'But this is a part of running a good business. It's taking proper responsibility for your people. It's also doing everything you can to build good performance. I hope that we will reach a point one day where we don't keep having to break the stigma because there is no stigma and that we manage physical health and mental health in similar ways. So those things, I hope, will change. But I think we'll have to keep supporting people working in tough and complex environments in a fast-changing world.'*



This case study highlights some of the key areas associated with effective absence management, as revealed by our 2014 *Absence Management* survey report. To access the full report, visit

[cipd.co.uk/absencemanagementsurvey](http://cipd.co.uk/absencemanagementsurvey)