

# **Mental wellbeing of young employees in the UK retail industry: Sector-specific mental health challenges and gap analysis on mental wellbeing initiatives among corporations**

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# **1. Executive Summary**

**Project objective** – The objective of this project is to first identify the common mental health challenges among young retail employees in the UK and their impact on absenteeism. The mental health programmes currently implemented in retail companies were analysed for a gap analysis to be performed.

**Method of analysis** – Seven retail companies operating in the UK were selected. Similarities across the mental health initiatives along with certain unique initiatives were identified. A SWOT analysis was conducted to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities to improve, and the threats to the effectiveness of current mental wellbeing initiatives to identify the gaps in effectiveness.

## **Recommendations**

- Foster sense of belonging and health company cultures
- Flexible company policies
- Tangible incentives
- Training and education
- Reducing financial insecurity by the provision of comprehensive financial planning resources
- Partnering with social enterprises and charities to offer on-demand access to free online counselling services
- Employee buddy programmes
- Emphasis on evidence-based policy interventions
- Incorporating mental health metrics in ESG

# Mental Wellbeing of young employees in the UK (United Kingdom) retail industry: Sector-specific mental health challenges and gap analysis on mental wellbeing initiatives among corporations

## **2. Introduction**

Maintaining good mental wellbeing is paramount for individuals, corporations, and society, especially when mental health issues are exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. While overall mental health deterioration is observed within the UK population due to the uncertainties raised during the Covid-19 pandemic, Jia et al. (2020) suggests that the mental health of young people (18-24 years old) has severely worsened compared with older age groups. Symptoms of depression and anxiety were more common among young people, along with greater stress levels than older age groups observed (Jia et al., 2020).

Previous research suggests that the pandemic has had a detrimental impact on the mental health of employees, particularly in the retail industry. Among the top 12 industries in the UK, the retail sector's rank on the WorkL Happiness Ranking dropped significantly from 4<sup>th</sup> during pre-pandemic era to last place since the pandemic started (Retail Trust, 2021). A survey conducted by the Retail Trust (2021) found that 84% of employee respondents have experienced mental health deterioration during the pandemic due to causes that arose from the pandemic. Young employees working in retail are one of the major groups in the UK to be disproportionately suffering from the latest mental health crisis.

Effective mental health initiatives are not only necessary, especially for young retail workers currently suffering severely during the pandemic, they also create opportunities for corporations to improve their organizational performance. Research conducted by Deloitte (2020) suggests that a £1 pound investment in mental health yields a £5 return on investment (ROI) as the prevalence of sickness presence and staff absence decreases. Furthermore, poor mental health costs UK employers up to £45 billion each year in 2020, which is a rise of 16% since 2016 - an extra £6 billion a year. Mental-health related absenteeism and staff turnover have contributed to the costs. In addition, presenteeism, a situation where employees work when they are not at their most productive, also adds to costs overall.

The high ROI shows that investments in mental health initiatives are highly lucrative. Lower presenteeism, absenteeism and staff turnover also relate to a more positive and mentally healthier workforce which boosts employee productivity and reduces injury and illness-related costs (Shain and Kramer, 2004). This demonstrates that the implementation of effective mental health initiatives to create a positive workforce is not only a sign of ethical responsibility but is also highly beneficial for corporations. This advantage is acknowledged by certain corporations which have already implemented wellbeing measures prior to the pandemic. Yet, those corporations are often limited to large-sized enterprises, such as Tesco, which signed the employer's mental health pledge in 2016 (Johnson, 2018). The mental wellbeing of young employees working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) tend to be neglected in occupational health research (Martin et al., 2009). There is a gap in the accessibility to mental health support between young employees working in large-sized corporation, and those working in SMEs. This presents a barrier for all young employees in the retail sector to receive support for improving mental wellbeing during the pandemic.

With regards to these findings obtained via in-depth preliminary research, the purpose of this study is to first explore the common mental health challenges among young retail employees and the current mental health initiatives in retail corporations. A gap analysis is then conducted to examine the effectiveness of initiatives in certain retail corporations in tackling those mental health challenges, along with suggestions to improve them. This investigation is significant as young employees working in the retail sector are likely to be one of the major sufferers of mental health issues during the pandemic. Moreover, as the largest private sector employer in the UK, the retail sector has a high dependency on young employees, with approximately 30% of its workforce being under 25 years old and an increasing number of young people choosing to start a career in retail (British Retail Consortium, 2016). The findings have important implications in designing, implementing, and improving mental health initiatives for retail corporations, especially medium and small-sized corporations. This can not only foster good mental wellbeing of young employees currently working in the retail industry, but also those who plan to step into the field of expertise in the future.

### **3. Methodology and Method of Analysis**

Interviews were conducted with professional researchers in mental wellbeing, to gain a deeper understanding on mental wellbeing, the gaps surrounding existing mental health initiatives, and potential initiatives that they believe are useful based on their previous research. Interviews were arranged with Mr. Sean Russell and Professor Anu Realo (PhD). Mr. Russell is a co-investigator driving the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot across the Midlands Engine. Professor Realo is the Director of Graduate Studies (Research) at the Department of Psychology at the University of Warwick under the research group “Lifespan Health and Wellbeing” and the President of European Association of Personality Psychology.

Detailed secondary research was conducted through analysis from relevant articles, reports, and newsletters. This was done to identify the overall mental health conditions in the working sector in the UK, the plethora of mental health challenges faced by the employees in the retail sector, consequences faced by companies because of young employees’ mental health challenges.

A gap analysis was performed by comparing the current mental health initiatives adopted by retail corporations to cater to the needs of the employees against a desired mental health programme to identify existing effectiveness gaps between them. For in-depth comparison, the effectiveness of current mental health initiatives was evaluated by identifying similarities and uniqueness among the mental health programmes of 7 retail companies selected. The SWOT analysis framework was utilized for identify effectiveness gaps that can be potentially filled to best solve the mental health challenges in the retail sector among young employees.

## 4. Key Findings

### 4.1 Common Mental Health Challenges

Though the retail employees suffer from a range of mental health challenges, there are 3 that are particularly common either due to pandemic-induced stressors or longer-lasting issues in the industry.

#### 4.1.1 GAD (General Anxiety Disorder)

GAD, as defined by the NHS, “is a long-term condition that causes you to feel anxious about a wide range of situations and issues, rather than 1 specific event.” It can take a mild or a severe form, but the condition is usually characterised as a chronic one. Symptoms could include trouble concentrating and or sleeping which directly impacts workers’ productivity. It is reported by Mental Health Foundation that there were 8.2 million cases of anxiety disorder in the UK alone in 2013 (13% of the population) (‘Fundamental Facts about mental health, 2016’) and with the impact of COVID-19, this figure will have skyrocketed in 2021. **According to a survey conducted in 2021 by the UK based charity, retailTRUST, increased “anxiety, worry or fear” was felt by 88% of retail employees who responded.**

#### *Main causes*

- Many young retail workers do not start out with high wages (especially those working on the shop floor or in distribution warehouses) and have little experience handling their finances. Therefore, financial insecurity plagues many young workers and can be a huge cause of distress and chronic anxiety. The Claro Mental Health Project Report (‘Millennials know so little about their finances it ‘significantly worsens’ mental health’) found that mental wellbeing scores for people with low financial confidence is, on average, 37%, lower than those with high financial confidence.
- Many low-skilled jobs in retail are under threat due to the growing prominence of e-commerce which has been accelerated due to the pandemic - **The British Retail Consortium (BRC) has projected that 1/3 of retail jobs vanish by 2025 due to rising minimum wages and new technology** (Sky News). This perpetual uncertainty that young workers must contend with is also a huge cause of anxiety.

### **4.1.2 Depression**

There are various symptoms of clinical depression including lasting feelings of unhappiness and loneliness, feeling tearful, and losing interest in things you once enjoyed. Physical symptoms could range from constantly feeling tired to sleeping badly, which once again thwarts productivity. Depression usually coincides with anxiety which makes their causes overlap. In 2014, in any given week, 3 out of every 100 people in the UK suffer from depression (Mind UK).

#### *Main causes*

- A primary cause of depression is the occurrence of acutely stressful events, in the retail industry, this could be losing a job which will become more prevalent. According to a report conducted by The Health Foundation, in January 2021, 43% of unemployed people has poor mental health compared to 27% for people in employment (Unemployment and Mental Health, Health Foundation, 2021).
- Another primary cause is loneliness. Many on-the-floor jobs in retail lack collaborative elements and sometimes exclusively entail restocking shelves and assisting customers, depriving workers of opportunities to build deeper relationships. In 2019, the British Red Cross found that over six in 10 people (63%) working in the retail and wholesale sectors feel always, often, or sometimes lonely (SLR).

### **4.1.3 PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)**

PTSD is a serious enough condition to seriously impact a person's day-to-day activities as victims could 'relive' traumatic experiences and its associated emotions. PTSD is known to cause insomnia and difficulty concentrating. According to the same report by the Mental Health Foundation, 4.4% of adults in a month in 2016 screened positive for PTSD. A particularly pernicious feature of PTSD is that those suffering from it are often unaware – only 3.3% of adults believed they had PTSD.

#### *Main causes*

- Though it has always been a semi-regular occurrence, incidence of verbal abuse to retail employees has increased markedly from the onset of the pandemic. Reasons include irritable customers that are reluctant to follow

COVID-19 safety rules. In a survey by retailTRUST, it was reported that 50% of respondents who suffered from an abusive incident with a customer took time off work.

- A more persistent problem which also could be a contribute to cases of PTSD, is the prevalence of sexual harassment in the retail industry. In a survey by a regional law firm, Foot Anstey, 11% of respondent (retail employees) have experience “inappropriate touching of a sexual nature”. (Responding to sexual harassment in the retail workplace). Furthermore, younger workers are more vulnerable to sexual harassment.

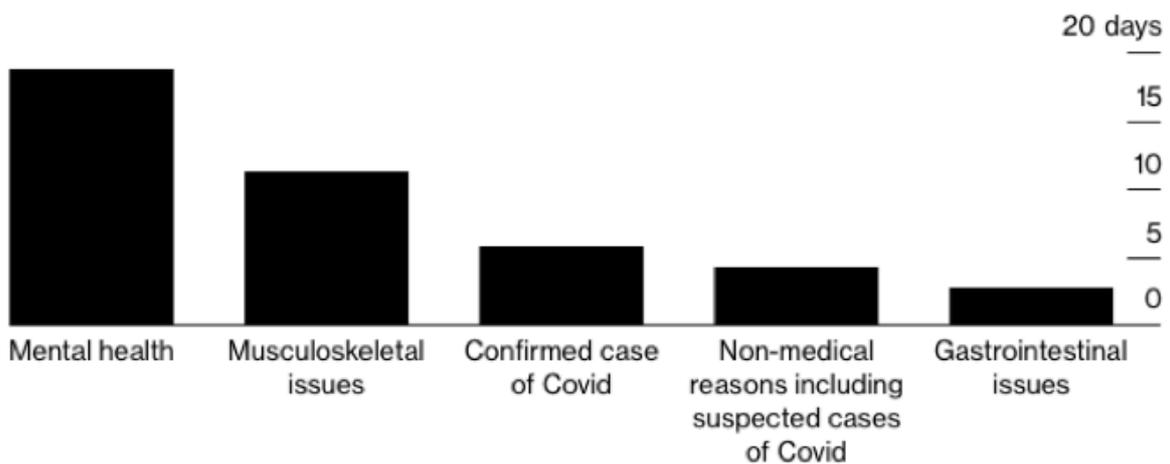
#### 4.2 Consequences of mental health challenges

Poor mental health accounted for almost a fifth of all lost working time across the UK this year, according to research. Furthermore, more than half (54%) of those who take two or more mental health-related absences will go on to leave their jobs.

#### Absent With Leave

Mental health was the top reason for days off sick in the U.K. in 2021

■ Average length of absence



Source: GoodShape

Figure 1: Bar chart depicting the most popular reasons for absenteeism due to illness in 2021 in the UK

A total of 26% people thought about leaving the industry, making them nearly twice as likely as the average worker to feel this way, according to the 2021 Stress and Mental

Health study. Only 13% of people were close to leave their role across healthcare, teaching and education, transport and logistics and finance.

Meanwhile, 5% of retail workers have already left the sector due to stress. **As many as three in five retail workers have experienced excessive stress at work over the last year. At least 28% felt their employers didn't provide the support they needed.** Meanwhile, 16% of workers in the industry have taken statutory sick days or unpaid leave due to mental health issues, with one in five suffering from mental health issues other than stress over the last year.

It is found that about 15% of people at work have symptoms of an existing mental health condition, which they said illustrates the fact that given the right support they can thrive in employment.

#### **4.3 Interview summary with clinical professionals and researchers in wellbeing**

Interviews were conducted with Mr. Sean Russell and Professor Anu Realo, both professionals in the field of mental wellbeing, to get a better understanding on the current situation on mental wellbeing among young employees and the effectiveness gaps in current mental wellbeing initiatives in retail companies. Key insights from the respective interviews were extracted.

*Mr. Sean Russell*

Our main takeaway from the meeting with Sean Russell was identifying the primary roots of the mental health challenges and taking a more preventative approach as it has been much less focused.

- Mr. Russell highlighted the importance of continued mental health support to the retail sector workforce. He started by emphasising the research that highlights a return of nearly £5 for an expenditure on mental health of £1.
- However, he stresses that it is still unidentified which interventions have the most significant impact and whether they vary across different age cohorts. Hence, throughout the meeting, he focuses that the policies should be embedded in the data and there need to be increased efforts to gather more data on the mental health situations of the workers.
- When asked about the effects of free counselling services, Mr. Russell responded that only the more prominent firms could offer these counselling

services through the Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs)- and it is nearly impossible for the small and medium enterprises to provide them.

- He indicates that the take-up of mental health initiatives is very low among the workers due to worries regarding the confidentiality of their discussions and the pervasive stigma around mental health. Thus, it remains vital to break the stigma around it to improve the workplaces in the retail sector.
- He argues that some of the major worries of the younger generation result from financial insecurity, caregiving, and anxieties relating to their work.
- He has given a fundamental breakdown of the path that firms should follow - workplace culture improvement, stigma reduction and addressing the financial insecurity of the workers.
- To counter the stigma, Mr. Russell suggests that the firms take a more preventative and down-streamed approach by making their culture more open, acknowledging the mental health challenges of the workers, and providing consistent efforts. Strengthening the employees' financial security is highly likely to increase their productivity, and the firms can take multiple measures. These may include providing job security in downturns, increased wages, and providing access to resources that help employees manage their finances better.

### *Professor Anu Realo*

The interview with Professor Realo focuses on finding new measures for mental health initiatives, evaluating current initiatives, and discussing the problem of appropriate measures to assess their effectiveness.

- Professor Realo believes that the main issue surrounding current mental wellbeing initiatives is that they deal with treatment, but not prevention.
- She states that a holistic approach should be adopted, which is related to designing initiatives that support not only the mental wellbeing, but also the entire person.
- She indicates that physical wellbeing factors, such as diet and exercise, are strongly linked to mental wellbeing.

- She argues that long-term engagement and systematic measures are the key to effectively tackling the mental wellbeing challenges associated with young employees in the retail sector.
- She suggests that companies should be genuinely concerned about employees' wellbeing, rather than solely implementing initiatives for brand image as a company that supports increasing mental health awareness.
- Her previous research has suggested that the use of tangible benefits as incentives for encouraging employees to adopt good physical health habits has been proven to be effective. This is because of the development of extrinsic motivation. By improving physical health, mental health will also be improved.
- Throughout the interview, the unavailability of proper and accurate metrics to assess the effectiveness of mental health initiatives has been repeatedly brought up. Professor Realo argues that data is key to examining and comparing the effectiveness of mental health initiatives. Specifically, the effectiveness of these initiatives from the perspective of young employees should be considered in this context.
- Long-term commitment must be dedicated to fostering a healthy company culture that raises awareness around mental health issues. This need to be felt by employees, and not only be stated on paper.
- She argues that companies often neglect their employees' life outside of the workplace with evidence from harsh company policies that impact employees' life outside of work.

#### **4.4 Discussion on mental health initiatives in retail companies**

Mental health and wellbeing programmes at Tesco, Marks and Spencer's, John Lewis Partnerships, Wilko, Unilever, Superdrug, and Aldi were studied and analysed. One company analysed represents one mental health programme.

##### **4.4.1 Detailed description and analysis of mental health programmes**

###### *Tesco*

- Signed a mental health pledge in 2016 to fight against the stigma around mental health and continue to be proud supporters of Time to Change
- Provide a range of learning, services, and resources to support colleagues' mental wellbeing.
- When addressing colleague mental wellbeing, Tesco has three main priorities: i) creating a supportive workplace experience; ii) using great interventions and resources that colleagues and managers are skilled to use; and iii) making sure we are all equipped to respond effectively when a colleague needs support.
- Compulsory mental health awareness training for new managers through Mind.
- The Wellbeing in Retail Guide: a guide that helps retail workers take care of their own mental health on their own.
- Tesco is giving its 300,000 staff free access to digital wellness tools such as Headspace and Silver Cloud. The motive is to prevent and alleviate mental health problems such as anxiety and stress amongst its employees during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Tesco in collaboration with Samaritans launched a wellbeing guide in the retail sector with the aim of helping the employees become more aware of their mental well-being and understanding the people around them.

###### *Marks and Spencer's*

- M&S has an initiative to "Promote an environment where we can talk about mental health", to destigmatize mental health issues.
- M&S was the first retailer to sign up to the Time to Change, to support the mental health cause for employees.
- They further joined Mental Health at Work Commitment 2020, which is a roadmap to achieve better mental health outcomes at the workplace.

- They provide access to 24/7 confidential, free mental health support via our EAP including free counselling and CBT both face to face and via live chat and video conference where preferred.
- Also arrange for free counselling sessions aimed at improvements in mental health including depression and anxiety
- Initiated a program for “Supporting teams mental health training” for Line Managers and colleague representatives to spot early signs and symptoms of mental health issues and thereby guide people towards an appropriate support service.
- Wellbeing in retail tool - an online learning platform for all retail colleagues aims to help them better understand and improve their own mental wellbeing.
- M&S started a unique initiative of Buddy Network, wherein, colleagues can informally discuss and share their own wellbeing experiences and support each other.
- Arrange for Employee engagement surveys and Direct colleague feedback to further understand and furnish better mental health services to employees.
- M&S in partnership with the PAM group, provide free and confidential support for mental health, physical health, financial wellbeing and much more.

#### *John Lewis Partnerships*

- Involved in partnership with Health Services Team for multidisciplinary clinical assistance that includes occupational health nurses, a doctor, physiotherapist, and wellbeing clinical lead.
- John Lewis provide Partner Support Service, which involves confidential, non-judgmental listening phone service.
- They also indulge in giving free Health advice and guidance to its employees for a healthy lifestyle.
- Medical triage, to cater to employees based on the specific treatment needed, and urgency of their matter.
- John Lewis arranges for specialist support, including physiotherapy, mental wellbeing, podiatry, and international business travel health

- During financial year, 2020-2021, they provided 5850+ psychological therapy sessions, 451 People Managers participated in mental health awareness training and 16,700+ calls to in-house partner support helpline.

#### *Wilko*

- Wilko provides an Employee Assistance Programme Health assured to give 24/7 advice and support, it is a confidential helpline, to ensure privacy and security of each employee's personal matters.

#### *Unilever*

- Unilever's Employee Assistance Programme delivers mental health support 24/7 which is accessible via telephone, text, or web chat, engages in mindfulness-based stress reduction courses, life coaching, financial wellbeing, and resilience training.

#### *Superdrug*

- Superdrug provide Online Therapy, which is on-the-spot access to first class psychologists in multiple different mediums, alongside digital psychological and educational tools to maintain good mental health.
- Superdrug uses questionnaires and assessments, to evaluate and understand its employees' mental health problems and then come up with appropriate solution.

#### *Aldi*

- Aldi assists employees in the form of counselling, wellness coaching, financial wellbeing support, an online wellbeing platform and a 24/7 confidential helpline delivered by retailTRUST.
- They have teamed up with Mental Health UK in a two-year partnership that will provide practical tools and guides that aim to give people the confidence to speak openly about their own mental wellbeing. It will help staff and their families look after their wellbeing by changing their perception of mental health and giving them the confidence to have open conversations about mental wellbeing.

Features of initiatives that are common across two or more mental health programmes were identified to determine what retail companies are generally doing to tackle the common mental health challenges in young employees.

- All mental wellbeing programmes in all companies studied offered counselling services from specialists via different means, such as wellness coaching, helplines, and web chats.
- Both Tesco and Marks & Spencer support Time to Change, a campaign that began in 2007 and ended in 2020 aimed at eliminating the stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health.
- Tesco, Marks & Spencer, and John Lewis Partnerships offered wellbeing training for its managers.
- Tesco, Marks & Spencer, and John Lewis Partnerships have contributed to the formulation of “Wellbeing in Retail”, an online learning platform aimed to assist employees to improve their own wellbeing.
- Tesco, Marks & Spencer, John Lewis Partnerships, Superdrug, and Aldi offered educational and guidance tools regarding mental wellbeing.

Unique initiatives were identified among the mental health programmes of retail companies studied.

- Tesco required its managers to complete compulsory mental health awareness training as part of their role, while wellbeing training for managers at Marks and Spencer’s and John Lewis Partnerships were available and optional
- Marks & Spencer’s mental wellbeing programme constituted an optional “Buddy Network” where employees are given an opportunity to share their experiences in managing mental health conditions and show support to each other via coffee chats.
- Marks & Spencer has conducted employee engagement surveys aimed at further improving their initiatives via constant evaluation
- John Lewis Partnerships’ mental health programme involves medical triage. It is the process of assessing the specific treatment required and urgency for a particular mental health issue.
- John Lewis Partnerships has an internal multidisciplinary clinical team

#### **4.4.2 SWOT Analysis of mental health initiatives**

A SWOT analysis was conducted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current mental health initiatives in retail companies, with focus on their effectiveness in improving mental wellbeing among young employees.

##### *Strengths*

Strengths are defined as the features of initiatives that demonstrates high effectiveness in dealing with mental health challenges.

- Compulsory wellbeing training for its managers at Tesco ensures full engagement from the management in improving employees' wellbeing, where there is no capacity to avoid such training.
- Medical triage in John Lewis Partnerships' mental wellbeing programme allows deeper understanding and personalized treatments on each employee's wellbeing via in-depth assessment.
- Medical triage in John Lewis Partnerships' mental wellbeing programme allows clear priorities in resource allocation for the company.
- The "Buddy Network" at Marks & Spencer provides a comfortable environment for employees to openly talk about their mental health issues with someone they are familiar with. This eliminates the fear generated from potential discrimination and stigma associated with seeking professional help as mental health topics are kept internally within the company network.
- The "Buddy Network" at Marks & Spencer encourages coffee chats among employees on a regular basis, which promotes long-term engagement in the discussion of wellbeing issues.
- The "Buddy Network" acts as a wellbeing support for young employees to transition to a new environment.
- The internal multidisciplinary clinical team at John Lewis Partnerships and on-demand counselling services via "My Online Therapy" in Superdrug allows on-the-spot access to readily available mental wellbeing support.

Strengths in effectiveness relates to the high accessibility, ability to create awareness and long-term engagement of the mental wellbeing initiatives, as well as the high efficiency in the utilization of company resources to establish those initiatives.

## *Weaknesses*

Weaknesses are defined as the features that lead to reduced effectiveness in tackling the common mental health challenges among young employees.

- The choice to react to and access wellbeing support, as well as discuss mental wellbeing issues is entirely dependent on employees. Employees may opt to not seek support and conceal their mental health issues.
- Professor Realo and Counselling services are treatments for mental health issues rather than prevention.
- Apart from compulsory wellbeing training at Tesco, other initiatives are optional for employees to engage in. This leaves the capacity for employees to prioritize work over seeking support.
- Apart from the “Buddy Network”, other initiatives may not necessarily achieve long-term engagement. Employees may only act upon the support provided only when mental health issues become severe.
- Medical triage in John Lewis Partnerships may lead to time lags in mental health treatment, as resources are allocated based on urgency. Employees suffering from mental health issues that are less urgent would be neglected in the short term.
- Medical triage in John Lewis Partnerships may lead to discrimination against employees with less urgent mental health issues, as treatment is prioritized to those who have more urgent conditions.
- Tesco’s compulsory training for managers would be ineffective if managers lack intrinsic motivation to participate in the training. This means that managers may only complete the training for the sake of securing their job without acknowledging the objectives of the training.

Weaknesses in effectiveness relate to the inability to eliminate the cause of the problem, discrimination in the accessibility to wellbeing support facilities and the inability to generate intrinsic motivation in promoting good mental wellbeing.

## *Opportunities*

Opportunities are defined as the capacity for current initiatives in each mental health programme to improve their effectiveness in tackling the common mental health challenges by considering the unique initiatives from other mental health programmes and initiatives that are beyond the programmes investigated and the retail sector.

- Negligence of employees with less urgent mental health issues during medical triage in John Lewis Partnerships' wellbeing programme can be compensated by Marks and Spencer's "Buddy Network" which avoids mental health deterioration in the long run.
- New young employees can be paired with a senior employee to establish a personal and comfortable connection for wellbeing support with a similar programme as Marks and Spencer's "Buddy Network".
- Professor Realo indicates that good physical wellbeing is correlated with good mental wellbeing. Retail companies can foster a good physical wellbeing culture by encouraging healthy eating and lifestyle habits. These include healthy diets, teetotalism, and a non-smoking lifestyle.
- Professor Realo suggested that incentives can be included to create extrinsic motivation for employees, which is the desire to perform a behavior because of promised reward or threats of punishments
- The professor mentioned that in addition to the implementing wellbeing programmes, the sense of belonging can be promoted within the company culture via other company policies such as flexible working hours to accommodate with sources of mental health challenges outside of the workplace.
- Professor Realo further argues that these initiatives are not necessarily implemented in a systematic and timely manner. That is, these initiatives are only taken place when the need becomes obvious and prevalent. This reflects the passiveness of these initiatives in responding to mental health challenges.
- Financial security should also be offered in the retail workplace. This is particularly crucial for young retail workers, whose incomes are relatively low at early stages of their career as well as the fear from losing their job due to risks from automation and digitization in retail. Such initiatives are common in the financial services industry.

## *Threats*

Threats are defined as the uncontrollable factors outside of the company that can potentially reduce the effectiveness of the current mental wellbeing programmes.

- Incidents of verbal abuse are the major contributors to the mental health deterioration of retail employees since the onset of the pandemic. Thus, the actions of customers are of the related causes to mental health challenges among retail workers. This is an external factor where the company has less control of.
- Factors outside of the workplace can also be sources of mental health challenges. They affect the productivity of the employee at work but remain uncontrollable by the company.

New initiatives should be formulated with an aim to mitigate the negative impact posed by these factors directly on the mental wellbeing of young employees, as well as the effectiveness of mental health programmes.

## **5. Recommendations**

A potential wellbeing programme targeted to prevent the deterioration of mental health issues and support the mental wellbeing of young retail employees would have the following traits that will exhibit the strengths and minimize the weaknesses discussed in the Key Findings.

### **5.1 Primary Prevention**

We define primary prevention as the initiatives that are aimed at preventing the cause of the mental health issue from occurring in the first place. Actions include addressing the modifiable factors and strengthening protective factors that are controllable by companies.

- **Foster sense of belonging and healthy company cultures:** Creating healthy company cultures that foster sense of belonging to the organization via top leadership support from every level of management from the C-suite to first-line supervisors. This contributes to stigma reduction in seeking mental health support.
- **Flexible company policies:** This may include flexible working hours. They should be implemented to accommodate the needs outside of the workplace. This allows physical and psychological job demands to be within the control and capabilities of employees
- **Tangible incentives:** Incentives should be incorporated to generate extrinsic motivation among workers to take on healthy lifestyle habits. Such incentives may include tangible benefits such as gift cards and coupons, free merchandise and memberships.
- **Training and education:** The firms need to help managers understand the need for mental health initiatives at the workplace and generate intrinsic motivation for engaging in mental wellbeing initiatives. They can be presented with straightforward studies with infographics that clearly communicate the rationale for promoting health, in all forms, at the workplace. It has often been observed that encouraging bosses are essential to achieving health and wellness while lesser motivating bosses lessen engagement and workers' compensation claims, and negatively impact productivity.

- **Reducing financial insecurity:** Multiple reports discuss the detrimental effects of financial insecurity on the younger adult population. There needs to be increased job security for the workers which leads to a healthier financial lifestyle, in turn leading to better well-being. Firms can provide comprehensive resources to their employees on handling their finances better by collaborating with private, public, and non-governmental organizations working in the area. For instance, there has been an increased take-up of the Financial Well-being Programme for Businesses by HSBC to help business employees navigate through their finances better.

## **5.2 Secondary Prevention**

Secondary prevention is defined as the early detection of symptoms of the mental health issue for proper diagnosis of the related disease.

- **Partnering with social enterprises and charities to offer on-demand access to free online counselling services:** As highlighted by Sean Russell, although the leading retailers provide such services, the take-up rate is very small, which needs to be tackled by acknowledging the reduction of stigma and ensuring the employees that their conversations with counsellors remain confidential. Counselling services and other initiatives related to treatment of mental health issues should still be implemented and targeted towards young employees who are already suffering from mental health issues to prevent deterioration in the long run. On-demand access to counselling services via internet resources will eliminate the need for retail companies to recruit external therapists to offer those counselling services. This would allow large savings to be made from the development of Employee Assistance Programmes. Therefore, such a measure is highly appropriate for medium and small companies with relatively limited funds and power than large retail companies.
- **Employee buddy programmes:** A peer supporting culture in such programmes are particularly effective for young employees. The input for such programmes would be the employees working at the companies. Therefore, such initiative is also highly suitable for medium and small retail companies as no additional costs will be incurred.

### **5.3 Further Recommendations**

Recommendations beyond the company initiatives were provided with a long-term purpose to continually examine the effectiveness of retail companies' mental health programmes.

- **Emphasis on timely and systematic evidence-based policy interventions:** Consistent and timely surveying on the mental health of employees should be carried out so that employees are constantly being heard. This will increase the sense of belonging to the company and allow early detection of related symptoms for early treatment. Metrics and indicators to assess the effectiveness should be standardized across all companies for fair and proper evaluation. This would encourage continuous amendments and improvements in mental health programmes in the long run.
- **Incorporating mental health metrics in ESG:** It is believed that mental health metrics should be incorporated into ESG evaluation. Productivity is strongly linked to employee mental wellbeing, while also being interconnected with long-term investment potential. Productivity and mental wellbeing of young employees would be paramount in determining long-term investment potential. They are more likely to establish long-term employee relationships with companies due to working at a younger age than senior employees.

## **6. Conclusion**

The aim of our investigation was to first explore the common mental health challenges among young retail employees and the current mental health initiatives in retail corporations. A gap analysis is then conducted to examine the effectiveness of initiatives in certain retail corporations in tackling those mental health challenges, along with suggestions to improve them.

Our findings suggest that the common mental health challenges among young retail employees include GAD (General Anxiety Disorder), depression, and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). These challenges negatively impact retail companies' operation as observed from the prevalence of presenteeism, absenteeism and high staff turnover.

Current mental health programmes demonstrating effectiveness in tackling mental health challenges by increasing accessibility, awareness, and long-term engagement, while also resulting in higher efficiency in using company resources. However, the measures used are unable to prevent the cause of mental health challenges. Discrimination in mental health support and the lack of intrinsic motivation is also an issue that will lower the effectiveness of mental health initiatives. It is possible for companies to consider a wide range of strong initiatives across different companies and beyond the retail sector. Additionally, new measures should be formulated to mitigate the negative impact from external factors out of the company that may potentially impact the effectiveness of mental health initiatives. There is room for improvement, and effectiveness gaps between current mental health initiatives and potential effectiveness that have been argued to be effective by previous research. A range of primary prevention and secondary prevention initiatives should be implemented with the aim to lower the probability that mental health challenges arise in the first place, while also aiding those currently suffering from mental health challenges.

The need for proper metrics to rigorously assess the effectiveness of mental health programmes at timely schedules is emphasized in this report. Quantitative assessments will allow a more robust overview on the effectiveness of mental health initiatives. This can arguably offer more precise comparisons than qualitative measures where only the "yes or no" question is answered regarding effectiveness.

For wider impact, governments should be advised to take part in formulating mental health and wellbeing metrics. For young employees to be better targeted in mental health support, metrics should be analysed based on age groups as separate populations and samples.

Further research can be conducted to understand the effectiveness of mental health initiatives as perceived by the young employees themselves. Combining with clinical advice from professionals and researchers of wellbeing, this would further ensure that mental health initiatives would be targeted to the wellbeing needs of young employees.

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