



Mad World Forum: Mental health must be a strategic priority

By Alex Sword, Europe Editor at [InternetRetailing.net](https://www.internetretailing.net).

A lack of clear definitions and strategic prioritisation is holding back the improvement of mental health in the workplace, according to delegates at the recent Mad World Forum.

The event on 9 October saw healthcare professionals and executives from companies big and small meet to discuss how the business world can improve the mental health of employees.

A Think Tank chaired by Lord Dennis Stevenson, founding chairman of mental health charity MQ, Peter Kelly, Senior Psychologist at health watchdog the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and InternetRetailing Editor-in-chief Ian Jindal, took the temperature of the industry.

The session was run under the Chatham House Rule to encourage openness and for that reason comments included are anonymous. They do however capture the key messages that emerged from discussion, along with a review of impediments and consensus on action areas.

We can no longer take the position of “too hard”

To set the scene the Chairs highlighted the progress that has already been made, emphasising that twenty years ago, we wouldn't be having this conversation and stressing that we can no longer take the position of “too hard”. The point was reinforced by reminding participants that they will not have this wave [of progress] again.

Progress and awareness were hailed at the highest rungs of the largest companies in the industry as well as the public sector, but the “gig economy” and SME sector were identified as areas of continuing concern.

Key impediments

The delegates were invited to weigh in on what has to be done, with the need for a clear definition of mental health emerging as a key point.

While the Chairs highlighted that standards are already available from HSE, many felt more needed to be done by businesses to understand them. “We understand what the building blocks of physical health are,” said one delegate, lamenting the lack of similar clarity in the mental health sphere.

Having more widely known criteria would help with another recommendation that came out of the think tank – introducing external reporting. Opinion was mixed on whether this should be introduced as a statutory requirement or left to voluntary commitments.

Delegates also highlighted senior role models as one particularly helpful way to raise awareness and reduce stigma. “If there's one thing to do, it is to get people to stand up,” attendees were reminded “At any level, there are always people who are doing their job well but are affected.”

The CEO of Lloyds Banking Group, António Horta-Osório, was referenced and his openness about the mental health problems he faced after a taxing period working to revive the company.

This was not just about the highest levels as well, but about empowering employees at the middle management level to promote good mental health.

The business case

The Think Tank also addressed the obstacles that face industry in trying to improve mental health. Interestingly, money was not initially raised as a primary barrier – but the discussion revealed that there are still questions about the business case for mental health programmes.

One participant said that investing in employee mental health required something of a “leap of faith”, with an uncertain pay-off – although he argued it would eventually show results. For others, it was more immediately quantifiable. One executive said that his company had been losing 5000 days per year to declared mental health absences and £1.6 million in sickness expenses – a “tremendous” cost to the business. In response, the company formed a partnership with Mind, relaunched its employee hotline and introduced a financial consolidation service.

Summing up more generally, in a riposte to the claim that it would be too expensive to improve mental health, it was reiterated that it would be too expensive not to do so.

Consensus on action

But some companies may not have even got as far as considering the financial implications of investing in employee mental health. “The chief execs on the board don’t see health as a strategic priority,” said one participant, identifying perhaps the biggest obstacle. “If they don’t, very little will happen,” adding that “if they do, they might embed health into the performance and management of the business, which would create significant cultural changes and a much more attractive business.”

He said that the word “health”, crucially, needs to encompass both physical and mental health in this context.

Also cited was a cultural bias in organisations, and a lack of understanding amongst those who had not suffered from mental health issues.

At an even more basic level, participants cited the very language around mental health as a barrier. Again, the comparison was made to physical health. The Chairs highlighted how when people are asked about their mental health they assume that this is referring to an illness, whereas in fact everybody has mental health, whether good or bad.

As a parting comment, delegates were challenged on an individual level to be the one who takes action. “A movement starts with one person.”