

1. How can we help junior members of staff with their development, when being in a physical office and learning by osmosis is not possible?

Using simulation environments to measure development is a recommended option. This could include scenario telephone calls or emails, using the results to build a tailored development plan. Sharing screens on Zoom does help, but also, moving the development responsibility back to the junior members and getting them to buddy up with someone more experienced to help can develop them faster.

2. We have an employee assistance programme (EAP) but take-up is low. How can we ensure that our people get the best from it?

Remind staff what the EAP provides, who is covered by it, the kind of support they can get, how to access it, the fact that it is confidential and, if possible, create a short-cut on computer desktops. You can also direct staff to the EAP during conversations about their wellbeing.

3. How can I ensure that I am taking responsibility for my employees' health and safety when I cannot control or access their home-working environment?

Recognise what you can and cannot influence. You should send guidance on working from home which aims to minimise the risk of staff becoming unwell due to their work commitments and change of working conditions.

4. How can we tackle feelings of uncertainty and convey positivity in light of the current circumstances?

Recognise even small achievements. Encourage your people to be mindful and make note of the little things that they have achieved throughout the day. Then, at the end of the day, ask them to review what they have achieved, rather than what they haven't. Acknowledge when people aren't coping well and offer support.

5. How do we deal with staff members who refuse to be on-camera in video meetings?

Be sensitive in the first instance. Explaining the reason *why* any employment change is required is half the battle to getting people to come round to agreeing to it. If that doesn't work, try to understand the rationale for not doing it and see if you can help alleviate that. If all else fails, it does become a conduct issue as they are refusing a management instruction.

6. How can we tackle 'video fatigue' and encourage more social interaction among employees?

Every new initiative brings a fatigue element to it but video calls are now proven to be more demanding on the brain than physical ones, due to the pixels in the screen. Just like any meeting, you do not permanently stare at the person speaking. Establish parameters about what is expected or okay and involve the whole team in this decision. If you do this, the fatigue element could be significantly reduced.

7. If an employee wants to go abroad to work, citing that it would help with their mental health and wellbeing, can we refuse the request?

Any adjustment for medical or physical health, even when advised by a medical practitioner, can be rejected if the company is unable to reasonably accommodate such an adjustment. Requests to work from abroad from employees who are 100% home-working are becoming increasingly more common. If you do want to accommodate this (and many are happy to), take some HR and tax advice first.

8. What is the role of a mental health first aider?

Much in the same way that first aiders are there for physical health, mental health first aiders act as a first port of call for anybody suffering from poor mental health in the workplace. They are fully trained on different aspects of mental health and can direct colleagues to appropriate help and resources. [Watch our Partner Karen Wardell explain how they can help.](#)

9. How can we promote self-care amongst our staff and help our people to feel comfortable speaking about their feelings and mental health?

Training and education are key. Ideally, all employees should be trained in a basic level of mental health awareness so that they have an understanding of common mental health illnesses and disorders, stress and how to manage or reduce stress, and self-help and coping strategies. Training and education will reduce the stigma and discrimination that surrounds this subject.

10. How can we set boundaries around working hours and break-taking?

Ensure that personnel at all levels within the company lead by example, while recognising that there will be times such as pinch points and deadlines when some personnel may be required to work extended hours. However, this needs to be monitored and managed and not allowed to become the norm.

11. How can I recognise a genuine mental health problem compared to somebody who is underperforming for other reasons?

- Get some guidance from your HR department or contact your EAP provider for suggestions on how to handle the matter.
- Try and have a one-to-one conversation with the person to see how they are coping with things in general. Ask if they think they could do with any assistance or if there are issues or challenges they want to discuss. Let them know that they can always speak to someone else or contact the EAP (if applicable) should they not want to speak to you.
- If you find the person is reluctant to talk or you get the answer 'I'm fine', don't push it any further. Let them know that they can talk to you and that you would be happy to listen to them should they change their mind.
- Keep re-engaging with the person to see how they are but gently making it clear that you have noticed some changes and are concerned about them.
- If they still won't open up, highlight why you are raising the issue and acknowledge that something must be causing this change or drop in performance, explaining that this hasn't been an issue before. Ask if they need assistance with their workload, deadlines or don't understand what is expected of them.
- Empathy is going to be key, so don't be too quick to judge. While you can offer help and assistance, if the person continues to push back and make clear that they don't need any personal help, it maybe you should consider an administrative approach to a performance review.
- While we should always remain open-minded and consider that a drop in work performance may be due to an underlying mental health problem, we should also accept that it may not always be the case.

12. How much should we encourage our people to come back into the office when they are able to, even if they have been effectively working from home during the pandemic?

Most companies have had almost a year to create an environment where home-working is normal, so returning to an office simply to sit at a PC could be rendered pointless, and adding a commute, time-consuming and expensive. However, some employees do need that interaction, so look to see how they can return ensuring that they are not the only one in the office. The office of the future could be meeting spaces and some hot desks but you have to do what works for your organisation and your employees. A blanket return, if there is no real appetite to do so, may not be well received.

13. What is the difference between mental health and mental illness?

We all have mental health just like we all have physical health. Our mental health can be good (we can cope) or poor (we're not coping). Mental health issues can be caused by many factors and, sometimes, changes to our behaviour can rectify these issues. However, some people will develop symptoms and, in some cases, multiple symptoms of mental health illnesses and disorders. They might not be able to cope with work, responsibilities, social interaction and even personal relationships. Because they haven't seen a GP or counsellor/therapist, they are undiagnosed and aren't receiving the help and support they need to start their recovery.

Once a person initially seeks medical assistance and they get a diagnosis for their illness and the help they need, they will probably still find it difficult to cope and interact, as it takes time for treatments, medication and supports to work.

Recovery from mental illness is not only possible, it's extremely likely. After a period of time, the vast majority of people will regain much if not all of their normal function. While they may still have a diagnosis of a mental illness or disorder; they can cope, hold down jobs and responsibility, socially interact and have satisfying personal relationships.

14. How can we engage with a mix of home and office-based workers who do not all have access to a camera?

You can engage with them without a camera, however, the team engagement will suffer. Those in the office will build better rapport and those working from home run the risk of becoming isolated. You may want to consider investing to provide cameras or encourage the use of camera phones as most people will have access to one. Make time for team interaction where everyone is on video, without the office-based employees in a room together but at their desks.

15. How can we introduce financial wellbeing into an existing health and wellbeing strategy?

Use an EAP scheme to allow employees to access financial advice for debt management etc. This is quite reactive but caution is advised with providing any form of financial advice when you are not qualified to do so. Even off-the-cuff comments regarding pensions should be avoided as these could potentially be seen as unlawful. Use specialist help and advice in this area.

16. If you could give top tips to a company looking to formalise a mental health and wellbeing initiative, what would they be?

- Mental health is an opportunity and a threat in the workplace - take ownership of it.
- Establish senior management buy-in to benefits
- Invest funds and time in employee mental wellbeing (spend to save)
- Mental health needs a continuous approach with an eye on the horizon for change
- Positive mental health in the workplace equals a more productive workforce.