

Happy people in healthcare

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Many trusts are working to foster a healthy, inclusive and compassionate working culture - a key tenet of the NHS Long Term Plan. In this latest Health Adviser article, James Rhodes (DAC Beachcroft partner and employment law expert) is joined by a number of leading figures in healthcare to discuss the innovative new schemes being rolled-out by trusts to encourage staff retention and boost recruitment.

Key to retention?

With 103,000 vacancies and high rates of sick leave, presenteeism and churn, the NHS has realised that it needs to invest more in the health and wellbeing of its staff and foster a healthy, inclusive and compassionate working culture - a key tenet of the NHS Long Term Plan.

As NHS Chief People Officer, Prerana Issar, has commented: “Getting the right workforce is not just about the number of people we bring in, but keeping and rewarding the team we have.”

“There are several things NHS organisations can do to improve their reputation, and one of those is a focus on health and wellbeing. A working environment with a good reputation will feed into a supply of staff,” says Danny Mortimer, Chief Executive at NHS Employers. “Most trusts do incorporate it into their workforce strategy, but more needs to be done.”

DAC Beachcroft Partner James Rhodes believes it can give trusts a competitive edge: “Some operate in places that are quite rural or seen as ‘unfashionable’ and may be competing with neighbouring trusts in more attractive locations, so struggle to attract staff. They have to sell a package and look at different ways of making the work more engaging.”

Fall in sick leave

The approach worked for Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which halved its vacancy rate from 11% to 5%, Rhodes says.

It does require effort - scoping out what’s needed, risk assessments, insurance and funding, he adds. “But the other way of looking at it, is the potential to mitigate the risk of staff going off sick with stress and burnout.”

At Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, a 24/7 professional counselling service and access to online cognitive behavioural therapy saved the trust £906,000 over two years in avoided sick leave. Programme attendees said it helped them cope and stay in work.

Mental health

Doctors are notoriously bad at opening up about health problems, particularly mental health issues, and the professional regulator, the General Medical Council (GMC), has commissioned research looking at how to tackle this.

“The culture we create is important, and having one that is open is clearly effective, but just like physical issues, colleagues with mental health issues need prompt access to expert services,” says Mortimer, adding that occupational health teams have a key role in promoting and maintaining staff health and wellbeing.

But health and wellbeing isn’t just about boosting recruitment and retention and lowering rates of sick leave. “It’s about wanting employees to be happy and provide safe care for patients,” says Rhodes.

Root of the problem

Suzie Bailey, Director of Leadership and Organisational Development at health think tank The King's Fund, agrees, but cautions against a generic approach.

“Yoga is a nice addition, but not everyone will want to do it. There will be different needs and interests, and for some people, time will be more important than doing something on site with colleagues,” she says. “And we shouldn't assume that what works in Taunton will work in central Birmingham.”

It's important to find out from staff what they want and to evaluate what works, she says. It is the simple inexpensive things like being able to take a break, somewhere to eat and drink when on night shift, or a line manager asking how a member of staff is, that can make a difference.

Respected, engaged and supported

Ultimately, health and wellbeing initiatives should be part of a continuum where staff feel psychologically safe, cared for, understood as individuals and are given the right tools to do their jobs.

“It's fundamentally about how staff are treated, and ensuring that they feel valued, respected, engaged and supported,” says Bailey. “As part of a package, it's great to be able to offer pilates, but it's much more about the day-to-day lived experience of staff.”

That comes down to good management and effective leadership at all levels. Research from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing shows that in NHS organisations with good management, rates of staff sick leave are three times lower, levels of patient satisfaction four times higher, levels of staff job satisfaction twice as high and staff engagement three times as high as in those where management is poor.

As Bailey says, it's hard to detract from stress and workforce pressures. But she adds: “We need to do a lot more on basic people management skills. If we did that well, there would be a lot less stress in the system and a greater experience for staff and patients,” insists Bailey.

For more information on the issues discussed in his article, please contact [James Rhodes](mailto:jrhodes@dacbeachcroft.com) on +44(0)113 251 4795 or email jrhodes@dacbeachcroft.com.

Authors



James Rhodes

Leeds

+44 (0)113 251 4795

jrhodes@dacbeachcroft.com