

Reducing mental health stigma in the workplace



Employment can play an important role in promoting mental health and wellbeing and can support recovery from mental health conditions.

Employment provides financial security, contributes to a sense of identity and can be an opportunity to make a positive community contribution.

Background

In 2016, the Commission engaged EY Sweeney to research the workplace experiences of Queenslanders living with mental health conditions, and how these experiences affect their ability to gain and maintain employment.

The research also explored what made a positive difference to people's employment experiences, and their perspectives on the different approaches to addressing mental health stigma in the workplace.

This paper summarises the findings of the final research report, *Mental Health Stigma Reduction in the Workplace*, June 2018.

Approach

The target audience for this research included employees and job seekers, employers, academics and mental health peak bodies.

The research project included:

- a literature review
- 49 in-depth interviews
- two online forums for employees and employers
- video diaries, completed by eight employees.

In total 102 people participated in the research, including 62 employees, 25 employers, three academics and four peak bodies.

Overview

Mental health conditions are relatively common among all Australians.

Mental health stigma and discrimination pose significant barriers to participation in the workforce, and many other areas of life.

Stigma refers to the shame, disgrace or disapproval which results in an individual being rejected, discriminated against, and excluded from participating in a number of areas of society.

While employees with a lived experience generally expressed a high level of acceptance of their condition, mental health stigma was familiar to all. Overall, they considered stigma had reduced over time, but that there was a 'long way to go' before stigma would disappear.

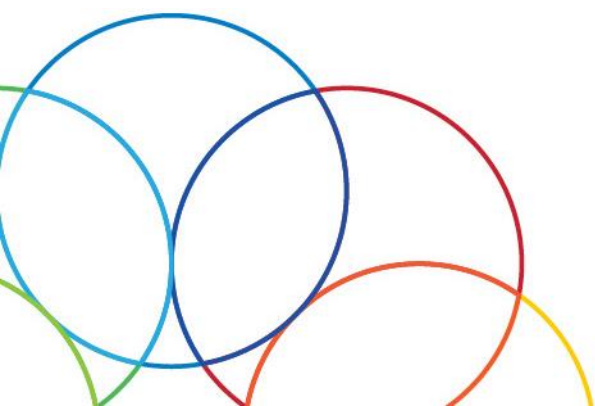
While employers generally considered mental health and wellbeing positive for business, they found managing mental illness, including balancing individual need with organisational productivity, was challenging.

Providing a safe, inclusive and supportive workplace is not just beneficial for people living with mental health conditions but also important for the mental health and wellbeing of all employees.

Mental illness and the workplace

Importance of employment

Employees with a lived experience had overwhelmingly positive attitude towards employment, which offered a sense of purpose and structure, financial reward, self-esteem and confidence.



In contrast, those not in paid work had lost confidence, and attributed this to their inability to find work.

“I’m a lot more confident now than I used to be. I think that’s come through working...”

Workplace stressors — such as heavy workloads, cultural issues, bullying and harassment, and trauma following cumulative exposure to workplace incidents — contributed to the development of mental health conditions for some employees.

Employer perspectives

Employers felt this was a challenging area for them. Employers considered employees’ mental health and wellbeing as vitally important but differed over their capability to recognise and respond; and their role in addressing workplace stigma and discrimination.

Some employers felt better responses to mental health issues would help promote positive workplace culture, enhance productivity and reduce costs. Others felt mental health conditions impacted productivity, with some believing workplaces should only assume responsibility for mental health issues if caused by the workplace.

“I cannot lie, it is hugely challenging and often frustrating ... when mental health issues arise which prohibit the staff member from doing their job. You need to find that balance between supporting that staff member as much as possible, but also ensuring that staff member is performing and contributing to the business’ success as they are paid to do...”

While employers believed stigma towards mental health conditions appears to be declining overall, they stated that it remains pervasive and were concerned that it significantly affects employees’ experiences at work, willingness to share their experiences with their employers, and deterred them from seeking help when they might need it.

Employee experiences

Employees reported positive and negative factors affecting their experiences searching for and maintaining employment. They included:

- aspects of recruitment, notably job interviews, pre-employment disclosure requirements and whether employers had designated roles for employees with a mental health condition
- availability of job seeking support, particularly when psychosocial support needs were complex
- workplace culture and inclusiveness, including leadership style and team culture
- workplace conditions and practices, including the extent to which workplaces were flexible, supportive and willing to accommodate an employee’s needs
- workplace attitudes and approaches towards mental health, such as how freely and openly mental health issues were discussed
- the nature of an employee’s manager or supervisor relationship, which influenced their comfort levels and willingness to discuss work or personal issues
- an employee’s ability to be open about mental health issues, including their attitudes and experiences in relation to disclosure of their conditions.

Openness about mental health in the workplace

People with a lived experience want to be open about their mental health issue with colleagues, to feel accepted for who they are, and to bring their ‘whole self’ to work. However, they had mixed views about openly discussing their mental health issues at work.

“[Disclosure] is like a mine field. You don’t know whether it’s okay to tell, you don’t know the reception you’re going to get...”

While more open discussion about mental health issues in the workplace benefits the employer and employee, being identified as having mental health issues can have negative consequences, including being perceived as less reliable, being treated differently, impacts on career progression, and potential job loss.

Most people did not talk about their condition to their employer. For those who had disclosed, outcomes ranged from being positive and empowering, through to negative outcomes extending, in some instances, to overt discrimination.

Strategies to reduce stigma and create more inclusive workplaces

Generally, stakeholder groups had positive attitudes towards workplaces playing an active role in reducing mental health issues and stigma in the workplace.

Culture and leadership

An organisation's culture had the most effect on attitudes toward people living with mental health issues. Employers viewed culture-based strategies as the most important and effective in determining organisational attitudes and creating positive change, and employees felt all change must come 'from the top'.

"Because the leaders are open, all the employees tend to follow suit..."

Public awareness campaigns

Public awareness campaigns seek to promote awareness and understanding by challenging commonly-held misconceptions and negative attitudes people may have around mental illness, and assume stigma reduces with greater awareness.

Public awareness campaigns, including campaigns such as mental health week, were perceived as important, and most effective when combined with other approaches, such as public figures or other relatable people disclosing their lived experience of mental health issues.

Education

Workplace education strategies were seen by all stakeholders as vital to supporting and assisting people experiencing mental health conditions. Education was considered effective at building the capacity of managers, supervisors and colleagues to talk comfortably about mental health, so they could initiate conversations about mental health and foster an inclusive workplace culture.

Contact strategies

Contact-based strategies — that is, having contact with colleagues and managers who live with mental health conditions — can be a powerful way of reducing mental health-related stigma.

Contact strategies can help people understand how those with a mental health condition feel and demonstrate that mental health conditions affect 'everyday' people.

"We need to talk more about it so it doesn't become a stigma, because unfortunately mental illness is the norm these days, and the sooner we realise that it can affect anyone of us at anytime, the more prepared we can be if it happens to us or someone close to us..."
(Employer)

Diversity and inclusiveness

Creating a culture of inclusiveness and appreciating diversity, rather than implementing specific stigma-reduction strategies, was seen to benefit the mental health and wellbeing of all employees, not just those living with mental health conditions.

"I believe that it is our duty as employers to make the workplace a place for work and not of dread to come to each day, and if it means helping a staff member through a crisis then that is what you do as a human being with compassion..."

Employers did not view mental health stigma and discrimination as something that needed to be specifically targeted, rather that it should be part of creating an inclusive workplace.

Some stakeholders indicated stigma reduction strategies in the workplace must be implemented well and genuinely to change workplace culture. Their view is that culture change requires managers and leaders to more than just 'tick a box'.

Next steps

The Queensland Mental Health Commission remains committed to better employment outcomes for people with lived experience. This includes:

- developing the lived-experience workforce
- driving reform to help those with a lived experience find and maintain work, and
- promoting workplace inclusion and diversity.

The findings of this research will help inform workplace and workforce development at the system and organisational levels.