



Making the workplace work – for people

When we talk of our place of work, it's invariably in the context of how we can earn a living and get ahead in life. But perhaps we need to recognise that the workplace plays a far greater role in our daily lives: it sets the stage for our emotional state and our social interactions in life. Ignore this influence at your peril.



Kurtney Naidoo
Research Analyst
Alexander Forbes Research Institute

Because the workplace is the most consistent meeting place for South Africans of all backgrounds, it can play a vital role in promoting social cohesion. But if we ignore those tiny little elements that introduce stress and friction into a worker's everyday life, we potentially contribute to an even greater fragmentation of our society.

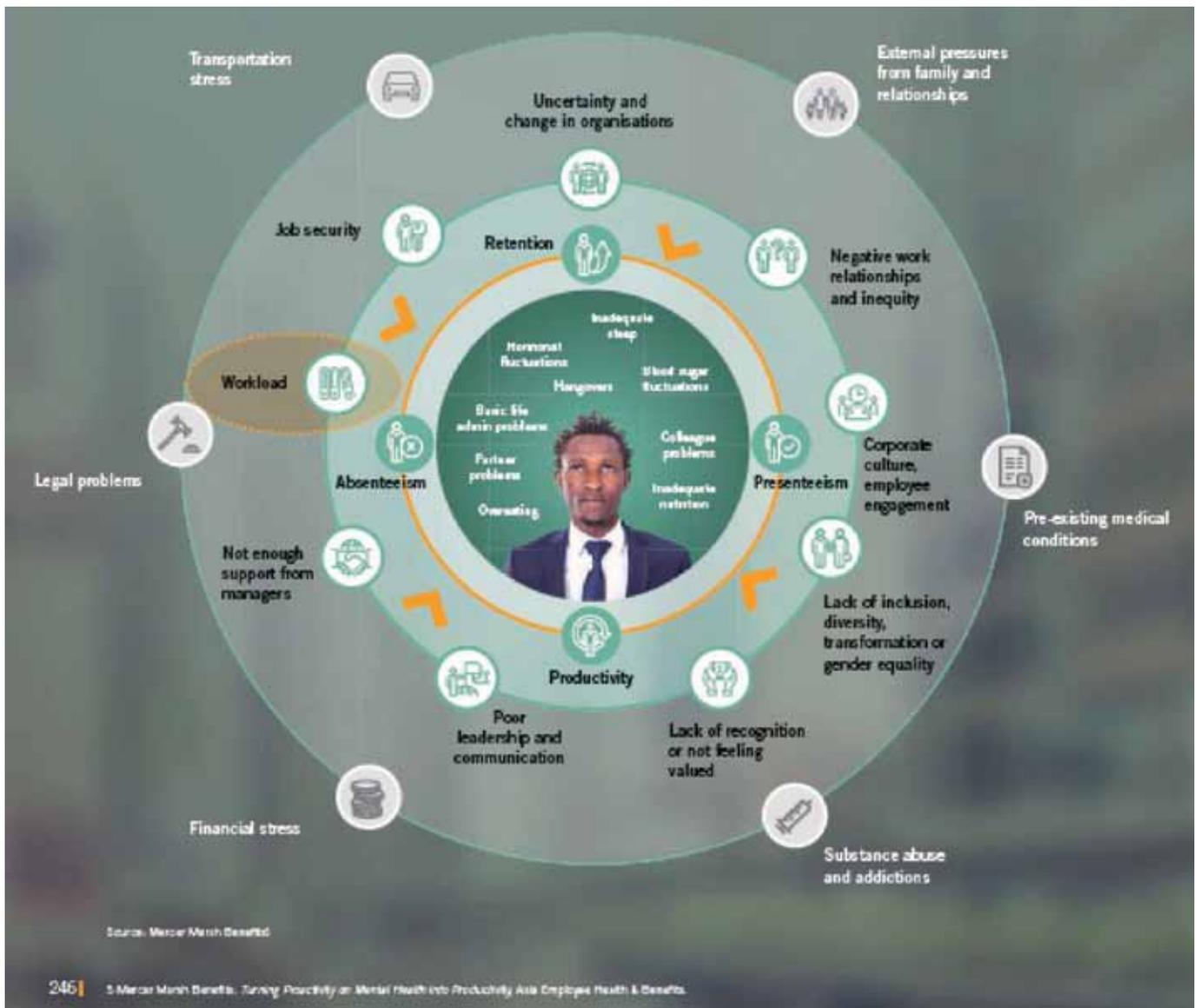
The vast majority of employers are only just beginning to realise that how they shape the work environment for their employees makes a massive impact on their effectiveness and general resilience. What they often miss is often being unable to address the little disruptions in life that can push employees over the edge – small things like:

- Leaving your glasses at home and not being allowed to retrieve them.

- Having no one at hand to pick up a sick child from school.
- Receiving a distressing call from one's partner without privacy to sort out an emotional meltdown.
- Not being able to find peace and quiet in the office to think through a critical work problem.

For many employers, the answers could be as simple and as low-tech as ensuring there are private areas where people can attend to personal business that simply cannot wait, or ensuring there are flexible policies to allow people to rush out and get those glasses, pick up their child or even work from home.

But for employers who really want to be cutting edge in addressing these issues, technology is now at hand to allow managers to be proactive and not just reactive.



Professor Rosalind Picard, founder and director of the Affective Computing Research Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology suggests that cellphone technology could provide individuals with a monitoring capability that forewarns them of their emotional state and thereafter sends mood stabilising interventions to either administer themselves or alert medical professionals, depending on the seriousness of the matter¹. The technology identifies when the individual's mood has drastically changed and subsequently sends suggested interventions such as changing break times or even sending them home if need be. Experiments with this technology in China's police and military forces have been shown to have a substantial impact on productivity – even if the thought of your employees wearing emotion-monitoring devices seems a bit draconian.

The point is that we are now seeing technology such as AI and “wearables” being used in the workplace to provide a wide-range of low-cost monitoring and counselling solutions.

What makes their contribution significant is that they can now serve multiple functions:

1. Early detection – you no longer have to rely on observation and self-monitoring.
2. Easy accessibility – it lowers the barriers to access advice, services and personalised treatment.
3. Lowered fear of stigma – chatbots are seen as unbiased and non-judgemental and allow for anonymous self-expression.

When Siri is not enough

But employers should also recognise that monitoring, robo-advice and chatbots are often not enough. Sometimes human beings need to talk to other human beings. On one hand, we can turn to technology again,

where communication tools such as Skype make it easy to provide workers with one-on-one counselling right in the workplace during break times. But perhaps the most overlooked “no-cost” support framework at hand for all employers – no matter what income group or professional grouping – is the miraculous power of the self-help group. Self-help groups can be structured to address almost any problematic issue: debt, addictions, family problems, abuse, work-related issues. Self-help groups have been set up to address almost every area of stress. Not only are self-help groups free, they have been shown to be one of the most effective means of actually creating behavioural change.

Look around you – there are more answers at hand

Ergonomics is the study of people's efficiency in their work environment – what we have learnt from this area of research is that productivity increases when there are nap areas, quiet rooms, games/sport areas, innovation areas (where people can illustrate their thinking – whiteboards, smart walls etc.) and workspaces where teams with large projects can work collaboratively. Having these specific areas helps employees keep stress under control.

Companies tend to opt for more open plan offices however this may not be the most effective solution. The intent is to encourage exposure to different sets of expertise allowing for creativity and innovation. But this just masks the fact that companies are reducing costs by redesigning and when employees realise this it may backfire. Depending on the employee's job profile, research is now highlighting that open spaces may be a hindrance to productivity levels. It's time that companies become more circumspect about these decisions.

Bottom line

Understanding the workplace for what it really is pays significantly greater dividends than we have perhaps properly understood. The workplace is a place where human beings – with all their complex emotional baggage – meet up to try and productively serve the interests of an employer. In South Africa, it's even more. Properly understood, the workplace can be a catalyst for change: for nurturing the transformative power of social inclusion. We just need to start addressing the “little things” that make the workplace work. The things that simply mean we are all human. ☐

FOOTNOTE:

- 1 Waters. R. 2018. How your phone can keep you from getting depressed, *Neo.Life*, 8 March 2018 (online).

