



WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH
**Challenges and
opportunities in India**



THE GLOBAL BUSINESS COLLABORATION
for Better Workplace Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

The Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health (GBC) is a business-led collaboration committed to creating mentally healthy workplaces across the world.

In June 2023, the GBC proudly led the second in a series of Leadership Roundtables in Mumbai, India, following on from a similar session held in April in Singapore. This session brought together executives from current and prospective GBC founders and signatories, to discuss the opportunities and challenges around employee mental health in India. Organisations with representatives included: Bharti Airtel Limited (Airtel), BHP, BP India (BP), Clifford Chance, Deloitte India, Dr Reddy's, Fidus Law Chambers, General Mills India Pvt Ltd (General Mills), Hershey India, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited, HSBC Bank India (HSBC), Indian Oil Institute of Petroleum Management, Kellogg India Pvt Ltd., Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd., Northern Trust, Pernod Ricard India (Pernod Ricard), Sodexo Food Solutions India Pvt. Ltd. (Sodexo), Hindustan Unilever Limited (Unilever) and WPP.

Chaired by Nitin Paranjpe, Chairman Hindustan Unilever Limited and Chief People and Transformation Officer at Unilever; Dr Diana Han, Chief Health and Wellbeing Officer at Unilever, and Poppy Jaman OBE, Chair of the GBC and Global CEO of the MindForward Alliance, the Leadership Roundtable surfaced a number of common themes which are summarised in this document. To support an open and transparent conversation, the roundtable was held in confidence, with an agreement to share key themes, learnings, and insights while anonymising commentary.

The Leadership Roundtable formed part of a broader event hosted by GBC Founding Partner Unilever, which saw over 90 C-suite leaders, talent and learning leaders, and health and wellbeing practitioners come together. GBC Leadership Pledge signatory members of this group shared practical insights in delivering on the Pledge (see p.11) – a set of commitments designed to support organisations in their efforts to advance on their workplace mental health journey.



'It is our pleasure to host this gathering of peers from many sectors across India, sharing insights which are critical in advancing our efforts in this space. We need all voices to be heard in the global conversation about mental health in the workplace, and these forums play a key role in that.'

Nitin Paranjpe, Chairman Hindustan Unilever Limited and Chief People and Transformation Officer at Unilever



'Today is about creating a safe space to discuss three key questions: what are the opportunities around mental health in India? What are the challenges? And how can Indian businesses become global brands known for their ability to create a culture of human flourishing which goes hand in hand with business performance?'

Poppy Jaman, Chair of the GBC and Global CEO of the MindForward Alliance



'The GBC is a forum for global organisations to learn from one another. Any one of our companies is never going to be as impactful or insightful as all of us can be together. When it comes to improving mental health in the workplace, sharing best practices and learnings across our organisations will only accelerate the shared journey we are on.'

Dr Diana Han, Chief Health and Wellbeing Officer at Unilever

'I am pleased to be here today to work with peers in this alliance to take forward a common definition and acknowledgment of mental wellbeing. We know that in many countries, including India, people don't always feel comfortable speaking about their mental health, in either their corporate or home environment'

Roundtable participant



KEY DISCUSSION THEMES

The Leadership Roundtable gathered 20 leaders from organisations of various sizes and sectors, and at different stages on their workplace mental health journeys. The discussion yielded a number of thought-provoking insights and reflections.

Each theme has been linked to relevant commitments in the GBC's Leadership Pledge. See p.11 for more details on the Pledge.



THE GROWTH OPPORTUNITY FROM SUPPORTING WORKPLACE INCLUSION AND MENTAL HEALTH

'When I first came to India, what I immediately saw was the promise, the energy, the development. But when it came to diversity, equity and inclusion, the potential remained untapped.'

India is currently one of the world's fastest growing economies, with its young and vibrant workforce being a formidable engine of innovation and productivity. But a lag in focus on diversity and inclusion in India's workplaces could be holding this growth back.

Early in the discussion, leaders spoke about the importance of people feeling a 'sense of belonging' and bringing their genuine selves to work to be at their best. With this in mind, some noted that a lack of inclusion – whether in terms of gender, sexual orientation, disability or other - could have a negative effect on both people's mental health and performance. Employers in India are increasingly aware of this and taking steps to build environments where everyone belongs and thrives.

Several of those taking part in the Roundtable mentioned initiatives such as establishing Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) where people could make connections with like-minded colleagues, and using those safe spaces to discuss common challenges and concerns.



Participants also discussed the importance of leaders starting and normalising conversations about inclusion and mental health – both in day-to-day interactions

and through targeted communications campaigns.

See Commitments 3 and 4 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11



Highlighting the strong links between inclusion and mental health, one executive explained that a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion campaign which featured leaders sharing personal stories resulted in highlighting several stories of mental health struggles. This, in turn, opened up conversations throughout the organisation about the importance of mental health and 'holistic wellbeing', as a natural progression from its efforts to foster inclusion.



'Some people still think that mental health is this horrible thing that you keep locked in a closet. People speaking about it, in and of itself, is really important.'

REDEFINING HEALTHY WORKING HABITS IN INDIA IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Participants noted that one challenge linked to India's focus on growth is a persistent culture of working long hours. One executive mentioned the perceived importance of 'being seen to toil away' as a measure of performance and worth. Another explained that, despite their organisation's best efforts, some of their workforce, including top performers, were found to be working longer hours than legally permitted in a recent audit.

While many employers in India are working hard to help people achieve a healthier work-life balance to support better mental health, several leaders mentioned the necessity to address this at a broader industry or sector level in order to change mindsets for good.

With India being a highly interconnected economy, an organisation's efforts to improve habits and cultures will only succeed if clients, suppliers and competitors also focus on instilling the right behaviours.

One participant from the legal sector pointed to their ecosystem as an example of where this type of concerted approach is needed.

They explained that the efforts undertaken by an individual law firm could only have so much impact, if what employees experience in other parts of their working day contradicts them.

'In the legal profession it's routinely acceptable to work late, which unfortunately can lead to burnout. There is also real stigma around initiating mental health conversations, so to strike a different note as one organisation is a challenge.'

While unhealthy working habits continue to be upheld as dedication and hard work, support resources offered – such as therapists or wellness days – generally see a low uptake by employees. Participants therefore spoke of the imperative for senior leaders to role model healthier work life balance, and a focus on mental health prioritisation at system or industry level.

See Commitments 3, 4 and 6 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11



BEYOND WORK: SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND RELATIONSHIPS AT HOME

There is another dimension to India's culture that requires employers to look beyond their immediate workplaces on mental health: the primacy of family relationships in multigenerational households.

When several generations live together, as is often the case in India, supporting mental health at an individual level or through isolated workplace interventions is unlikely to be enough. The different lived experiences, awareness levels and attitudes of family members with regards to mental health also need to be considered.

Culturally, many people can be reluctant to raise mental health issues with relatives, or to seek help – for fear of being judged or bringing shame on their household. Educating and supporting families as a whole

is therefore key to employees' wellbeing. A growing number of companies in India understand this and have started widening their mental wellbeing provision to include family members. Indeed, this has been a key focus for one of the organisations present, after they found that most calls made to their EAP helpline were related to personal relationships, even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

'We realised that doing all we can to support employees in the office, including making managers more inclusive and vulnerable, wasn't supporting the 'whole' employee. As an employer, we needed to also encourage normalisation of using mental health resources, giving relatives the same level of support as our people.'

One organisation decided to distribute fridge magnets with the EAP helpline number for all employees to put up at home. They saw a significant rise in calls from relatives of their employees as a result. They also started inviting family members to all their mental health related sessions. This included a dedicated wellness day which encouraged families to choose activities together to help them relax, and to explore new hybrid ways of working that benefited the entire household.



With a highly-globalised economy, many people working in India also often have to work away from their families. One executive shared how he, and others on his leadership team, live and work on different continents to their partners and children, facing specific challenges around connections and belonging, and requiring tailored support.

'Many of us have moved from working remotely to their family now being remote. We need to recognise that.'

See Commitments 2 and 5 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11)



NORMALISING THE CONVERSATION: TACKLING CULTURAL STIGMA TO PROMOTE OPENNESS AND AWARENESS

'Oftentimes, mental health lives beneath the water line. In most parts of the world, it's ok to speak about diabetes, blood pressure or strokes - but it's much more difficult to speak about mental health. Yet it is a unifying theme in the human condition.'

hesitant to seek help at work or change engrained working habits, but also means that mental health itself is not always understood as a concept. In response, some employers are taking specific measures to help people identify, as well as address, mental health challenges.

The cultural stigma around mental health that prevails has far-reaching implications. It not only results in many workers being

See Commitments 2, 4 and 5 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11)



A participant shared how their organisation discovered that people being preoccupied was the leading cause of on-site accidents. This led them to embed mental health awareness in regular safety briefings – with one in three 'safety moments' at the start of team meetings being dedicated to mental wellbeing. This worked to raise self-awareness and keep wellbeing at the front of people's minds. Building on this, they promoted various ways for people to seek help in the moment – from a 24-hour free helpline to an SOS button on their HR phone app.



Another company developed a tool to help people identify drivers of mental ill health associated to team dynamics. The tool uses survey questions validated by a strong evidence base to surface insights around how particular interactions can impact personal mental health – and to help the team take action on both triggers and solutions.



A number of other leaders in the session shared how issues specific to their workforce have influenced their organisation's response. One explained how separate divisions in their business are dominated by different generations needing specific types of support (a topic covered in the Singapore Roundtable [LINK to paper]. Another mentioned the necessity for them to tackle 'mental attrition' - whereby people stay with the company a long time but mentally switch off after a few years without

realising that mental health issues may affect their motivation or performance.

'We have been focusing on raising awareness of mental health issues and what we refer to as "mental attrition". Once diagnosed, people start to realise that they need help, but also that they can help colleagues who are going through similar issues. And that helps remove stigma.'

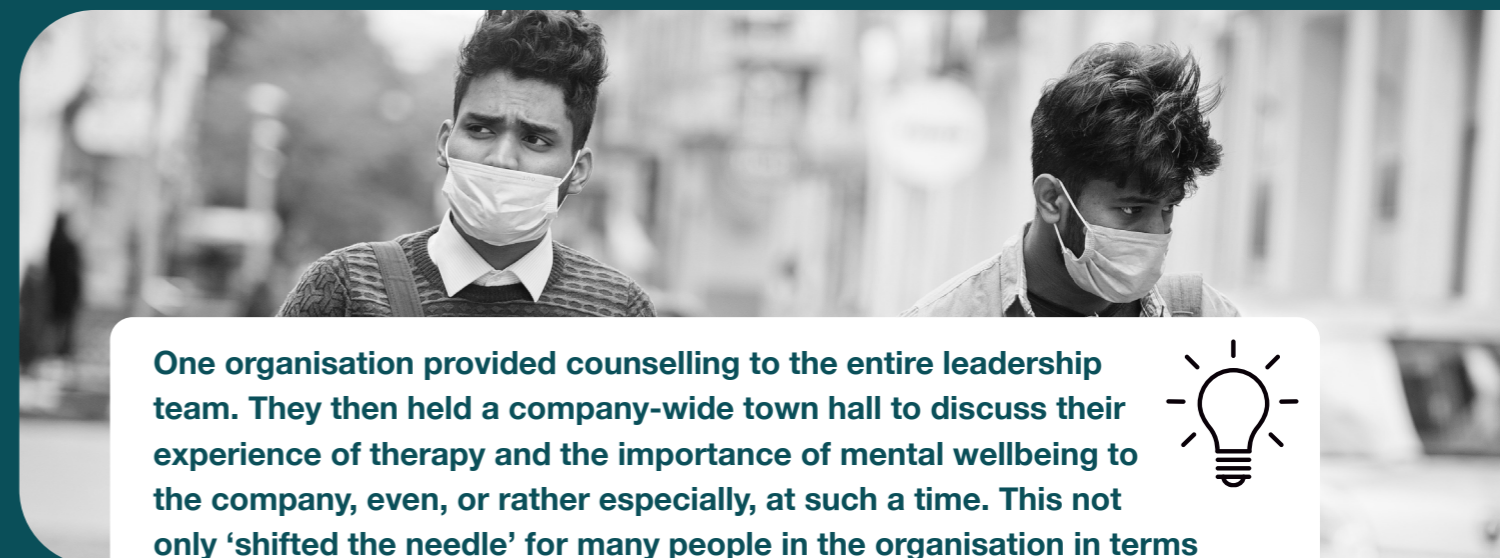


THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND MENTAL HEALTH: TURNING CHALLENGES INTO STRENGTHS

As in many other places in the world, the impact of COVID-19 on India has been immense, and the pandemic's effects on mental health was naturally a recurring theme in the discussion.

'It was almost as if it seemed "frivolous" to talk about mental health when people around us were seeking life-saving treatment or losing loved ones. We lost several people in our organisation, including a senior leader, to COVID-19 – and people were dealing with this very privately instead of asking for help.'

One organisation in particular shared its experience of supporting employee mental wellbeing during COVID, with people's initial response being to turn away from discussing mental health or using well-established support resources.



One organisation provided counselling to the entire leadership team. They then held a company-wide town hall to discuss their experience of therapy and the importance of mental wellbeing to the company, even, or rather especially, at such a time. This not only 'shifted the needle' for many people in the organisation in terms of deciding to resume the use of mental health support resources, but it showcased the power of senior leaders in de-stigmatising mental health conversations.



Participants also shared ways that the pandemic accelerated initiatives to enhance mental wellbeing – from appointing a 'Chief Happiness Officer' on the Executive team, to introducing new ways to personalise hybrid working in order to build psychological safety. Importantly, some of the executives around the table shared how they found

their own personal coping mechanisms during the pandemic – with one learning to DJ as a way to balance themselves during lockdown, for example.

See Commitments 3, 4 and 5 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11)



MENTAL HEALTH IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP: VULNERABILITY AS A STRENGTH

‘There is no better way to remove the stigma than for leaders to speak about it and share their stories.’

As it was in **Singapore**, the concept of leadership ‘accessibility’ or ‘vulnerability’ featured heavily in the discussion, cross-cutting many of the other themes.

Several participants shared their personal efforts to remove the stigma around mental health – for example by transparently putting their weekly therapy session in their calendar for their team members to see. Others explained how they now make a conscious effort to use their own experiences to support and advise others.

‘Many years ago, I went through what I realise now in hindsight must have been a period of burnout, but these issues were not discussed widely at the time. I was very lucky to be in a position to put my mental health first, and I took time away from work to focus on learning how to play the tabla. It was so mentally refreshing and I managed to resume my career feeling stronger. I now share my story to encourage people who need a break to take time out.’

With India having such a rich cultural heritage, it was noted that Indian businesses could play a key role in encouraging employees to use the arts to enhance wellbeing. The personal impact of the pandemic and other challenges on senior executives was also candidly discussed – with some admitting to being subjected to intense levels of pressure.

This moved the discussion on to the imperative of helping leaders themselves recognise the importance of looking after their own mental health to be able to lead effectively and inclusively – in and of itself an enabler of employees’ wellbeing.

‘When we’re not mentally well, we build barriers around ourselves and we stop making connections. When a leader does that, then creating an inclusive environment for their teams becomes that much more difficult.’

Organisations therefore need to help those in senior positions to identify and address their own struggles – promoting ‘help-seeking’ behaviour as a vital leadership skill.

“‘Help seeking behaviour is a skill, not a weakness. Poor mental health should not be career-limiting. If anything, overcoming our struggles has helped all of us around the table today become more resilient and purposeful.’

**Poppy Jaman, Chair of the GBC
and Global CEO of the
MindForward Alliance**

See Commitments 2 and 4 of the
GBC’s Leadership Pledge, p.11



TAKING ACTION

MAKING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY – THE LEADERSHIP PLEDGE

‘India is on a trajectory of rapid global growth. And we would love to see India, now the most populous country in the world, lead on mental health. So today we invite you to take the Leadership Pledge and be a part of the GBC movement.’ Dr Diana Han

The GBC’s Leadership Pledge – a powerful call to action to be signed by senior leaders – has been created to support organisations advance on their workplace mental journey. Participating businesses who were not yet signatories were invited to join the movement by signing the Pledge and making a public commitment to address this important societal challenge.

As a responsible business leader, I recognise that I play a critical role in raising awareness and enabling support for people within my organisation. By signing this pledge, I commit to playing my part by making mental health a visible priority in every region in which we operate.

MY ORGANISATION WILL:

- 01** Develop and deliver an action plan to support good mental health in our organisation.
- 02** Promote an open culture around mental health, working towards eliminating stigma.
- 03** Take proactive steps to develop our culture and ways of working towards creating positive mental health and reducing mental ill-health.
- 04** Empower all our people to manage and prioritise their own mental health, and to support one another.
- 05** Signpost our people to mental health tools and the support they need.
- 06** Regularly measure the impact of our efforts, being open about our progress, to influence and inspire change in our organisation and beyond.

SIGN THE PLEDGE [HERE](#)



By signing the Pledge, leaders join the GBC’s community of trailblazers, enabling them to receive support from equally committed peers.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL BUSINESS COLLABORATION FOR BETTER WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

No one business has all the answers when it comes to workplace mental health. This is why the **Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health** is building a global community of visionary business leaders who are willing to commit to prioritising workplace mental health in their own organisations, and to sharing learnings, insights and good practice to support positive action – wherever a global business is on its journey.

OUR VISION is to create a world where all workplace leaders recognise signs of struggle, have the right tools to support employees, and commit to taking tangible and evidence-based action on mental health and wellbeing in the workplace – enabling their workforce to thrive.

OUR MISSION is to advocate for – and accelerate – positive change for mental health in the workplace on a global basis.

THE GBC'S FOUNDING PARTNERS - BP, BHP, Clifford Chance, Deloitte, HSBC, Sodexo, Unilever, Visa and WPP - came together to form a group of non-competing global multinationals with a track record in workplace mental health. The Founding Partners help resource, drive and advocate for the coalition.

In July 2022, the GBC announced a new partnership with MindForward Alliance to build on the Collaboration's success and grow our community of business leaders around the world.

MINDFORWARD ALLIANCE is the leading global not-for-profit organisation transforming workplace culture into one that supports the mental health of its employees. For over a decade, its community of businesses has been leading the way in creating transformational change in workplace mental health.



With thanks to our GBC Founding Partners:



BHP



CLIFFORD
CHANCE



Deloitte.



sodexo



VISA



WPP

Special thanks to Unilever
for hosting the roundtable

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