



WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

Challenges and opportunities in Continental Europe



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 September 2023, the GBC proudly brought together senior leaders from across Continental Europe for a roundtable discussion on the opportunities and challenges around employee mental health in the region. This roundtable, which followed on from similar sessions in Singapore and India earlier in the year, was kindly hosted by GBC Founding Partner Clifford Chance.

The discussion provided a unique opportunity for leaders from diverse business sectors to have a culturally-nuanced dialogue on workplace mental health, chaired and steered by experts. The session saw participants share insights into how their businesses are making mental health a strategic priority; and offer personal reflections and observations on specific challenges and opportunities in the region.

Hosted by Mathieu Rémy, Managing Partner of the Paris office at Clifford Chance, and Poppy Jaman OBE, Chair of the GBC and of MindForward Alliance, the roundtable surfaced a number of themes around common issues and solutions, which are summarised in this document.

The discussion was held confidentially to support an open and transparent conversation, but with a collective agreement to share key themes. The names of participating individuals have therefore been omitted from this summary, and quotes are indicative and anonymised.

Organisations represented at the event included Allen & Overy, BHP, BNY Mellon, BP, Cap Gemini, Clifford Chance, Deloitte, HSBC, L'Oréal, Mars Petcare and Food, MindForward Alliance, Sodexo, Unilever, the World Economic Forum and WPP.



'Poor mental health is a long-standing and accelerating issue, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic – most notably in younger people. The GBC is a huge opportunity to rally business leaders around a collective response. If we can create a mental health movement in the workplace, we will reach millions of employees, and in turn positively impact millions more of their families and friends. With the GBC we are creating a blueprint for change.'

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



'There is increasing awareness and recognition about the importance of mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, we need to put the topic high on the agenda and make sure we talk about it as leaders, engage our people and be there for them when they need. Creating a mentally healthy workplace will make our people happier and healthier, and it will make them grow, both personally and professionally.'

Mathieu Remy, Managing Partner for Paris, Clifford Chance



'Our people are the most important resource we have. Therefore all of us as leaders have a responsibility to create an environment which allows them to thrive. Our organisations may approach things differently, adapted to the sectors we work in, but sharing experiences is a truly helpful thing.'

Steve Jacoby, Regional Managing Partner for Continental Europe, Clifford Chance

MENTAL HEALTH IN EUROPE (PRE-COVID LEVELS)

- Over 125 million people – 13% of the population- living with mental health conditions including depression, anxiety disorders and psychosis in adults, as well as developmental and behavioural disorders in children and adolescents
- Mental health conditions accounting for 15% of all years lived with disability
- 119,000 lost to suicide in 2019, with an increasing proportion of young people

Source: WHO, 2019



KEY DISCUSSION THEMES

Seventeen leaders took part in the roundtable, contributing diverse perspectives and insights with key themes emerging as summarised in this report. These contributions help paint a picture of the challenges, opportunities and solutions to promote employee mental health in France

and across Continental Europe, for the benefit of both employees and employers.

Each theme has been linked to relevant commitments in the GBC's Leadership Pledge.

See p.11 for more details on the Pledge.



MENTAL HEALTH AS A LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY

'While HR can do the heavy lifting on policies and monitoring, mental health needs to be an executive level topic. As CEO, I am making sure that we work hard as an Executive to ensure everyone in our organisation feels listened to, understood and supported.'

'In the end, it's all about listening, and creating positive environments adapted to our people's needs.'

Much of the discussion centred on the importance of senior leaders openly and honestly discussing mental health, both as a corporate and personal priority. Participants shared their commitment to bringing up the topic more regularly and positively, including leading by example through prioritising their own wellbeing.

There is a growing recognition in Continental Europe - as in other regions - that workplace mental health has become a critical business issue, with the onus on senior leaders to see this as part of their duty of care to their workforce.

'We need to lead by example. If we want to allow people to look after themselves, we must allow ourselves to do the same.'

This was a consistent thread throughout the roundtable, with participants reflecting on the notion that 'good work is good for health'. Executives agreed that while being employed enhances people's wellbeing in principle – by providing purpose, connections and challenge – it also has the potential to undermine wellbeing in a variety of ways, from coping with heavy workloads to feeling undervalued.

Some noted that the need for executive teams to lead this agenda has been accelerated by the pandemic. But also, more positively, by a growing realisation that there is no trade-off between mental health and business success, and that investing in supporting employee mental health leads to better outcomes for all stakeholders.

This places a responsibility on employers to identify the drivers of stress and anxiety and in particular to understand the impact of their organisation's culture on their employees.

See Commitments 2 and 3 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11



ENCOURAGING THE RIGHT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

Continuing the theme of leadership, a significant part of the discussion revolved around the role that managers at all levels play and the duty they have in helping their team members flourish.

to then be more receptive to the importance of looking after their own wellbeing and that of people around them, and to embrace the right leadership behaviours – including vulnerability.

The importance of creating 'psychological safety' where leaders enable people to raise issues without fear of judgment came through as a key theme, consistent with findings in previous roundtables. Participants shared their companies' efforts to equip managers with the skills and confidence to be open and authentic.

Senior leaders from the company attend most sessions to demonstrate their support for the programme and capture 'in the moment' feedback from attendees – ensuring that the company prioritises the right interventions.

One executive shared how their company has developed a holistic programme centred around 'empathetic and collective leadership' – recognising that the success of their entire business relied on their people's behaviours and mindsets. The program, rolled out to all their managers, consists of four pillars: care ('taking care of yourself and your teams'), empathy (with a focus on understanding people), feedback, and collective impact. The programme encourages people to open up on the first day of the course, allowing them

Other organisations shared that they have started including specific interview questions to gauge a leader's ability to care for their team alongside technical skills or experience – elevating empathetic leadership to the same level as core competencies.

See Commitment 4 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.11



MENTAL HEALTH AND CULTURAL STIGMA IN EUROPE

Despite enhanced top-down messaging and leadership training, some line managers in Continental European countries such as France or Spain remain more hesitant to bring up mental health with team members compared with other countries. This is linked to a traditional separation of professional and private lives, and concerns around interfering with personal issues. Some participants also mentioned a persistent stigma amongst 'blue collar' employees whereby mental health issues are perceived as weakness. This creates differences in how various categories of employees perceive, and respond to, their managers' attempts to support their wellbeing.



‘We need to reach across all microcultures within a business and explain that mental health is not just about having issues but also about enabling human flourishing and everyone’s growth, whatever their role. Here, large organisations with diverse and multi-cultural workforces can learn from each other.’

TACKLING A CULTURE OF LONG HOURS AND BEING ‘ALWAYS ON’

Early in the discussion, participants raised the importance of addressing prevalent cultures of long hours - specifically in professional services – to minimise the risk of burnout and the associated impacts on individuals at work, but also in their personal lives.

An executive shared that his eldest son had few, ‘blurry’ memories of him from his childhood, bringing home – in the most personal way - the full implications of working long hours.

‘That conversation didn’t feel good. It got me to question whether I had been a good father. Now in my career’s “second act” and as a senior leader, I want to make sure we enable people to balance their professional and personal lives. Burnout is our number one enemy, and we need to spot the signs in our professionals before it’s too late.’

This is all the more important when taking into account the shifting expectations of younger generations, who want to find purpose and balance in the work they do.

One of the executives from a professional services organisation acknowledged that avoiding long hours is not always possible. Consequently, they focus on educating their leaders to spot the signs of burnout, while proactively engaging with the younger members of their workforce on ways to build purpose into the work as a compensating factor for the demands of their work. They are also prioritising access to resources that enhance physical health in recognition of its close links to mental health – investing in providing trainers, gym and regular health check-ups.

The conversation also touched on how the hybrid ways of working that are now prevalent in many organisations can sometimes blur the lines between professional and personal time, adding pressure on people to be ‘always on’. To counter this, one participating organisation has recently launched an initiative encouraging people not to send emails over weekends.

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



TAKING AN ‘ECOSYSTEM’ VIEW TO PROMOTE HEALTHY WORK CULTURES

As was raised during the India roundtable [LINK], the discussion turned to the importance of looking beyond single workplaces to successfully shift behaviors.

One participant from a business-to-business firm shared that they were looking into formalising expectations around work hours and deadlines with clients – noting that their own goals on enabling work-life balance could only be fulfilled if their clients’ expectations also aligned.

One avenue to enable this could be to add a clause on working arrangements and mutual expectations in contracts. It was noted that having formal and binding agreements would not only benefit current employees, but would also help in attracting new talent, at a time when younger generations readily share their experiences of work cultures in online forums.

‘Bringing mental health considerations into commercial arrangements is not easy, but it is the only way forward because this high-pressure culture is no longer acceptable with younger generations. Young people now share their experience around workloads and their experiences of workplace cultures on social media and dedicated apps. This includes “rating” clients that different firms work with, making it a key factor in choosing whether to apply.’

The executive pointed out that this increased transparency could result in clients becoming more receptive to formalising expectations. But another participant raised the question of which balance to strike between offering people the tools and internal environments to look after their wellbeing, and stepping in in this way to try and re-shape system-level cultures at a time where many organisations themselves face increasing pressures and competition.

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



MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AS A TALENT DIFFERENTIATOR

‘Research shows that over three quarters of Gen Z and millennial employees say support is an important factor in choosing an employer. But only half believe employers take this seriously. And only 30% feel able to share issues with their managers’.¹

Younger generations are placing increased emphasis on mental health and expect their employers to support their wellbeing. This is not lost on employers, and many are taking action to understand and meet those expectations.

This is becoming a major factor in talent attraction, with one executive explaining that some forums on social media enable prospective joiners to comment on or rate specific elements of a company’s work culture, including work-life balance and mental health support – which could discourage people from even applying.

Participants shared some of the steps they are taking to make sure that younger workers feel supported in their quest for balance. One organisation in particular is following a motto of ‘transparency, proximity and enthusiasm’ to help bridge differences in mindsets and attitudes between workplace generations. Initiatives range from shortening meetings to 45 minutes to creating a workplace ‘buddy system’ between younger and older generations. They are also running courses for more senior employees on psychological safety and on how

to use social media to communicate with their teams. Another company has recently rolled out inter-generational mentoring.

The pandemic has also shone a light on mental health care and provision as a talent retention issue. One organisation shared that while their workforce grew from 50,000 to 55,000 through the pandemic, they had to recruit about 30,000 people over the period – pointing to a significant rise in turnover as people revisited their priorities around balance and purpose and shifted their attitudes to work.

‘Something drastically changed in people’s minds during the pandemic, including the expectations of what an employer should do for them around wellbeing and purpose. We’ve focused on mental health for a long time, but we have had to refine our support provision quite extensively at global level – and we are still learning.’

Beyond its direct mental health support, the company has introduced more flexible ways of working for all its employees - including the possibility to work anywhere in the world where the company operates for up to two weeks a year, and a two-week paid care leave per year. Measures such as these help build a culture of trust and care, promoting both people’s wellbeing and overall retention.

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

¹ <https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/issues/work/content/genzmillennialsurvey.html>

ONGOING EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK AS KEY ENABLERS OF GOOD WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

See Commitments 2 and 6 of the GBC’s Leadership Pledge, p.11



As businesses implement a broader range of initiatives to support workplace mental health, there needs to be a parallel step-up in efforts to measure their impact. Roundtable participants shared a variety of approaches – with key performance indicators (KPIs) ranging from regular engagement surveys with increasingly granular questions on wellbeing, to data from anonymous support lines or levels of absenteeism and turnover.

Some organisations are using specific KPIs – with one now taking steps to monitor psychological safety by measuring, for example, the effects of specific training sessions and reporting on it annually. They shared that findings from this annual evaluation have reinforced the importance of leadership behaviours in enabling people to feel safe in disclosing issues.

Another company has started running a short daily survey asking all their employees how they feel – with the results shared with their managers in order to resolve issues quickly. Managers receive the full support of the company, which has recently created a dedicated wellbeing function working closely with DE&I and employee engagement.

The point was made that, as more and more global businesses invest in monitoring both the state of mental health in their workforce and the effectiveness of their initiatives, moving towards common, sector-agnostic KPIs and language could be a catalyst for progress.

‘If we could align on how to explain and measure mental health in a work environment, it would help remove stigma and some of the challenges we currently face, and show the positive connections with business outcomes.’

The conversation also turned to the importance of promoting ‘feedback cultures’ to create caring working environments. Upwards feedback can both encourage individual managers to embrace the right leadership behaviours, and help leadership teams gauge progress towards creating supportive cultures.

Going one step further still, one executive argued the benefits of managers and leaders being rated on their leadership and supportive skills not just by their teams, but by other departments as well – in effect encouraging people to ‘prospect’ for feedback as a healthy and helpful work habit to promote trust and openness.



‘There is so much for us to learn still on mental health but what stood up for me today is the commitments we are all making to prioritise this issue. I made so many notes today of ideas that I will take back to our Executive team.’

Following the roundtable, GBC Founding Partners Clifford Chance and Sodexo shared why they are committed to prioritising positive workplace mental health and why commitment from leadership is crucial.



Bruno Vaquette, CEO, Sodexo France



Charles Alberts, Global Head of Wellbeing and People Experience, Clifford Chance

MAKING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY – THE LEADERSHIP PLEDGE

As the Chairs closed the session, each participant shared their key ‘take-away’ from the roundtable, and made a personal commitment to continue making mental health a strategic priority.

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 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



**C L I F F O R D
C H A N C E**

Special thanks to Clifford
Chance for hosting the
roundtable



Deloitte.



sodexo



VISA



WPP

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