WORKPLACE WELL-BEING: MENTAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY OF NON-UNIONISED AND UNIONISED EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

Imagine working in a highly productive environment in which you feel safe, respected and valued; the work is challenging; the demands of the job are reasonable; you have work-life balance; and your employer supports your involvement in your work and interpersonal growth and development. This is what is known as a mentally healthy workplace, (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2012).

Twenty-three percent of workers in Europe are reported to have low levels of well-being (Ardito et al., 2012). Organisations, therefore, need to examine the operating environment so that they can begin to improve the psychological health of their employees (Mowbray, 2014). Failure to assess and resolve psychological health and safety risks in the workplace can create significant employee issues in an environment that requires "psychological competencies such as judgement, knowledge, interpersonal cooperation and emotional self-regulation. These psychological tools and skills flourish only in work environments that nurture and support their development and use, and minimize psychosocial factors in the work environment that can serve to undermine them" (Gilbert & Samra, 2010: para 2). While work can play a vital role in a person's quality of life as it provides them with a source of income and a platform for broader social advancement, it can also impact on a person's health as a result of risk factors present in the workplace which may cause injury, work-related illness or could potentially result in long-term health implications (Ardito et al., 2012). Consequently, mental and psychological health problems in the workplace can have a significant effect on both the employee and the organisation, in turn impacting productivity and competitiveness.

This research therefore seeks to explore the mental and psychological health and safety of employees within a multi-national pharmaceutical company based in the Republic of Ireland so as to address some of these pertinent issues. The participating company is listed in the top one hundred companies on the 2015 Fortune 500 list (Time Inc., 2015).

A quantitative case study was conducted in this study to gain a wider understanding of the mental and psychological health and safety of non-unionised verses unionised employees, specifically within this multi-national pharmaceutical company. One hundred and sixty-seven employees and seven senior managers were surveyed to explore their perspectives of psychological health and safety risks in the workplace across thirteen different psychosocial factors which are known to have either positive or negative effects on the psychological health and well-being of an employee.

To conduct this study, the research utilized online resources provided by Guarding Minds @ Work, an initiative which has been developed by the Canadian based Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction (CARMHA). By using two online survey methods, this study tested a hypothesis which assumed that there would be more psychological health and safety risks among unionised employees, while also investigating employee's experience of discrimination, bullying or harassment, and unfair treatment in the workplace. In order to test this theory, the following alternative hypothesis (H₁) was tested:

'If a union exists within a workplace, then there will be a difference between the combined psychological health and safety concerns for non-unionised and unionised employees which will indicate that there is a greater risk to the psychological health and safety of unionised employees'.

Differences in the perspectives of all employees and senior managers were also compared with respect to the psychological health and safety of employees in the workplace. Statistical analyses in the form of t-tests were applied to the data obtained from ninety-seven non-unionised and sixty-three unionised employees to examine the level of psychological health and safety risks present within these groups.

The key findings from this study reveal that the psychological health and safety of unionised employees is more at risk in this workplace; in fact, unionised employees reported greater concerns across eleven out of the thirteen psychosocial factors. Furthermore, this research found that more unionised employees report previous experience of bullying or harassment in the workplace. It is also evident from this study that senior managers are significantly underestimating the psychological health and safety risks which are impacting employee's psychological health and safety in the workplace.

Considering that physically and psychologically healthy engaged employees maximise business efficiency and profitability, enabling organisations to achieve its goals and objectives, this study is pertinent and relevant to businesses who seek to protect the psychological health and safety of employees. As a result of dynamic workplaces, employees are now expected to be more flexible and resilient to changing organisational priorities as companies attempt to compete in challenging environments. Such challenges place a significant amount of pressure on employees which can inherently increase the risks to their physical and psychological health, safety, and well-being. Therefore, the main findings and recommendations for future practice and future research resulting from this study provide valuable insights not only for the participating multi-national company, but also for policy makers, employers, management, human resource departments, trade union representatives and professional or organisational development institutions.

Keywords: Mental Health, Work Place, Safety, Guarding Minds at Work, Occupational Health, Psychosocial Risk, Trade Unions, Workplace Well-being.

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