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## INVEST IN MENTAL HEALTH, GAIN RETURNS IN PERFORMANCE!

**HR managers also have to look at innovative ways to retain talent by focussing on uplifting employees' overall well-being and investing in providing meaningful workplace support.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes in the domain of human resources in India. The pandemic has changed how HR departments across India Inc. operates. One of these changes has been that now an essential responsibility of the modern HR manager in India includes addressing the mental health of employees. During the pandemic, there was an increased importance given to mental health of employees by companies in India. As a result of this, several organisations in India announced some short-term measures for mental health of employees but most of these were only temporary measures.

Mental health issues have always affected employees but the topic has still largely remained unaddressed in the country. Most organisations in India still do not have HR policies that include mental health. Among India's 1.1 million active registered companies, only 1,000 are estimated to have a structured employee assistance programme (EAP) for mental health, according to a report from 2019 by Optum Health International, a leading EAP service provider belonging to the Minnesota (US)-based UnitedHealth Group.

In 2022, as organisations return to work from office, based on learnings from the pandemic, it would be imperative for HR managers to create holistic policies and offer education that address mental health of employees. In addition to this, most importantly, HR managers will also have to look at innovative ways to retain talent by focussing on uplifting employees' overall well-being and investing in providing meaningful support to ensure that they stay resilient and confident in the face of new challenges and opportunities while keeping mentally fit. Further, this is an essential responsibility not just for the HR manager but especially for the leadership of the organisation. This will require a cultural change in organisations and the successful implementation of these programs to reimagine employees' mental health will require that acceptance from the leadership.

Mental health issues affect not only employees but also has economic costs for organisations. According to World Health Organisation (WHO), since 2016, the global economy is adversely affected by \$1 trillion annually because of the mental health of employees. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also noted that for every \$1 investment in treating common mental health issues, there is a \$4 return. Historically in India, company leaders have worked with HR departments to effectively communicate with employees about topics such as performance and training but not to invest on mental health programs even though they know its benefits. For example, most companies in India know that having an employee assistance programme is a beneficial investment. Most MNCs in India have employee assistance programmes but only some Indian companies have it.

An EAP generally includes both preventive — workshops and awareness programmes on mental health — and counselling services — whether telephonic, face-to-face or online interaction — for employees and their family members. But based on the learnings from the pandemic, now it has become very important for various types of organisations to implement EAP for employees in India. To implement this successfully, an effective EAP should be a proactive, preventive approach where details of the EAP are shared with all employees and there are EAPs designed for specific situations so that the situation can be corrected before it becomes adverse.

While designing a mental health programme, employers will have to consider requirements of organisation, employees, nature of work, Industry and other such details as there is no one suitable mental health programme for all organisations. But there are some measures that all organisations irrespective of their size, nature of work or Industry can consider adopting this year to address the mental health of their employees.

One of these measures can be training employees of the organisation to provide basic support to each other before directing them towards professional help. In the past two years, companies have started employee assistance programmes (EAPs) to provide mental health support such as therapy and counselling but it's not always that an employee understands what they are going through or has the self-awareness to reach out for help. That's where these "mental health first-responders" come in—they've been trained to spot the signs of emotional distress, mental exhaustion, anxiety or grief that a colleague is going through and encourage them towards the right avenues for help. These employees will be certified mental health first aiders. It is important that employees who attend these sessions understand that they are not counselors and convey this to people who approach them for guidance. These mental health first aiders will help in increasing awareness and create an open environment in organisations for people to interact and engage.

Secondly, to address mental health of employees and to enable better communication, organisations should work towards creating transparent employee practices. This could be in the form of creating more transparent job descriptions which will result in proper management of tasks and responsibilities. Also adopting flexible work policies by giving expanded options and control to employees' over how they work, with the aim to boost their morale, engagement and retention.

Thirdly, it is important to increase awareness of mental health in organisations across India. A lot of people in India still do not know what mental health is. From time to time, HR managers should look at organising discussions, training programs, imparting sessions on mental health issues and spread awareness through various modes including in meetings with employees and management to increase understanding about mental health and help in reducing apprehensions or nervousness.

Employees are the most important resource of an organisation. In the new decade, organisations require HR managers who have an employee first approach. This approach includes creating a healthy work culture and enhancing overall well-being that gives importance to mental health. Mental health of employees cannot be addressed by any one initiative; it requires a series of initiatives which need to be embraced in the organization's culture and promoted as a practice. If companies adopt a mindset of investing in the mental health of employees and not consider it as an additional responsibility, it will contribute significantly in maintaining a healthy environment, reducing attrition and improving the performance of the organisation.

