



American Workers' Mental Health and Its Implications in Their Careers

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Abstract

The American workforce, like virtually every segment of the population, was disrupted by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, creating many mental health challenges for both workers and their employers. Per the Career Optimism Index (2022) published by the University of Phoenix Career Institute, mental health support is a growing need for American workers more than two years into the pandemic. Workers in nearly every one of the 20 Designated Metropolitan Areas (DMAs) surveyed have been increasingly dependent on mental health resources over the previous year. Employers report providing resources for mental health issues related to careers at a higher rate than employees report awareness and utilization of those resources. Workers may not see their employers as sources of mental health support, as less than half have taken advantage of the resources provided by their employers. Yet, they remain optimistic about their careers.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020 caused all but essential workers to adapt to working from home, thus disrupting the American workforce. Lingering effects continue to impact the mental health of workers. Nearly half of Americans have reported that they need support managing their mental health/wellness, and there is a disconnect between what employers report about mental health resources they make available and the resources employees report they are aware of and utilize. The purpose of this paper is to identify mental health needs and the resources available through employers as reported in the Career Optimism Index (2022).

The Career Optimism Index is based on a survey conducted for the University of Phoenix Career Institute. The survey was commissioned to measure and track individuals' sense of career and how optimistic they are about their careers on a scale of 0-100 in terms of five pillars (Career Optimism Index, 2022). The areas explored were a) job security: employability and job retention; b) financial security: satisfaction with pay, economic concerns, and debt; c) skill development: confidence in critical skills opportunities for development; d) mental health: emotional, psychological, and physical well-being as it is related to careers, and e) career trajectory: beliefs about the future of their careers.

This paper focuses on the mental health aspect of the study, including what employees reported about their mental health, the support they need, and whether they believed that support was available from their employers. The employer's perspective is also included. Some 90 percent of employers reported employee retention as a top priority, although workers are leaving at a higher rate than before the pandemic (Career Optimism Index, 2022; PEW Institute, 2021). While those leaving their jobs, as reported in a Pew Research Institute study, cite low pay and lack of advancement opportunities for leaving, those who left and were hired elsewhere reported

work-life balance, which can be critical to good mental health, as a key factor that would cause them to stay on the new job.

Changing Work Environment Introduced New Work-related Stressors

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, and most workers found themselves working from home and dealing with all the issues and disruptions that came with that, adjusting to a changing work environment was no longer just the option that a few companies had been toying with for several years; now it was a necessity (Butler, 2022). Performing work without the appropriate technology, physical resources, and in-person support of colleagues and managers was daunting. For many workers, assisting children with their online schooling and multiple workers in the household often created high levels of stress in the home that now functioned as the school and worksites, as well. The stress was real and for some overbearing (Downey & Ash-Lee, 2021).

In addition to those working from home, front-line workers such as healthcare workers, first responders, and other essential employees also experienced work-related stress, often fearing they would contract the virus and carry it home to their families. Xing (2021) reported a high prevalence of anxiety and depression among frontline healthcare workers since the COVID-19 outbreak and suggested more psychological care should be given. No segment of workers was spared additional stress as it related to their career during and after Covid.

As the pandemic waned, new policies and procedures around restarting work, such as employee screenings (e.g., taking temperatures, wearing masks, and social distancing rules), contributed to ongoing stress even when workers were able to return to work. At a virtual conference hosted by an environmental, health, and safety company (EHS), surveys of attendees

found that 60 percent of their workers were experiencing more stress and muscular discomfort or pain since COVID-19 struck.

Workers Sought Mental Health Resources to Manage Stress

According to the Career Optimism Index (2022) regarding stress-related mental health issues as they pertain to careers, employees reported they had looked for mental health resources to help manage work-related stress across 20 designated metropolitan areas (DMAs) surveyed. Two years into the pandemic fraught with Covid fatigue, employees in nearly every DMA have been increasingly dependent on mental health resources over the previous year. Workers in nearly every DMA are more likely than the previous year to have sought out resources to manage work-related stress.

In the 2022 report, more than half of the employees stated they have looked for mental health support with younger generations seeking support for work-related stress at a higher rate than older employees. In all reported categories the need was prevalent, ranging from 48 percent to 59 percent. Yet, the survey indicated that far fewer employees actually took advantage of any mental health programs (Career Optimism Index, 2022).

Employer-offered Mental Health Resources High but Utilization Low

Employers at a high rate of more than 80 percent reported they currently offered or were going to offer mental health resources to their employees. A cause for concern is that only slightly more than 60 percent of their employees reported resources were offered or were going to be offered by their current employer. While the survey did not indicate a reason for the disconnect of nearly 20 percentage points, the literature suggests that the loss of normal communication channels that were in place for face-to-face work environments might be one

cause. Employees might not go to the company website if one exists or might not think to email human resources to ask about services.

Lack of understanding that the company EAP programs would address Covid-related stress may be another cause. Harris and Fennell (1988) reported that getting employees to seek help from employee assistance programs (EAPs) has long been a major concern of both practitioners and employers. Perhaps workers don't take advantage of EAP or other types of support programs because they are concerned about a possible breach of confidentiality or that taking advantage of an EAP-type program might be somehow used against them in the workplace. Other factors, such as lack of familiarity with the source of help and perceptions of its effectiveness may also play a role.

Other employees might think the program would not be a fit for their Covid-related stress. For example, whether the employee worked from home or on the job site, dealing with homeschooling of young students added a new, never-before-experienced source of stress for many employees (Downey & Ash-Lee, 2021). An employee who is aware that EAP could be used for workplace or physical health issues might not realize that it could also be used for this new stressor.

Disconnected Employees Remain Optimistic but Need More Support

Regardless of the reason, the disconnect occurs with nearly 85 percent of employers surveyed for the Career Optimism Index study reporting resources are available for their employees, but only 50 percent of employees reported using these resources for work-related stress. Despite these issues, employees are still full of hope and are optimistic about the future of their careers, even though they may need extra support and compassion as a positive intervention to get where they want to be career wise (Kalwani, 2021). Despite the disconnect in employers'

and employees' perceptions of services offered, both groups overwhelmingly reported interest in and need for continuing mental health resources at a greater rate than before the Covid-19 pandemic. American workers demonstrate resilience and report hope and optimism for their careers whether with the existing employer or elsewhere.

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