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Service With(out) a Smile?

The Mental Health of Hospitality Workers

RSPH
ROYAL SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH
VISION, VOICE AND PRACTICE

Key Points

- Hospitality is the third biggest employment sector in the UK

- The working culture of the hospitality sector is currently stressful and demanding; three quarters (74%) have reported being verbally abused by a customer

- As a result, many employees report poor mental health and wellbeing, with one in five (20%) reporting severe mental health problems they believe to be a direct result of their job

- Our survey revealed that almost two thirds (62%) of workers do not think the sector looks after its employees

- The mental wellbeing support available for workers is inconsistent, and where it is available there is limited awareness amongst employees

Suggested Recommendations

- Employers to put in place systems and processes that protect mental health and wellbeing, including:
  - Sick leave
  - Regular one-to-ones between managers and employees
  - Mental health first aiders
  - Training, such as the RSPH Level 2 Award in Understanding Mental Wellbeing

- Improved enforcement of employment rights

- Further research into what hospitality can learn from best practice in workplace wellbeing within other sectors

Background

As of October 2018, the wider hospitality sector was the third biggest employer in the UK, with six million people in the workforce, and generated £72 billion directly to the UK economy.[i] Employment in restaurants makes up the largest part of the sector, followed by catering, accommodation, cultural and recreational activities, and event management.[ii]

With a large number of people working in hospitality, it is important that employers are able and encouraged to look after the health and wellbeing of their staff. The Health and Safety Executive estimated that between 2015/16 and 2017/18 an average of 529,000 workers suffered a new case of ill health which they believe to be caused or made worse by their work.[iii] This is estimated to cost the economy £9.7 billion.[iv]

While public conversation around mental health has become widespread over recent years, talk has not necessarily led to effective action in all parts of society. A disproportionate number of hospitality workers suffer with mental health problems; a recent survey revealed that 81% of UK chefs have experienced poor mental health during their careers.[v] A survey by The Caterer in 2018 found that 59% of hospitality workers had a current mental health problem.[vi] Our new research, along with existing evidence, indicates that there is a lack of awareness amongst employees about any support that is available to them, and that for many there is no support on offer at all.

Stress is a common problem in hospitality. A survey conducted by CV Library in 2015 found that 45% of employees reported taking time off work due to stress, with 33% reporting that their stress was due to poor management.[vii] This can have many widespread implications: work-family conflicts,[vii] a high staff turnover rate,[ix] insomnia and sleep problems,[x] and anxiety and depression[xi] are some of the most common issues. Furthermore, having to constantly be friendly to customers has recently been linked to excessive alcohol intake.[xii] Worryingly, only 7% of hospitality workers said that they would feel comfortable talking to their employer about their mental health.[xiii]

What is the sector doing to address these issues?

A number of hospitality employers and groups have taken steps to counteract these trends and support employee mental health and wellbeing.

- Hospitality Action introduced an Employee Assistance Programme in 2014, designed specifically to provide specialist, independent and confidential advice, support and assistance.[xiv] Employers can sign up if they wish, but it is a voluntary scheme.

- Pizza Hut partnered with Mental Health UK in 2016, and alongside raising money for the charity, they launched an internal wellness programme, offering practical and emotional support to staff.[xv]

- The Benevolent, the drinks industry charity, launched their campaign #NotAlone in January 2018. #NotAlone aims to encourage free speech about mental health issues within the workplace, creating a stigma-free environment.[xvi]

- Healthy Hospo, a not-for-profit community interest company, run Wellness Workshops on mental and physical health; they joined with Unilever to provide mental health training as part of the FairKitchens project; and they have a partnership with Love Drinks to run health and wellness programmes for UK bartenders and managers.[xvii]

- In 2018 UK Hospitality and Unite the Union published guidance on fair distribution of tips.[xviii]

- Well Grounded Jobs, a coffee training academy, mentor trainees to look after their own mental health, alongside providing technical training.[xix]

- Me, Myself in Mind run classes on stress reduction techniques, mindfulness and mental health awareness, specifically for the hospitality industry.[xx]

- The mental health charity Mind has worked in partnership with The Royal Foundation to create a Mental Health at Work gateway; this is a portal for employers and employees from any industry to access for advice, resources and training.[xxi]

- The social campaign group Time to Change works to improve attitudes to mental health. Employers can sign up to the Employer Pledge; this is a commitment to change how employers and employees think and act about mental health in the workplace, and to make sure that employees who are facing these problems feel supported.[xxii]

Internationally, the situation is not dissimilar to the UK. Industry organisations promote mental health support, such as Not 9 to 5 in Canada,[xxiii] and Chefs with Issues in the US.[xxiv] However, as with the UK bodies, programmes are voluntary and sporadic across the industry.

What did we find from our research?

- Three quarters (74%) have experienced verbal abuse from a customer
- Eighty-four percent reported increased stress as a direct result of their job
- One in five (20%) have a severe mental health problem that they believe is related to work

While these initiatives are very welcome steps, provision of mental wellbeing support is still patchy and inconsistent across the wider sector, and the prevalence of mental health problems in the workforce remains concerning. We conducted an online questionnaire of 743 hospitality workers using SurveyMonkey from March 18th to May 6th.[1] The sector the largest number of respondents worked in was catering (72%); 35% of those who worked in catering worked in a restaurant, 30% worked in a pub and 15% worked in a café. Nearly three quarters (74%) had worked in hospitality for more than three years, and almost all (99%) were based in the UK.

Although nearly half (45%) rated their experience of working in hospitality as mostly positive, the vast majority (81%) had been negatively affected by something that happened at work. In fact, over half (55%) had experienced a negative event at work within the past month.

The ten most common examples of mistreatment at work were:

- Verbal abuse from a customer (74%)
- Insufficient breaks (62%)
- Inadequate management (61%)
- Difficult working relationships (57%)
- Verbal abuse from a manager (43%)
- Unfair distribution of tips (43%)
- No overtime payment or time off in lieu (42%)
- Verbal abuse from a co-worker (41%)
- Substandard working conditions (38%)
- Not being allowed to take leave (33%)

Only 4% of respondents reported not having experienced any mistreatment at work.

[1.] The limitations of the survey should be acknowledged – the sample is not representative due to self-selection bias, and the sample size is a limiting factor.

The consequences of mistreatment at work affect mental health, physical health, and wider aspects of life.

The ten most common repercussions experienced by hospitality workers, that they believe are directly related to their job, were:

- Increased stress (84%)
- Less time for other activities (73%)
- Disrupted sleep (71%)
- Anxiety (69%)
- Fatigue (68%)

- Low mood or tearfulness (65%)
- Increased irritability or anger (58%)
- Depression (50%)
- Ate less (48%)
- Diminished friend or family relationships (46%)

Worryingly, nearly one quarter (24%) of respondents required medical or psychological help, and one fifth (20%) reported having a severe mental health problem. Only 3% of respondents reported not having experienced effects on their health and wellbeing due to their job.

There are clearly problems in the workplace that impact employees in their personal lives, and 41% of respondents said they did not feel they had been supported through negative experiences at work by their employer. In fact, 33% of respondents stated no support was provided, and one quarter (25%) said they did not know what support is available.

Only 16% reported having flexible working hours, 14% had regular one-to-ones with a line manager, and 13% had a whistle blowing policy. Less than 10% had training to support health and wellbeing, mentoring or mental health first aiders.

Given the lack of broader mental wellbeing support from employers, it is not surprising that as many as 28% reported seeking medical assistance, and 24% counselling or talking therapies, as a direct result of work related issues. Indeed, 37% saw their GP, and 16% saw a professional counsellor. Of those who sought professional help, 59% received medication as a result.

These issues extend into wider life. Almost three in five (58%) reported that the effects of work on their mental health had a knock-on effect on their lifestyle, such as diet, smoking and alcohol consumption. This was closely followed by effects on social life (57%), physical health (50%), general relationships (46%), and finances (36%).

Despite these results, just over half (52%) said they would continue to work in the sector, but almost as many (45%) would not recommend working in hospitality. In total, 62% of respondents said that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the sector takes care of its employees.

The view from the workforce: case studies

Following the survey, a number of respondents spoke to us in more detail about their experience, and gave their insight into what the sector could do to improve the current situation.

Legislation is a huge burden on the industry, which drives most of the work place pressures. Most stressful situations are driven by time, costs and employing the right people, plus maintaining a smile against all the odds. People in the sector have a complex range of issues to deal with often driven by overzealous managers pushing for higher service standards.

This leaves individuals with anxiety and misconceptions of failing self-worth; that is not to say managers are immune to stress too. With very long hours, split shifts and poor wages staff often become weary; this can lead to poor general health. All this results in an industry overburdened with a high turnover of staff of all grades who then often leave the industry entirely.

My thoughts: where staff are working very long hours, divide these hours and encourage part-time roles. Then there's training, which can help resolve most issues, target employees to become mentors, development programmes that can help develop staff towards a better-managed culture.

Lastly there is a need for a dedicated union that represents hospitality employees to help with the poor working conditions of many employees, much like UNISON for the medical profession.

Tony Catanzaro: *Food Safety Advisor and Food New Product Development*

Some workers in hospitality are truly driven by the desire to provide great customer service. These people work tirelessly towards this end. The nature of this business is a real dichotomy. On the surface it is about the service of the guest and the craft of producing this service, but behind this facade is the reality that it is a business. As a business, it has obligations to stakeholders to show a profit, in good times and bad. And when the revenues are not pouring in, the business has obligations to keep overhead as low as possible.

Thirty years ago hotels were great places for chefs to practice their culinary craft. In a hotel one could expect slightly below average wages, but in turn what you received were great benefits; steady hours, the best equipment and plenty of colleagues to work with.

Since this time we have seen several global economic crises. The response of the industry was to preserve the profit (an admirable business attribute) but at the expense of the peace of mind of the workers. Many jobs were lost. In my experience with a large multinational company, these job losses came through attrition and not through layoffs.

After some recovery in the economy, revenues returned, but jobs did not. As businesses were able to run leaner, they were now expected to continue to do so. The staff which used to be the pride of the establishment were treated as an amenity, a necessary evil. Often working long, unsociable hours and often without commensurate overtime pay. These dedicated people, with a true desire to serve, feel like they are failing.

Currently we are seeing several thousand hospitality workers leave the industry each year in the UK. Often because they have been pushed beyond reasonable limits, family life suffers, health suffers…

Outside the business world there are several charitable organisations that have recognised this and offer emotional assistance to people in the hospitality industry. I have witnessed some of this recovery and am very grateful.

Anon: *A chef with 20 years of experience in the industry, who wished to remain anonymous*

Suggested recommendations

● Employers to put in place systems and processes that protect mental health and wellbeing

Many suggestions that emerged from the hospitality workers who completed the survey were simple, practical solutions that employers can introduce to improve the working environment. Critically, legislation should make any systems and processes implemented compulsory for the whole sector. These systems and processes must be enforced to be effective.

Time management: Shifts could be shorter with proper breaks factored in to create stability and more of a routine. Rotas should be shared fairly between staff, and allow for time off, including sick and holiday leave. If an employee works extra hours, they should be given time off in lieu. Hiring more staff could help achieve this, and would make working conditions safer. Almost half (41%) of suggestions from our survey were about improving time management.

Employee-manager relationships: Regular one-to-ones and appraisals between employees and managers should be standard. This would help create space for discussion about individual needs, and mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. Employees should also be able to give anonymous feedback and report incidents, which could be supported by having a whistle blowing policy. Over two thirds (71%) of comments mentioned the importance of good employee-manager relationships.

Managers: Line manager involvement in workplace wellbeing strategies is emphasised both in the Workplace Wellbeing Charter,[xxv] and Dame Carol Black's Review of the health of Britain's working age population.[xxvi] It is also a key component of NICE guidelines on mental wellbeing at work.[xxvii] There should be training for managers on mental health, giving support, how to communicate effectively, and conflict resolution. Programmes such as Connect 5,[2] which trains front line

health and care staff to help people improve their mental wellbeing, could be adapted for the hospitality setting. Managers should also be aware of where to signpost employees to for help, and should make their employees aware of this too. Nearly one fifth (19%) of survey suggestions were about the qualities of a good manager.

Support: Employee Assistance Programmes should be available to all. This could include mental health first aiders, wellbeing mentors, drug and alcohol support, and training and education. For instance, the RSPH qualification Level 2 Understanding Mental Wellbeing provides training on the principles of mental wellbeing. Statements on opportunities for support appeared in 40% of suggestions.

Working environment: Zero tolerance of abuse towards staff should be standard. The working environment should aim to be fun and friendly, and empower individuals to look after their physical and mental health. Employees should be treated with respect and have opportunities to bond at team building days and during company-wide staff meetings. Almost one quarter (23%) of comments were related to ways the working environment could be made better.

HR: HR policies should be part of every workplace no matter the size. Only 2% of suggestions mentioned workplace policies, which suggests there is less awareness of HR practices. These should be introduced into every organisation and employees made aware of them.

[2] RSPH, 2017. Available at: https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/videos/itn-films/itn-film-2017-the-public-s-health-across-the-life-course/rsph-in-2017/connect-5.html

● Improved enforcement of employment rights

To follow the implementation of formalised systems and processes to protect mental health and wellbeing, these employment rights need to be enforced. Currently, there are multiple bodies responsible for enforcing employment rights.

The Taylor Review recommended simpler and better funded enforcement of employment rights.[xxviii] The government responded with the Good Work plan, published last year.[xxix] A simple approach to this would be to follow what Citizens Advice have been advocating, which is for the establishment of one body responsible for enforcement with sufficient funds, referred to as a Fair Work Authority.

A more ambitious, longer-term approach would be to make it mandatory for employers to recognise and bargain with unions, which the Trades Union Congress have called for in response to the government consultation on enforcement of rights recommendations.[xxxi]

From this it may emerge that the hospitality sector stands to benefit from a dedicated union for hospitality workers.

Although the hospitality sector is the third biggest employer in the UK, there is no hospitality union. Employees can join Unite the Union, but they deal with issues facing the wider workforce, rather than those specific to hospitality. Similarly, UK Hospitality is an organisation that represents the interests of hospitality workers in the UK,[xxxii] and they have campaigned across a range of issues that face different professions within the sector.

Many of the issues raised in the survey would be appropriate to take to a union, and a union could help implement and enforce the systems and processes to protect mental health and wellbeing. But this should be researched further and explored as a possibility, following enforcement of employment rights as an initial step.

● Further research into what hospitality can learn from best practice in workplace wellbeing within other sectors

The hospitality industry can learn from other sectors that have incorporated mental health and wellbeing practices as a standard in the workplace. The legal profession is known to have many similar problems to the hospitality sector; long hours, high workload, stress and demanding situations.

The Legal Professionals Wellbeing Taskforce was launched in May 2016, with the aim to identify areas for collaboration, sharing best practice, how to improve the perception of mental health, and addressing stigma as a barrier to accessing support.[xxxiii] More broadly, the City Mental Health Alliance has members from finance and law, and strives to open up the conversation about mental health as an essential way to maximise business performance.[xxxiv] Initiatives such as these should be implemented across the hospitality sector.

Richard Martin was a lawyer in the city before experiencing mental health problems. He now heads up the mental health work at Byrne Dean, who provide workplace training. He said:

Mental health is central to everything in our lives – to how we feel about ourselves, how we relate and give to our friends and family, and also to the energy and enthusiasm we are able to bring to our work. There has been so much done, and real progress made, in recent years across many sectors in raising awareness of the subject, breaking the stigma that surrounds mental health and illness and working to create healthier working practices. It is fantastic that the hospitality sector is getting involved and can learn so much from the good work done elsewhere, and also contribute its own ideas and unique insight to this vital movement.

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