Mental Health and Employment

Thematic evaluation summary

What is this evaluation summary about?

This summary presents the main findings of a thematic evaluation on mental health and employment based on data collected from four workplace projects being delivered as part of the Altogether Better programme.

The aim of this thematic evaluation was to better understand how Altogether Better projects are promoting mental health in workplace settings and to provide robust evidence to inform the development of practice. Implications for policy and practice are also highlighted.

The summary has been written for anyone involved in commissioning, planning, delivering and evaluating workplace mental health projects. A full evaluation report and an evidence review on mental health and employment have also been produced.[1]

Key messages

- The workplace can be a good setting to promote mental health and well-being. Reported indicators of improved mental well-being included; increased confidence and self esteem, ability to identify and manage stress, improved skills and knowledge and ability to engage with and support others with mental health issues.

- For the most sustainable impact, project activities need to be responsive to community and workplace environments.

- A key evolving role is the 'business champion' taking on an 'activator' role to foster participation, raise awareness, enable changes to work procedures and strengthen networks – this helps to embed projects within the organisation.

- Health promoting activities and training designed around the workplace environment improved individuals' confidence, skills and capacity. The most effective approaches combine a focus on organisations and individuals, because changes can be reinforced at different levels in the workplace.

- Both individual empowerment and changes to workplace procedures are needed to effectively remove the cultural stigma around mental health and employment.

- Organisational culture change can be achieved by working with senior management and by empowering employees using participatory approaches. Where initiatives are owned by individuals and organisations, this helps to create and sustain a non-stigmatising culture in healthy workplaces.

- While initial training and support from project leads is critical, ultimately the work needs to be handed over and taken forward by 'business champions'. From the outset, organisations need to be supported to develop their own sustainability plans.

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[1] Robinson M., Raine G. and South J. (2010) Mental Health and Employment: Evidence Review. Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University.

About Altogether Better

Altogether Better is a five-year programme funded through the BIG Lottery that aims to empower people across the Yorkshire and Humber region to improve their own health and that of their families and their communities. The regional programme is made up of a learning network and sixteen projects with an emphasis on three themes: physical activity, healthy eating and mental health & well-being. Each project (see Box 1) differs in scale, size and approach with twelve projects based in the community and four based in workplaces.

Altogether Better is based on an empowerment approach - equipping members of the public with the knowledge, confidence and skills to make a difference in their communities and workplaces.

Box 1: Altogether Better projects

Workplace-based projects

Better Workplace Better Mental Health - Doncaster

Health Means Business - Wakefield

Mind Your Own Business - Rotherham

Yorkshire and Humber Regional Mental Health First Aid

Community-based projects

Altogether Better York

Building Neighbourhood Capacity for Health - Kirklees

Calderdale Community Health Champions

Coastal Health Improvement Programme - East Riding

Fresh 'N' Fruity - Leeds

Healthwise Hull

Healthy Coastal Communities - North Yorkshire

Leading the way to Active Lives - North East & North Lincs

Older and Active in Leeds

One Barnsley

Sheffield Community Health Champions Network

Seniors Show the Way - Bradford

How was the evidence gathered?

A qualitative approach was taken in order to fully understand the context, delivery and outcomes of the four Altogether Better workplace projects. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders including: project leads, direct recipients of the projects, workplace or business champions, Mental Health First Aid area champions and training instructors, and stakeholders from commissioning primary care trusts. The sample, interviewed between March and May 2010, represented a range of organisations across the private, public and third sectors and included indirect beneficiaries such as employees, managers, a union representative and a GP. The evaluation team was able to explore how the projects are contributing to better approaches to promoting mental health in workplace settings.

What are the important project activities and roles?

Each of the four workplace projects worked in different ways and needed to adapt flexibly to particular community and workplace environments to have the best impact (see Box 2). Training was a core element to all the projects, including delivering training to equip people with the confidence and skills to improve their own health and that of their families and work colleagues. However the type and nature of training varied between projects. Other core activities include developing tools and development plans. Project leads played an important facilitating role in embedding activities in the different workplace settings.

> *"What I've tried to do is formulate our own support tools here. So I put together a list of support tools and bodies locally, but also nationally… [Health and Safety Executive lead] he's given me time to run a stress awareness programme, they've given me the time to chat with people individually on a one to one basis as and when required, and they've given me the space on our intranet to put things like the wellbeing support tools, the action plans".*
> *(Workplace Champion)*

Box 2. How workplace projects provide training and support

Project	Training offered	Support offered
Better Workplace Better Mental Health - Doncaster	A range of training for businesses including; Mental Health First Aid and Stress Awareness workshops for employees, Managing Mental Health in the Workplace for line managers. 'Working for Better Mental Health Training' delivered to PCT staff, GP practices and frontline workers aims to increase referrals to employment support projects by health services.	Support and guidance targeted at NHS professionals and private, public and third sector employers. A toolkit to support PCT staff and GP practices. In businesses, a needs assessment informs an improvement plan from employers. The project supports businesses to implement the plan.
Yorkshire & Humber Regional Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)	A two-day MHFA training course for employees from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors aimed at improving understanding of mental ill health and increasing people's confidence in offering help to others.	The project works with a range of 'champions' (predominantly public health professionals) who promote courses in their locality. Once Mental Health First Aiders have completed the course their contact with the project ends.
Mind Your Own Business - Rotherham	MHFA training to employees and Managing Mental Health in the Workplace training for line managers. Also runs Job Retention Training, bespoke courses and seminars on relevant topics.	A needs assessment informs an improvement plan for employers. The project supports businesses to implement the plan and also provides a Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace Toolkit, signposting to local services and resources for employees.
Health Means Business - Wakefield	A range of short sessions across the three wellbeing strands run by the project team or healthcare specialists and partner organisations. Also offers MHFA training.	Provides support and advice to 'workplace health champions' (both employers and employees) to implement health activities and events activities such as pedometer challenges and holistic therapy sessions.

Source: DMSS Research and Consultancy

A key evolving role is that of **'business champion'** although specific roles and terminology vary between the projects. The 'champions' potential to make a difference depends on the work settings and their existing (paid) roles, skills and motivation. Champions can act as 'facilitators', supporting the project implementation, and as more proactive activators who serve to:

● coordinate project strands
● embed the project in the workplace
● encourage participation
● raise awareness
● encourage changes to work procedures
● strengthen networks and partnerships

Other key roles developed through projects include mental health first aiders and 'buddies' to support employees returning to work.

The vital relationship between the support of key champions within the workplace and the external support of project leads involves stages of 'handing over' the activator role from the project lead to organisational leads, with further redistribution of ownership as other supporters of change are identified. Strong support from project leads early on was highly valued but as the project develops, champions may take on more strategic activator leadership with project leads assisting with resources, advice and access to supportive networks.

"We just received a fantastic document from Mind Your Own Business, which sort of takes what I did, the internal document and support document with tools, email addresses and contact numbers and they've put their own little directory together, which has gone out to the community because it is quite a document, and we're using it in our business as well."

What difference do projects make to individuals?

Project activities designed around the workplace environment have improved individuals' confidence and capacity. Without this individual empowerment, system change alone is unlikely to remove the cultural stigma around mental health and employment. The two-day MHFA training helped individual beneficiaries to become more observant and reflective, and to address stress in themselves or others. The evidence review found that interventions which combine actions at both individual and organisational level are more likely to result in robust system change. While there was evidence of beneficiaries gaining self-esteem, confidence and a willingness to engage with others and challenge stigma, there was less evidence of MHFA training alone leading to beneficiaries challenging work systems.

Workplace mental health projects that developed improvement plans which combined different elements – both organisational and individual - had a positive impact on individuals because changes were reinforced and supported through people taking part. Some examples include:

● Combining training, support and tools gave individuals the confidence to plan and organise events together.

● Individuals growing confidence helps to develop a more empowering culture within organisations.

● Individuals reported supporting others to take courses, responding to common problems, and taking up issues with managers.

● Empowering outcomes for indirect beneficiaries were also reported, including transfer of skills, knowledge or confidence to a client or colleague, and assisting a colleague by providing care, advice or support when needed.

● New activities at the workplace (e.g. well-being groups, internal courses on stress awareness), and system changes (e.g. introduction of staff packs) provided colleagues with the understanding to break down stigma.

"it's definitely given me a lot more confidence - if there was a colleague in my workplace or a friend who were feeling a bit down or I could see were having some problems, I'd be far more likely to help out."

What difference do projects make to organisations?

Projects made a difference to organisational climate, structures and processes. These changes can support better health for managers, employees and their families.

- The combination of training, support tools, and support from project leads helped to de-stigmatise mental health and change the corporate culture of some organisations. This happens through using processes which increase trust, both influencing the attitudes and practice of senior management, and the openness of employees to talk about employment and mental health.

- For organisational change to be sustained it was vital for projects to convince employers that well-being is good for business. This is supported by the evidence which shows that organisational culture change is achieved through engaging senior management as well as empowering employees.

There was also evidence of structural change in a number of areas, such as policy change, new practices and procedures, and new tools for action and reflection. These came as a result of combinations of training, project lead support, handover of activator roles from project leads to champions or company leads, and further distribution of activator roles. Well-timed interventions dovetailed with concerns and 'trigger' situations - a first step was to use assessment and planning to promote reflection.

"I have made suggestions to the Managing Deputy where I work about mental health in general, so it's kind of rubbed off in terms of giving me a bit of confidence and kind of spread the word; not directly related to the course but in terms of having employers look after employees, I've disseminated some information to the managing director for him to use from there."

"We're de-stigmatising [mental health issues] now and putting this at the fore of people's attention, we're not afraid to deal with this and help people in these situations. Because we as business are recognising it, the individuals in the business are recognising it as well, so I think that has been a massive cultural change around the subject."

What are the most important processes to support healthy workplaces?

Ownership is key to achieving empowerment and building individual confidence and capacity, organisational capacity and system change. Where initiatives are recognised and valued by individuals and organisations, this helps to create and sustain a non-stigmatising culture in healthy organisations. Ownership was nurtured where training and shared activities result in organisational members developing new tools and practices, for example stress action plans. This can be encouraged by the use of formal or informal employee networks to 'take the bull by the horns' and start changing workplace policy and practice.

There is persistent tension between recruiting extensively in workplace settings and providing tailored follow-up support from project leads. More tailored interventions may encourage more sustainable organisational change over time.

Projects have faced challenges in delivering within workplace settings where health is invariably not the primary concern. Work was needed to link better mental health to business concerns because, "as soon as businesses hear mental health, they shy away from it."

Other significant challenges which projects have faced include:

- Developing whole system change requires planning time and protected resources.

- Addressing culture change involves supporting participatory approaches and doing consistent ground work with senior management.

- Improving the fit of training with employment environments has involved developing alternative workplace courses.

- Addressing issues arising from the provider-commissioner split requires early and sustained mutual engagement.

- Balancing resource needs for outreach work and reaching targets with supporting current beneficiaries, and tracing/evidencing the changes that are likely to work best.

Achieving sustainability involves capacity building in workplaces, and embedding changes in organisations as well as extending the reach of projects to other workplace settings. Achieving empowering system change involves developing high quality models for organisational and individual action, and supporting participatory processes. The importance of sustaining some external support role and infrastructure was emphasised. Tensions can arise over short term funding, and defining what needs sustaining.

"Cultural change takes another three years ultimately…and it needs cultural change… Ultimately it is the model and the health work that needs to go on, but there is a role still for us I think in supporting health champions. There's a danger that it could fizzle out if there isn't some overriding leadership."

What are the implications for policy and practice?

There is growing evidence to support the use of the workplace as a setting for mental health promotion. Work based interventions can be beneficial to the mental health of employees. A number of key points emerge from this thematic evaluation for policy and practice.

1. **Plan to work with individuals and organisations**
   Projects need to consider how well-being, mental health and stress are affected within work environments, and the processes of change. As the evidence review highlighted, it is helpful to be clear about types of intervention, target groups and their likely impact on people's well-being. Interventions which combine complementary individual and organisational elements are most likely to produce robust change and remove the cultural stigma around mental health and employment.

2. **Build ownership**
   The most important change processes leading to empowering individual and organisational changes concern ownership. Where initiatives are really taken on board by individuals and organisations, this helps to create and sustain non-stigmatising healthy organisations. Challenges around sustainable change can best be met by projects working to hand over control to employers and employees in ways that help embed action on mental health and well-being within organisations' policy and practice.

3. **Develop the business champion role**
   Managers and staff should be encouraged to take on activator roles as 'business champions' which involve them proactively motivating and developing employer and employee engagement, encouraging changes to work procedures, and strengthening networks and partnerships. Projects should be encouraged to seek further evidence of key activator roles and participatory processes which help to make this handover process happen.

4. **Support culture change within organisations and workplaces**
   With participatory approaches, such as workers organising well-being events together, individuals' growing confidence has in some cases contributed to a more empowering workplace culture. Culture change can also be furthered through engaging senior management in planning and policy review, with targeted training and support. Careful consideration needs to be given to the pace of culture change and how projects fit with the workplace organisational climate.

5. **Aim to sustain, monitor and evaluate change**
   Organisations need to be supported by projects to develop their own sustainability plans, and projects need to plan area-wide for sustainability. Projects therefore need dedicated reflection and planning time from the start. Projects should also be encouraged to develop tools that capture the transformative nature of projects for individuals, workplace cultures, and organisational policy and practice, where culture change, though sometimes slow, can lead to more lasting outcomes.

"For the longer term it would be good for sustainability, that you had kind of a network of businesses doing all good practices who could kind of support other businesses and could share pieces of information."

Conclusions

This thematic evaluation summary has focused on mental health and employment projects centrally concerned with improving people's well-being at work, as well as improving support for job retention and return to work. The evaluation confirms the evidence review's emphasis on the importance of a systems focus on both organisations and individuals, with participatory processes leading to culture change. It is particularly important to focus on understanding, supporting and celebrating those roles and processes within organisations (and between services) which are most likely to lead to sustainable 'handover' of ownership for change in different workplace environments. This also requires continued efforts at sustaining and refreshing support for organisations, and developing appropriate tools for enriching and adding to the evidence base.

How was this evidence summary produced?

This thematic evaluation summary was produced by the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University. A full report is available which presents detailed findings from the evaluation.

A further thematic evaluation on community health champion role and empowerment was undertaken as part of the Altogether Better programme evaluation. All evidence reviews and thematic evaluations can be downloaded from
www.altogetherbetter.org.uk

Further information

For information on this evaluation please contact:

Centre for Health Promotion Research
0800 7311170
frsu@leedsmet.ac.uk

For information on Altogether Better, please contact:
altogether.better@yorksandhumber.nhs.uk
0113 295 2134.

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