WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

Challenges and opportunities in the Asia Pacific region

THE GLOBAL BUSINESS COLLABORATION
for Better Workplace Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

The Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health (GBC) is a business-led collaboration committed to creating mentally healthy workplaces across the world.

In April 2023, the GBC proudly led the first in a series of Leadership Roundtables in Singapore which brought together over 20 C-suite executives from current and prospective GBC founders and signatories, to discuss the opportunities and challenges around employee mental health in the Asia Pacific region. This roundtable was generously hosted by GBC Founding Partner BHP.

The discussion provided a unique opportunity for leaders from Singapore's diverse business sectors to have a culturally-nuanced dialogue on workplace mental health, chaired and steered by experts. The session allowed participants to share insights into 'how' their businesses are making mental health a strategic priority; and to offer personal reflections and observations on specific challenges and opportunities for the in their region.

Chaired by Agnes Goh, Head of Credit and Market Risk at BHP, and Poppy Jaman OBE, Chair of the GBC and Global CEO of the MindForward Alliance, the roundtable surfaced a number of themes around common issues and solutions, which are summarised in this document.

The discussion was held confidentially to support an open and transparent conversation, but with a collective agreement to share key themes. The names of participating individuals have therefore been omitted from this summary, and quotes are indicative and anonymised.

Organisations represented at the event included Allen & Overy, Berge Bulk, BHP, BP, Clifford Chance, Deloitte, Eastern Pacific Shipping, Fidelity International, HSBC, IHH Singapore, Linklaters, MindForward Alliance, Oliver Wyman, Sodexo, Starmed Specialist Centre and Visa.

'It is widely recognised that mental ill health could be the biggest global health crisis we, and the next generation, face. The GBC was created to not only raise awareness of the importance of workplace mental health, but also to enable international businesses to sign up to the global Leadership Pledge and to publicly influence and encourage the participation of peers on this critical issue.

Today's discussion is about understanding the opportunities in Asia around workplace mental health, and what we can do as leaders to progress this agenda, so that our children and grandchildren won't have to have this conversation.'

Poppy Jaman, Chair of the GBC and Global CEO of the MindForward Alliance

'This isn't a race that can be won by a single business: it needs community and collaboration. No one has all the answers on workplace mental health, so it is crucial for us to combine our efforts as leaders to accelerate progress and amplify our collective voice. This is not just the right thing to do, but it is also essential in promoting better job satisfaction, productivity, employee engagement and safety.'

Agnes Goh, Head of Credit and Market Risk, BHP

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KEY DISCUSSION THEMES

Twenty-one leaders from diverse sectors took part in the roundtable - giving rich and honest insights into their leadership in, and personal experience of, addressing mental health in the workplace. These diverse and helpful contributions surfaced the following key themes – which collectively help paint a picture of the challenges, opportunities and solutions to promote employee mental health, for the benefit of both employees and employers, in Singapore and across Asia Pacific.

Each theme has been linked to relevant commitments in the GBC's Leadership Pledge. See p12 for more details on the Pledge

'HARDWARE VS SOFTWARE' – THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP

'Leaders like ourselves need to talk about mental health and provide an environment where employees feel safe to open up about their issues.'

There is no denying that companies in Singapore, Asia and elsewhere have stepped up their efforts to support their employees' mental health in recent years, most notably during the pandemic. Organisations now commonly offer a suite of tools and interventions to help people stay mentally healthy – ranging from in-house psychiatrists, helplines and mindfulness apps, to face-to-face workshops, sabbaticals and subscriptions to gyms.

But often, this investment in what roundtable participants referred to as the 'hardware' of workplace mental health, will not make a meaningful difference unless accompanied by a shift in behaviours and expectations from leaders and managers. In other words, the 'software' also needs to change.

Indeed, there is increased recognition that leadership 'vulnerability' or 'relatability' may be the most important factors in helping people remain mentally healthy at work. This means encouraging leaders to regularly speak about mental health, including opening up about their own experience, acknowledging their own vulnerability and recognising that all people can experience poor mental health.

For some businesses, this is where the journey in fact starts. One executive explained how a series of short films, featuring senior leaders talking about their mental health challenges and shared with partners, broke a 'wall of silence' in their organisation – paving the way for a comprehensive employee support programme. This has included a series of town halls featuring testimonies from local leaders, storytelling campaigns, and the creation of an in-house team of psychotherapists.

'This has created a supportive environment based on care and trust where people openly discuss booking a slot with the psychotherapist. People feel safe sharing their issues, as all conversations are confidential and we use anonymised data solely to address key issues at company level.'

See Commitments 2, 3 and 5 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.12

THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS IN DE-STIGMATISING ISSUES AROUND MENTAL HEALTH IN SINGAPORE AND ASIA

This focus on empathetic leadership is of primary importance as stigma around mental health remains particularly prominent in Singapore and across Asia. Despite an increased focus in recent years on acknowledging and discussing the importance of mental health at work and beyond, many people do not always get the support they need from friends and families. A highly competitive education system and a traditional focus on career success as a source of social standing and family pride can make it harder for people to open up and seek help.

To end the stigma, it is therefore crucial for employers in the region to provide that safe space, and for team leaders to be encouraged to share their own stories, in addition to senior leaders setting the tone through company-wide communications and initiatives. Manager education is key, as is normalising mental health conversations in day-to-day interactions.

One business has sought to do this by encouraging all its leaders to open up management meetings with asking simple questions such as 'Is everyone ok?' or 'Are there any issues anyone needs to share?'. Another has rolled out awareness training for leaders to help them spot signs of mental ill health and stamp out assumptions that stress, overload or burn out are part and parcel of a successful working life.

'We instill in our managers the need for them to "know their team" and to offer help when they feel someone is behaving out of the norm.'

See Commitments 4 and 6 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.12

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THE 'SAY/DO GAP' AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

Education and normalisation are also crucial in reducing what is sometimes called the 'Say/Do gap' – whereby senior leaders frequently rate their company's efforts on mental health or wellbeing considerably higher than employees.

Organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of bridging this gap. For example, a GBC Founding Partner has started featuring case studies based on issues reported by employees through a mental health hotline, and asking its leaders to reflect on how they would deal with this issue as part of awareness training.
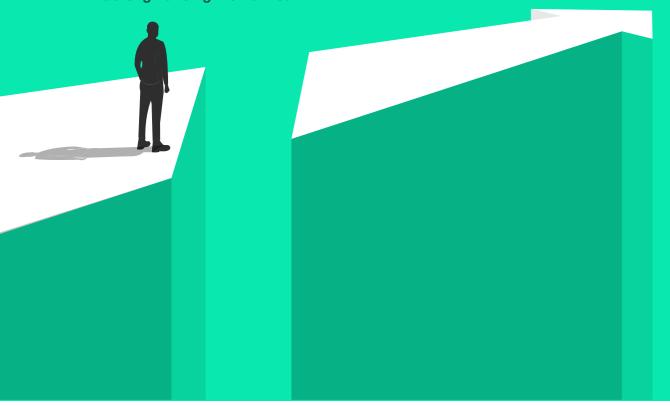
'For some senior leaders, it takes someone being close to reaching breakdown for them to have a mental health issue. These leaders need to realise that something like stress is not normal. The tone from the top is essential in de-stigmatising mental health.'

Another important lever in reducing the 'Say/do' gap is the support provided to middle management roles - by setting out clear expectations on responsibilities, and facilitating 'peer-to-peer' support sessions, where people are encouraged to share issues, lessons and solutions.

One participant also shared that their business conducts weekly 'balance surveys' to constantly monitor the state of wellbeing of its employees – using the aggregate data to enable the company's leadership to shape tools and programmes accordingly.

FLEXIBLE WORKING VERSUS WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION – GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

The COVID-19 pandemic has promoted flexible working practices around the world, and a broader acceptance of people completing work tasks at times that suit them. In most places, this is a trend that can be seen as supporting good mental health. However, in Singapore and other parts of Asia, where many people work for global and innovative companies, this acceleration of what some people refer to as 'work-life integration' compounds two pre-existing tendencies:

- a global mindset whereby people strive to accommodate different time zones to work in real time with colleagues in overseas offices, and
- a quest for digitisation whereby employees use multiple devices and digital apps to stay permanently 'switched on'

"Data shows that Singapore's workforce experiences the highest levels of stress in the world and many people feel burnt out. The global nature of many roles and a drive for digitisation mean that many employees "follow the sun" and struggle to switch off. Yet there is still stigma around mental health here that we need to address."

Roundtable participants talked of the need for senior leaders and managers to lead by example and show discipline and consistency – for example by minimising out-of-hours emails or not staying late in the office.

'We have to be consistent in our "leadership shadow" so we do not drive this culture of constant work ourselves.'

There is also scope for organisations to be more proactive in formalising policies and guidelines, although this needs to be done sensitively in the context of increased expectations around trust and flexible working post pandemic. One executive shared the example of a company that has already introduced a piece of software which stops emails being sent over the weekend, instead asking people to reconsider the urgency of their message and allowing them to set an automated time for the message to go out after 8am on Mondays.

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CHANGING THE SYSTEM TO RECONCILE PERFORMANCE AND WELLBEING

Taking another step back on culture leads to an even more difficult question: is there something inherently unhealthy with our current work environments? Even with the right 'hardware' and 'software' in place, can people deliver the work and step up the career ladder given the pressures they are under in the way jobs are currently designed? Or do we need to rethink the entire system? And what would that mean?

'We're trying to find solutions on mental health but we're also trying to run businesses. Sometimes there is a trade-off between performance or compliance, and health.'

One GBC Founding Partner is taking steps to select line managers using criteria linked to people leadership as well as business skills – to establish how well they would care for the people in their teams, in addition to reaching business objectives. That organisation is also focusing on mental health as the common and central element underpinning all dimensions of their Diversity and Inclusion agenda - encouraging their employee networks to advocate for mental wellbeing 'from the bottom up', and seeking to create the 'psychological safety' that will enable all their people to perform at their best.

"Workplaces are communities, and communities are resourceful in finding solutions to problems.'

See Commitments 3 and 4 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.12

ENCOURAGING INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE TO WIN THE 'WAR ON TALENT'

The long-standing stigma around mental health means that different generations have different attitudes to it. Asian work cultures typically tend to place a strong focus on hierarchy. Therefore, facilitating dialogues between the five or so generations* making up the current workforce is essential to understand different perceptions and lived experiences of mental ill health. It is also crucial in finding solutions that meaningfully engage all seniority levels.

This is particularly important when considering the needs and expectations of younger workers around mental wellbeing. In Singapore, working adults aged 20 to 34 account for 36% of the population. Meanwhile, over a fifth of 18 to 34 year olds report having a mental health condition, and the number of suicides - which has declined overall in Singapore in recent years - has steadily increased in that particular demographic since 2017.

This makes tackling poor mental health in Singapore's young workforce an urgent priority, and young workers themselves are keenly aware of this. Coming out of a very structured education system and facing cumulative challenges, people starting their careers now look for employers that create mentally healthy workplaces. And they will often 'vote with their feet' if their current organisation does not offer the level of support they expect. Mental health has therefore become a key battleground in the war for talent.

"In Singapore, there is growing understanding of the importance of supporting young people's mental wellbeing. As they come out of school and enter employment, they face several pressures linked to career ambition, starting a family, caring for parents and so on. These people are the future of companies and need to be looked after."

With multi-generational households being the norm in Singapore and Asia, caring responsibilities can be greater than in other regions. This makes the role of employers in terms of mental health education and support even more crucial. Concerns and duties of younger workers related to the ongoing care of elderly family members, for example, need to be understood and accommodated to enable people to thrive and fully contribute at work.

See Commitments 1, 3 and 4 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.12

*Generation Z: born between 2001 and 2020. Millennials: born between 1981 and 2000. Generation X: born between 1965 and 1980. Baby Boomers: born between 1946 and 1964. Silent Generation: born between 1925 and 1945 Source: Time

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LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC

However, the expectations of business leaders to look after their employees' mental health increasingly transcend generational differences. The hardship caused by the pandemic in many sectors means that many people, at all stages of their careers, are now looking at the priority placed by prospective employers on wellbeing and work-life balance.

Most companies have realised this: whereas mental health support was not typically or explicitly included in employee benefits or health insurance cover before the pandemic, employers not offering this now are seen as lagging behind.

In the healthcare industry specifically, there is increased recognition of the need to 'rehabilitate' frontline staff after their experiences during the pandemic. Dedicated support units, 24-hour counselling and mental health monitoring tools are now commonly offered.

'Before COVID, mental health was not considered a priority in the healthcare industry. The focus has now shifted and companies not offering those resources are now outliers.'

The pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of building mental resilience in service industries - acknowledging that those supporting others in the most difficult circumstances need support themselves for their organisations to continue functioning. This has shone a light on imperatives such as the need to rehabilitate burnt out

workers, or to root out non-respectful behaviours by managers when they come under pressure.

But the pandemic has also surfaced challenges common across all sectors, such as the importance of helping people recognise when they are burnt out or 'jaded', and seek adequate support. In the highly competitive work environments of Singapore and other Asian countries, people can become victims of their own success and lose sight of the importance of their mental wellbeing. Many businesses have identified the need to address this mindset to avoid reverting back to pre-COVID habits driven by work-centred cultures.

See Commitments 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.12

MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Another factor affecting employee mental health that is pertinent to Singapore and Asia is the economic disparity between employees of the same organisation. One roundtable participant cited that the vast majority of their employees were not office based, but migrant workers recruited from Asian countries with lower levels of socio-economic development.
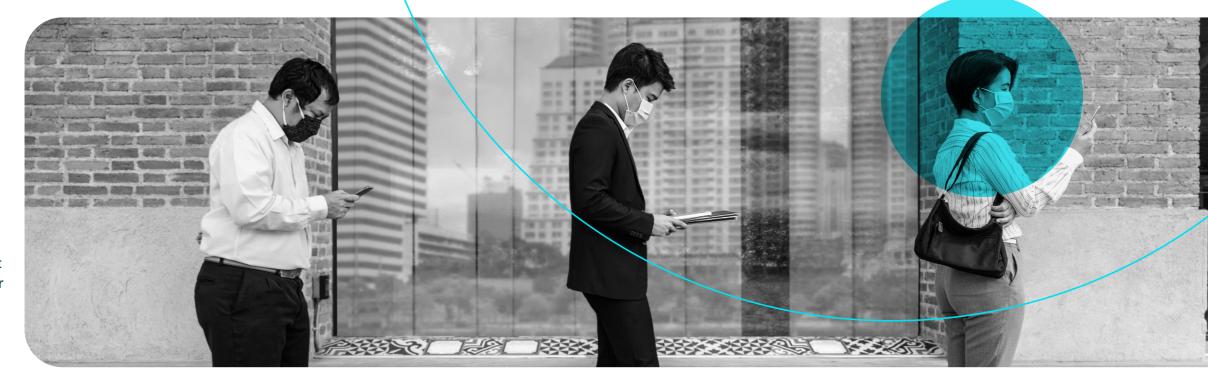
'For some employees, securing the basic needs of their families, like food and clean water, is the priority, and employers can significantly enhance the mental health of those employees by reducing the number of things they have to worry about.'

They emphasised that while it was important for leadership to set the tone on providing a safe space for everyone, it was crucial

that mental health provision is relevant to the employee and their needs. For many workers in Singapore, financial security is a prerequisite to good mental health, and employers' efforts in recognising and supporting this can go a long way in reducing levels of stress and anxiety.

"Singapore has a unique diversity of nationalities and social groups in its workforce – it is a multicultural and economic melting pot. If you find the right mix of solutions to support mental health here, you have a framework that will work anywhere in Asia and the world.'

See Commitments 1 and 3 of the GBC's Leadership Pledge, p.12

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MAKING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH A PRIORITY – THE LEADERSHIP PLEDGE

As the Chairs closed the session, each participant shared their key 'take-away' from the roundtable, and made a personal commitment to continue making mental health a strategic priority.

The GBC's Leadership Pledge – a powerful call to action to be signed by senior leaders - has been created to support organisations advance on their workplace mental journey. Participating businesses who were not yet signatories were invited join the movement by signing the Pledge and making a public commitment to address this important societal challenge.

As a responsible business leader, I recognise that I play a critical role in raising awareness and enabling support for people within my organisation. By signing this pledge, I commit to playing my part by making mental health a visible priority in every region in which we operate.

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MY ORGANISATION WILL:
Develop and deliver an action plan to support good mental health in our organisation.

Promote an open culture around mental health, working towards eliminating stigma.

Take proactive steps to develop our culture and ways of working towards creating positive mental health and reducing mental ill-health.

Empower all our people to manage and prioritise their own mental health, and to support one another.

Signpost our people to mental health tools and the support they need.

Regularly measure the impact of our efforts, being open about our progress, to influence and inspire change in our organisation and beyond.

By signing the Pledge, leaders join the GBC's community of trailblazers, enabling them to receive support from equally committed peers.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL BUSINESS COLLABORATION FOR BETTER WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

No one business has all the answers when it comes to workplace mental health. This is why the **Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health** is building a global community of visionary business leaders who are willing to commit to prioritising workplace mental health in their own organisations, and to sharing learnings, insights and good practice to support positive action – wherever a global business is on its journey.

OUR VISION is to create a world where all workplace leaders recognise signs of struggle, have the right tools to support employees, and commit to taking tangible and evidence-based action on mental health and wellbeing in the workplace – enabling their workforce to thrive.

OUR MISSION is to advocate for – and accelerate – positive change for mental health in the workplace on a global basis.

THE GBC'S FOUNDING PARTNERS - BP, BHP, Clifford Chance, Deloitte, HSBC, Sodexo, Unilever, Visa and WPP - came together to form a group of non-competing global multinationals with a track record in workplace mental health. The Founding Partners help resource, drive and advocate for the coalition.

In July 2022, the GBC announced a new partnership with MindForward Alliance to build on the Collaboration's success and grow our community of business leaders around the world.

MINDFORWARD ALLIANCE is the leading global not-for-profit organisation transforming workplace culture into one that supports the mental health of its employees. For over a decade, its community of businesses has been leading the way in creating transformational change in workplace mental health.

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With thanks to our GBC Founding Partners:

BHP

Special thanks to BHP for hosting the roundtable

bp

CLIFFORD CHANCE

Deloitte.

HSBC

sodexo

Unilever

VISA

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