

## Why companies need to take bold steps towards mental health advocacy in the workplace



*In the construction industry, where high-pressure environments are the norm, mental health often takes a backseat to safety and productivity. However, the mental wellbeing of employees is critical to their performance and, ultimately, project success. Recognising these challenges, GVK-Siya Zama has taken proactive measures to equip workers with the tools to not only excel physically, but also maintain their emotional and psychological wellbeing.*

In an endeavour to deepen the understanding of mental health issues among employees, equip HR practitioners with essential skills to identify red flags, create a culture of seeking help, and develop proactive strategies to support employee wellbeing, GVK recently conducted a comprehensive HR workshop focused on these issues.

During the workshop, the HR team meticulously examined common assumptions surrounding mental health and developed a framework for both proactive and reactive interventions tailored to meet the needs of not only the organisation, but also its valued employees.

A key takeaway from the session was the critical emphasis on confidentiality and trust, reinforcing the company's duty of care and pledge to maintain open communication even during challenging times.

"Recognising that workplace culture significantly affects employee wellbeing is paramount," says Amelia Keefer, Group Marketing and HR Executive. "We are committed to creating an environment in which mental health is respected, and employees feel safe to express their concerns and seek support."

### **Addressing mental health challenges**

The South Africa's construction industry faces high rates of mental ill-health, including depression, anxiety and suicide, exceeding the general population. Despite these challenges, mental health remains largely unaddressed, with a primary focus on physical safety.

Professor John Smallwood, from the Department of Construction Management at Nelson Mandela University, has said that, while the causes are complex, stressors within and outside of the workplace, including organisational culture, work demands, financial insecurity, and personal issues, contribute significantly.

"Addressing these requires a cultural shift and collaborative effort," he says. "Potential solutions include mental health literacy programmes, toolbox talks, employee assistance programmes, wellness days, financial management programmes, and even confidential mental health hotlines. Early identification of stressors and increased awareness are crucial for intervention and support," he added.

Added to this, the alarming statistics from the recent Gallup State of the Global Workplace: 2024 Report conveyed that 20% of employees experience loneliness daily – especially among those under the age of 35 – and that 15% of workers are disengaged, with a significant portion experiencing high stress levels. In South Africa, findings from the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) Working Life Survey indicated that 52% of employees have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, which highlights a pressing need for more awareness and support within the workplace.

With this in mind, GVK took action to try to address these issues in the workshop. "Given the current mental health crisis in South Africa, it is essential that organisations like ours take proactive steps to support their employees," says Keefer. "Too many individuals are suffering in silence, and we aim to combat this by ensuring that our HR practitioners are well-equipped to identify issues and provide meaningful resources."

### **Building a supportive workplace culture**

Collaboration during the workshop produced practical strategies to better equip team leaders to recognise mental health issues and fulfil their duty of care towards employees. Participants were introduced to a wide array of resources and training to guide them on how to address varied human conditions, ensuring that their teams can respond effectively to the emotional needs of employees.

"By prioritising mental health and wellbeing, we can nurture a more engaged and productive workforce," says Keefer. "Our team is dedicated to ensuring that our employees feel supported, understood and valued."

Going forward, GVK's HR team plans to continue its commitment to mental health advocacy through ongoing training sessions, regular assessment of workplace culture, and the incorporation of mental health policies that reflect and promote the wellbeing of all employees.