Midlands businesses need urgent help with staff mental health after report details COVID impact

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Media Release issued by the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot

Small businesses across the Midlands need urgent help with improving wellbeing in the workplace after a new report showed COVID-19 is now a main factor in causing mental health absences from work.

The Mental Health and Productivity Pilot (MHPP) is encouraging businesses to get in touch for advice on adopting a free mental health and wellbeing programme for workplaces, to help combat the problem.

The report, published by the Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) and authored by researchers at University of Warwick – a partner of MHPP – showed that mental health issues related to COVID-19 were a more common factor for sickness absences at Midlands workplaces than issues related to in-work problems or physical health.

It also revealed that smaller firms were much less likely to have adopted a mental health plan or to have changed working practices due to COVID-19 compared to larger companies.

MHPP, funded by Midlands Engine, has been helping companies across the Midlands to take steps to support and improve the mental health of their workforce – and boost their bottom line at the same time.

Kate Wood, MHPP Project Manager at University of Derby said: "The ERC's report makes it clear that COVID-19 has had a strong impact on mental health absences from work and is therefore having a detrimental effect on productivity. **"COVID-19 has become a bigger factor for mental health absences than in-work issues or physical health, so now more than ever, businesses need to act to help identify any problems their workers are having before they need to take time off. "Smaller businesses were found to be much less likely to have adopted policies to improve mental health in their workplaces during the pandemic, which suggests they need extra support in order to do this."**

The ERC surveyed 570 businesses and organisations of various sizes and sectors across the East and West Midlands – both before the pandemic and during the pandemic – about how mental health sickness has affected working life. A major finding was that in the second of those two periods, mental health absences due to COVID-19 accounted for half or more of all absences in 22 per cent of those surveyed. This was higher than in-work issues, which was the biggest factor for absences in just 14 per cent of businesses, and those related to physical health in 18 per cent. Issues outside work remained the biggest cause of mental health absences in most businesses.

The research found that COVID-19 led 30 per cent of businesses to introduce new programmes and activities to boost wellbeing – with mainly larger firms and those in the business services sector doing so the most. Smaller firms were less likely to have taken steps to improve wellbeing. While 31 per cent of all firms surveyed reported mental health sickness absences in the last 12 months before the pandemic, the figure dropped to 26.3 per cent during the pandemic. This slight reduction contradicts findings from the Office for National Statistics and the Centre for Mental Health, but the ERC believes the increase in remote working and furlough may have contributed to this result.

Vicki Belt, Deputy Director of Impact and Engagement at the ERC, added: **"Our report shows that COVID-19 has become a strong factor in mental health absences. "This supports earlier research pointing to an increase in mental health issues as a result of the pandemic, as people struggle to deal with the uncertainty, increased anxiety, and the economic fallout that accompanies it. "The overall reduction in mental health sickness absences was an interesting finding though, and we speculate that it could be due to remote working making it harder to identify staff struggling with their mental health, and related to workers being furloughed instead of being absent."**

Caroline Geraghty, MHPP Project Manager at Coventry University added: **"We can help businesses take that first step into finding a free mental health and wellbeing resource that is right for them, which will not only support the health and wellbeing of their staff, but will result in increased productivity in the long-term. "We have been working with businesses all over the Midlands to help them implement free programmes to boost mental health and wellbeing, and we would urge businesses who are unsure about how to do this to contact us."**

MHPP is led by Coventry University in partnership with the University of Warwick, the West Midlands Combined Authority, mental health charity Mind and the universities of Birmingham, Derby, Lincoln, Loughborough and Nottingham.

Businesses can find out more about the support available from MHPP at **www.mhpp.me**/employers

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Notes to editors

1. **Full report:** The full ERC report, 'Workplace mental health and wellbeing in Midlands firms before and during the COVID-19 pandemic', is available here.
2. **About the Enterprise Research Centre:** The ERC is the UK's leading independent research institute on growth, productivity and innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The Centre is led by Professor Stephen Roper of Warwick Business School. http://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk