

MAD WORLD SUMMIT

HIGHLIGHTS: **THINK TANK**

Mad World Summit 2019: When leaders care about people, businesses do better

By Alex Sword, Europe Editor, [InternetRetailing.net](#)

Facilitated by:



Dr Richard Heron MB
ChB FRCP, FFOM,
Vice-President Health &
Chief Medical Officer, **BP**

Hosted by:



David Sayers,
Director, CFO & Board
Practice, **Green Park**

Chaired by:



Isabel Berwick,
Editor of Works &
Careers,
Financial Times

Moving beyond focusing purely on financials is key in tapping into the full benefits of supporting employee mental health, according to delegates at the recent Mad World Summit.

The think tank hosted by David Sayers, Director, CFO and Board Practice at Green Park and chaired by Isabel Berwick, Executive Editor of Work and Careers at the Financial Times, offered a closed door setting where senior business professionals could privately share their thoughts on building the business case for improving mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

Introducing the session, David Sayers said that as mental health challenges are complex there was "no silver bullet" to tackle mental health issues, but the session would allow attendees to "share our findings and learn from one another's experiences". The FT's Isabel Berwick said the event would help C-suite leaders "build a business case for improving and supporting workplace mental health and wellbeing."

Richard Heron, Vice-President for Health and Chief Medical Officer at BP, kicked off the session with a presentation about his employer's journey on mental health. The company has a range of mental health initiatives including regular events to raise awareness, e-learning materials on recognising and managing stress and mental health elements within leadership training programmes.

Focus on business objectives to influence the board

"I'm not going to try and out-finance any CFO," Heron emphasised at the beginning of the talk. "I'm not going to talk ROI or EBITDA or anything like that."

The key focus of the talk was the process of bringing C-levels on board. When approaching them, you have to know what's on their mind, the business's objectives and be clear why focusing on mental health will help them to achieve them.

To overcome this gap in priorities between HR and the CFO, Heron cited the important role of data. However, crucially, he argued that more data doesn't mean better. He used the example of Christopher Columbus ("one of the best influencers I've ever known of") who managed to convince royalty to back his expedition to North America based on "only three pieces of data and two tools at any one time."

You have to ask what the data is telling you, said Heron, and "why should it keep you up at night?"

He used a formula to explain the process of launching a mental health initiative. The pain of implementation needs to be smaller than the combination of the strength of the vision, dissatisfaction with the status quo and the first steps already taken.

"If they aren't dissatisfied enough [with the current state of affairs], I need to show them why they should be."

Moving beyond converting the C-suite

Once the C-suite has been won over by the data, Heron said, follow the same “evidence-based, authoritative” approach to find the solution. For example, BP conducted a study assessing the impacts of cognitive behavioural therapy on a group of lawyers to see how it improved their sleeping patterns.

When formerly sceptical C-levels are won over and become what Heron calls “converts”, they become important symbols of change within an organisation which in turn win further converts.

“When leaders authentically care then business outcomes improve,” Heron said. “There is a whole range of business outcomes correlated to the degree to which leaders authentically care.”

After the presentation, delegates were invited to discuss two questions: how mental health impacts business outcomes and the obstacles in addressing mental health issues.

Outcomes and challenges

Some of the delegates highlighted fundamental changes that were taking place in the relationship between employee mental health and business outcomes.

One noted how the Business Roundtable, a group of CEOs of nearly 200 major U.S. corporations, had recently incorporated employees into its definition of stakeholders as opposed to just shareholders.

They added that a new focus on mental health could form part of a wider reassessing of the role of business, alongside other improvements in corporate governance. BP’s Heron added that a strong business does not just make money or keep customers but functions as a part of society.

The crucial point was that taking this less profit-oriented approach not only didn’t damage business but even improved it. One attendee said that not only did her company’s resilience programmes help people feel good about themselves but it also led to them fielding more calls and selling more products.

One commonly mentioned obstacle was communication. One attendee spoke of the importance of managers learning to recognise warning signs and creating dialogues with teams.

Opening up these communication channels, whether through direct conversation or other means of reporting, was crucial, the attendee added. Heron responded that attendees should get their employee assistance programme to train managers in how to open up this communication.

There is still a way to go though, noted one attendee. Even with buy-in from the top of the organisation, there are still barriers such as perceived stigma, with employees potentially concerned that their career and promotion could be impacted by admitting to mental health issues. Another attendee noted that this led to difficulties in finding role models who were willing to speak out about their mental health. This highlights the significant role Health and Wellbeing leaders can play as advocates of those who cannot speak out for themselves in the journey to address these perceptions.

Date for your diary:

8th October, Mad World Summit 2020

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