

Case study



The Management of Mental Health at Work at Brentwood Community Print

This case study looks at how a Community Interest Company (CIC) in the printing sector has used its expertise to support people with mental health needs to have a positive experience of working life, building confidence and skills and a mutually supportive workplace culture. It has also deployed its expertise to support improved awareness and practices amongst local businesses.

About the company

Brentwood Community Print (BCP) is a CIC. It is well known in the Brentwood area, regularly receiving orders for its print services which in turn helps to support its community interest activities. These activities include working with people in recovery from mental illness to rebuild their confidence and build skills for work through activities in its print and graphic design business. There are 20 members of staff which are a mixture of paid workers and volunteers, all of whom have lived experience of mental health difficulties. Having the status of a community interest company is important:

'I think it's important because first and foremost here, the mental health comes first, that is the most important thing. We try and keep it as normal a business environment as we can to try and give people that sense of being in a business environment preparing for work, this is what it's like'
(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).

CICs are a type of company introduced by the UK Government in 2005. They are designed for social enterprises that want to use their profits and assets for the public good. The intention is that they are easy to set up with some special features to ensure they are working for the benefit of the community.

Perceptions of mental health at work and workplace effectiveness

Both staff and clients at BCP benefit from being able to talk to someone within the company with a good awareness of mental health issues. Most clients lack coping mechanisms to manage their symptoms in a working environment and find BCP a place to focus their mind away from those symptoms and learn coping strategies from receiving peer support. If someone comes into work and they are very distressed then they have an empathetic person to talk to, who is willing to try and help, or signpost them to other support and accompany them to that support if needed:

'We have even gone as far as if we've had someone come in who's quite upset and unwell who needs to access a doctor or other support services, we will go with them. I know that can't happen in every work place but we try and do that where we can.'
(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).



Staff and clients at BCP have always had a range of mental health needs, for example anxiety, depression, personality disorders, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. There are a mix of men and women from a variety of age groups. The younger members of the team tend to have anxiety issues, need confidence building and have not had the opportunity to develop a career. They might have been unwell since they've left school and struggled since then. The older staff may have had a career and then become unwell.

BCP has a strong sense of its duty of care towards its staff as well as the value of mental health in workplace effectiveness:

'If everybody's got good mental health and a really comfortable environment they will perform better, of course they will ... pressured jobs means pressured minds... . Not everybody likes being in a cushy job, some people have got very stressful jobs, in which they need more support. Wellbeing of people needs to be paramount really' (Director, BCP).

'Everybody's mental health comes first because your employees are the most important part of the business where you have to look after them. And every single one of us is in recovery so... We all have our ups and downs you know, sometimes there are external things that go on that you can't help so we try and be as flexible as we can'

(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).

Policy, practice and initiatives in the management of mental health at work

BCP's approach to the management of mental health at work is influenced by the experience of one of its Directors who was the service lead and community mental health worker for Rethink Graphics (part of Rethink Mental Illness) together with the experience of the staff and volunteers who have received mental health first aid training. This has contributed to a very people-centred approach that encourages social inclusion. The company's community interest activities include working with local employers to promote awareness and better practice around good mental health in the workplace as well as encouraging joined up working between local organisations that engage with mental health in some way.

BCP have a range of policies including a code of conduct on the management of mental health at work, a code which is very people centred:

'We are very much based around that we look after the person, not the illness. We have somebody who came in the other week who said, "I've got depression and my name's [name]". I replied, "No, your name is [name] and you are suffering from depression, you're not a label", it's 'let's see what we can do''

(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).



The code of conduct provides guidance on acceptable behaviours in a context where there are a number of vulnerable adults. The company has to be mindful of the health and wellbeing of all staff and insulate them from situations (including colleagues) that might be destructive to their emotional and mental wellbeing:

'If someone came here and they were unwell but they were unwell to the extent that they made everybody else unwell, of course I have to understand that and of course I get them support but they have to go somewhere where they can get that support. It wouldn't be here because the collective is more important than the individual because with teamwork is how we break down barriers.
(Director, BCP)

Having a workplace culture of mutual support is pivotal in the BCP approach to the management of mental health at work and it is helped by co-workers being honest with each other. If someone is going through a difficult period vis-à-vis their mental health, adjustments are made to support that individual, for example reducing working hours, rescheduling work commitments and redistributing work tasks. The company has found that knowing the staff is important in early detection of additional mental health support needs and a lack of turnover at BCP supports that:

'The staff that have been here a while, we obviously know each other quite well and if I'm being completely honest with you, if you turn up in the morning, once you get to work with somebody quite often you will know if they're having a good day, bad day, if something is going on'
(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).

Fostering a climate of social inclusion in which staff and clients feel that they have some influence and control supports this process:

'We do a lot of social inclusion work and consider that everybody's contribution is important. If there are any decisions that need to be taken in a business, of course there are decisions that need to be taken at directorship level, that's obvious, but for the directors to reach that decision the whole team would be involved with the decision making process. This I think fosters a nice atmosphere of involvement and team inclusion for our staff and clients. You feel that your input does matter and you are being listened to'
(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).

Drawing on its own staff experiences of managing mental health, BCP visits local businesses to educate them on mental health, for example raising awareness of signs of mental illness and how to support someone who may be going through difficulties. The main initial focus has been on existing customers who purchase BCP services and the engagement has been broadened out to business networking groups, Brentwood Borough Council, Brentwood Job Centre and a local funeral director. The visits are tailored, for example using an interactive PowerPoint presentation or roundtable discussion.



Bridges are being built in the community in other ways. Over the last year or so, one of the company's directors has launched the Community Tree Partnership with funding from, and in partnership with, the local council. Once a quarter local organisations meet to share information on what they are doing. As part of its contribution to this partnership, BCP has designed and produced a leaflet outlining the wide-range of organisations working in mental health-related fields. The leaflet has been sent out to a range of local organisations, for example GP surgeries, pharmacists and libraries.

Successes and challenges in the management of mental health at work

Signs that BCP's people-centred approach has been working is reflected in the growing knowledge, expertise, experience and confidence of its staff and clients, which helps to overcome the potential for staff and clients to develop a dependency relationship in their workplace interactions.

The company takes pride in having supported the labour market progression of people with mental health conditions. For example an apprentice working at BCP in her early twenties who has experienced anxiety since she was in school. Coming to BCP has allowed her to learn many aspects of the business, such as graphic design and networking with local employers, and to progress to an apprenticeship. She contrasts her negative experience of working in the private sector with positive experiences of her working life at BCP:

'It does work because it helps lots of people move on into employment in some way or another or even if they don't get employed then they're much better with communicating than they were before they came here. For example if I'd been made to go to work somewhere else after having panic attacks at [a private sector retailer that I had worked at before] it would have just made me so much worse. Because people, like my friends, don't really understand my anxiety and that's quite off putting sometimes. So being in the work environment with a bunch of people that you don't know at all, who don't have any concept of anxiety, haven't understood it, or think they know of it... Like, because you can know of anxiety but I think you've got to have some kind of experience or know someone who has suffered to have that compassion.... '
(Apprentice, BCP).

Taking a people-centred approach, BCP has fostered and achieved a climate of openness and mutual workplace support with respect to mental health needs. The company recognises that having a small workforce helps in this:

'We're all in the same boat, we all look after each other and look out for each other'
(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP)

'I know it sounds funny but we are all rowing in the same direction, you know, when someone isn't well, someone will tell me. Very, very unique I suppose in some ways, very caring but then some small businesses are exactly the same as this'
(Director, BCP)



One challenge is that dependency can arise in such a supportive and empathetic environment, which is not necessarily healthy in the longer-term. Instead of assuming responsibility for people's problems BCP actively encourages and supports people to problem solve therefore empowering them to continue to solve their own problems and move to independence. On the other hand, as people's confidence increases, with exposure to new work challenges, that sense of dependency can be lessened.

The company has been very outward looking, in keeping with its community interest orientation, and the benefits of this are increasingly evident. Feedback from the employer outreach programme suggests that it is working very well, raising awareness and fostering employer interest in mental health needs as well as improving the prospects for disclosure:

'We've had a few members of staff at various organisations who have actually stayed behind to talk to us and say, you know what, I think I'm struggling with this, or, I'm going through this problem, how do I address it? So it's obviously touching a nerve and there's a need for it'

(Supported Work placements Project Co-ordinator, BCP).

Key learning points

- In developing a people-centred approach to the management of mental health at work, team work is important in breaking down barriers to support. This is because good workplace relationships help individuals to ask for help as well as helping co-workers to pick up on signs that help might be needed. Knowing your staff is very important in early detection of mental health support needs. This may be easier in small businesses compared with large ones.
- While some decisions need to be made at directorship level, consulting your staff wherever possible helps to foster a dimate of social indusion in which staff feel that they have some influence and control and are valued.
- Awareness of mental health amongst local employers can be increased through outreach activities in local communities. The personal testimonies and work experiences of people with mental health conditions have an invaluable role to play in this.

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Endnotes

1 This case study is based on interviews with staff at Brentwood Community Print and conducted by a researcher at the University of Essex.