



TACKLING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

CASE STUDY: WIPRO'S MITR PROGRAM

AROGYA
WORLD

**AROGYA WORLD'S
HEALTHY WORKPLACES**

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BACKGROUND

Mental illness imposes an enormous disease burden on societies. Depression and anxiety disorders affect more than 600 million people around the world, and have a devastating toll – they can make even everyday tasks seem insurmountable (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/health/brief/mental-health>) – The World Bank (2016). According to One Mind Institute, mental illness affects 1 in 4 people and is the #1 cause of adult disability worldwide. The cost of lost productivity in the workplace due to depression and anxiety is very high – over 1 trillion dollars a year.

The problem may be even worse in developing countries like India, compounded by stigma and lack of adequate healthcare professionals and facilities. A 2016 National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences study showed that 13.7% of the population in India is mentally ill.

Because of the efforts of the World Bank, WHO and other organizations, the world is beginning to recognize the enormous toll of mental health, and has included it in the Sustainable Development Goals targets. This gives us at Arogya World, hope that our generation is indeed serious about leaving the world a better place.

WHY WORKPLACES?

Mental health disorders have a substantial impact not only on the health of individuals and communities, but they also pose an economic challenge to companies in terms of lost productivity and a diminished workforce. A strong inverse relationship exists between employee job satisfaction and measures of mental health such as stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression (Faragher (2005). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/oem.2002.006734>). Research in the U.S. has consistently shown that the indirect costs from mental health issues to the employer is approximately three times greater than the related direct costs of absenteeism and medical care -- combined. In India, where the medical costs of treating mental health disorders for employers is typically lower than in the U.S., the ratio of indirect costs to direct costs of mental health issues may be even higher. Indirect costs can be attributed to diminished work performance. The ensuing loss in productivity from affected employees' inability to work at their full capacity – an effect known as “presenteeism” is substantial. So significant are the human capital and financial costs of mental health issues, that employers worldwide have consistently identified stress as one of the top 3 issues influencing their health and wellness programs (bucksurveys.com)

India is a young country. Two-thirds of the billion plus people

are less than 35 years old. India's population pyramid is expected to bulge across the 15-64 age bracket increasing the working age population from 761 million to 869 million in 2011-2020. [FICCI, EY, 2014].

Currently, in the age group of 18-35, the third leading cause of death is suicide, four out of ten professionals suffer from depression or anxiety and over 50% are under 30. ASSOCHAM's corporate employees' survey in 2015 revealed that 42.5% of the corporate employees in India are suffering from depression or general anxiety disorder. The rate of anxiety and depression has increased by 45-50% in the last eight years.

Workplaces, where so many working Indians spend so much of their day, offer an attractive platform to educate busy professionals, and help improve their physical and emotional wellbeing. Evidence based results show that treating anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions is an affordable and cost effective way to promote wellbeing and prosperity. Employee assistance programmes help organisations build effective strategies and interventions for personal and workplace support, along with providing confidential counselling services.

As part of its Healthy Workplace program, designed to leverage workplaces for NCD prevention, Arogya World (www.arogyaworld.org) seeks to understand and evaluate an organization's efforts in reducing stress and NCD risk factors in its employee population. Work-life balance was identified as a necessary criterion that would mark a company as “healthy”, in a multi-stakeholder consultation the global health non-profit held in Feb 2012, in Bangalore. Arogya World has, since then, included work-life balance yardsticks routinely in all its site-visits and formal Healthy Workplace Assessments to date (>85 companies, about 2.5 million employees). In 2016, the non-profit initiated a Platinum Healthy Workplace award, where it analyses quantitative employee health data submitted by companies and works with them to calculate the business benefits from investing in employee health. Mental health program metrics are also examined during Platinum scoring.

Wipro, a leading IT services and management consulting firm, became one of Arogya World's Healthy Workplaces in 2015 and a Platinum Healthy Workplace in 2016. We have chosen Wipro's emotional well-being program called MITR (meaning friend), as our first case study not only for its innovative, peer-led, compassionate, voluntary, bottom-up approach to tackling mental health in the workplace, but also for the company's extraordinary efforts in successfully deploying it among its huge workforce of 175,000 employees. Our hope is that we can inspire other companies in India and around

the world to learn and adapt from this case study, and invest more to help their employees lead healthy lives.

WIPRO'S MITR

Wipro deserves kudos for being ahead of its time by tackling mental health in the workplace in India 13 years ago through its pioneering MITR program, and for being a genuine leader in several aspects of workplace health. The program is integrated with Wipro's Workplace NCD Program - Fit for Life - so issues that emerge in either program can be addressed accordingly. An excellent example of this was the development of Fit for Life stress management and sleep hygiene programs after these topics emerged as issues of concern through MITR.

HOW MITR WAS STARTED

The World Health Organization's 2000 World Health Report ranked India's Healthcare system at 112 out of 190. Wanting to do something about it, Wipro employees reviewed this report with care and felt it "pushed us to look into the challenges that not only the organization, but the entire sector would be facing very soon," said Namrata Sinha, Wipro HR. In 2000, Wipro already had several programs in place for the physical health and well-being of the employees. They decided to start an additional emotional wellness program for employees, which was launched in 2004 under the name "MITR". The concept and the name were home grown - **"MITR", means a friend in Hindi, someone one could speak to, when feeling low.**

The company did a thorough needs assessment before starting the program. Employee health data were analyzed, and showed high claims for gastrointestinal disorders, which was a direct impact of high stress levels. Next, they conducted surveys and tests via questionnaires, to assess the stress levels of the employee, and the cumulative 'pile-up' of stressors. The company felt that counseling during stressful times could be quite helpful in providing support and skills to better address life challenges. The MITR initiative was designed as a preventive measure, to deal with the upcoming problems that the entire sector was about to face.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MITR PROGRAM

In addition to the more traditional and formal Employee Assistance Program (EAP) offered by trained professionals, Wipro chooses 10-15 employees a year to serve as volunteer MITR counselors, trains them and deploys them in their workplace settings, to help their fellow employees, and sometimes along with their families, cope with life's challenges.

MITR counselors are usually empathetic, mature professionals, with high emotional intelligence, who have been part of Wipro for some time, and are experienced in handling teams. They undergo several stages of elimination & selection: after filling a questionnaire, they go through many rounds of interviews, before being finally on-boarded into the MITR team.



Wipro makes sure that every site has at least one trained MITR counselor. Training is pretty rigorous – 5 days of training, delivered by Wipro's EAP partner, and internal and external experts, over two weekends. Typically, 40% of the cases that come in are handled by MITR counselors, and the rest more serious cases are handled by the EAP partner professionals.

One of the key elements of the MITR program is confidentiality. Wipro promotes the MITR counselors on its intranet site – Yammer – and publishes the hotline number, to make it easy for employees to know who to go to for help. The employee who needs help selects the right counselor, even perhaps at a different site, then schedules a mutually convenient time to meet. The face-to-face meeting typically takes place in a conference room that either the counselor or the employee has booked. This gives them a quiet, undisturbed venue right on campus to discuss the employee's concerns.

"Importantly, the company does not know who sought advice from whom and when, and what was discussed. The discussion between MITR counselor and Wipro employee is completely confidential."

– Prachi Sharma, Wipro HR

Once a month all MITR counselors meet with the EAP professionals to discuss the cases they are handling, without revealing the identity of the employee, and report on the progress in each case, how many cases have been successfully closed etc. At these meetings the EAP professionals also give the MITR counselor advice on next steps in challenging situations.

On average every MITR volunteer handles about 20 cases a year, each requiring about 3-4 sessions to get resolved. Along with the monthly meets, it adds up to a significant time commitment. The time spent by the MITR counselor in this program is not logged, is purely voluntary and is over and above the regular working hours. This is communicated explicitly to all volunteers at the beginning of the on-boarding process. Also, the manager gets a formal sign-off from the MITR counselor before formal induction. Wipro does not provide any extra incentive to MITR counselors.

Still, the MITR counselor is a very coveted role as typically 400 or so people apply for the roughly 10 vacancies per year.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES EMPLOYEES MOST CARE ABOUT?

Approximately 95% of the issues discussed with the MITR counselors are personal in nature. The top 5 issues are:

- Psychological issues
- Discord with family members / demise of a family member
- Couples counseling
- Other relationship issues
- Matrimony issues

TACKLING STIGMA HEAD ON

With this program Wipro has attempted to confront and blunt the stigma associated with mental health, by offering it right in the workplace setting, with full visibility of the entire workforce. The name “MITR” was chosen to help reduce the inhibition employees feel while approaching another for help, and help them put across their case in an open manner, like they would to a friend.

The company does a lot to socialize this program and remove the stigma around mental health by:

- Frequent communications – eg sending mailers, conducting Webex educational sessions
- Putting up relevant posters and banners
- Involving senior leadership in the initiative
- Posting on Wipro’s internal social platforms like “Yammer”. These platforms are accessed by employees to voice their opinions on various topics, participate in debates, meet other employees with similar interests etc.
- Conducting on-the-ground talks on emotional wellness

We believe that this aggressive and frequent communications effort is a critical factor in the successful deployment of the MITR program in all of Wipro. The program is now familiar to employees, is introduced to all new employees during Orientation, and is part of the fabric of the company.

SCALING UP

The company was aware that face-to-face counseling was more effective than voice/video calls. Thus, they made sure that MITR counselors were selected from most if not all Wipro locations. They then went about spreading awareness throughout the organization in all sites. Also, mailers were

sent to employees all over India to educate them on the benefits of emotional wellbeing. And suggesting MITR as a program they could make use of.

The goal of MITR is to ensure that “embedded reasons for distress of employees is looked into and removed” rather than maximizing participation.

In 2016, about 500 employees across all of Wipro’s sites availed of the MITR program. While Wipro would like more employees especially in the remote sites to make use of this program, they are not looking to scale up much beyond this level, as they want to ensure the quality of the program.

METRICS

The company monitors this program by tracking:

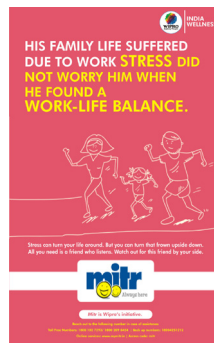
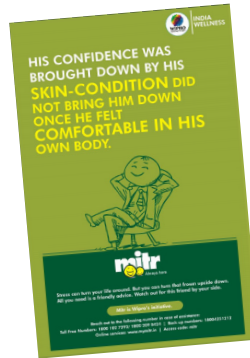
- Gender Balance in the cases – men typically don’t seek help on emotional issues, so Wipro in particular watches for how many male employees use MITR as reported by the counselors during the monthly meets and by the EAP partner.
- Number of new employee cases
- Number of family member cases
- Number of closed cases - The number of cases closed by MITR volunteers, without having to reach out to professional EAP partner counselors, is an important metric for evaluating the effectiveness of the program.
- Overall Utilization rate
- Hours of online, telephone & face-to-face counseling
- In addition, the company conducts an annual Employee Perception Survey. Questions regarding emotional wellness are incorporated into the survey.
- The company also looks at the MITR program attrition rate which has historically been low. There is a strict requirement for MITR counselors to attend all the monthly meetings. Any MITR counselor not attending 4 consecutive meets, is not retained within the team. (Approximate loss 5%). A few employees sometimes choose to discontinue after one year (Approximate loss 10%). Employees moving out of Wipro are unable to continue in the team (Approximate loss 10%).

Wipro’s EAP partner provides to Wipro HR quarterly reports of de-identified data tracking these metrics, and flags the issues, if any, for management to tackle.

PROGRAM COSTS

The design of the program helps Wipro make the program sustainable by reducing costs, which they would have otherwise spent on external counseling. The only costs for the MITR program are:

- Amount to be paid to the vendor for providing training,



conducting monthly meets, tracking program metrics and issuing de-identified quarterly reports to Wipro HR.

- Critical cases handled by the vendor on priority, are paid for by Wipro

Generally, 40% of the incoming cases are handled by the MITR counselors.

IMPACT

From anecdotal experiences and reports from the MITR counselors it is clear that both the employee seeking help and the employee providing counseling, benefit greatly from the program. For the counselors it is a matter of deep satisfaction that they have helped a fellow employee navigate a tough situation. For the employees they know they have obtained sound advice from a trained well wisher, and resolved their situation without alerting company management. The low attrition rate and the continued use of the MITR program in all sites is testament to that.

Wipro does not have metrics to measure the impact of the MITR program on business performance, productivity or employee loyalty and retention. But the company knows the program saves costs as 40% of the cases are handled by MITR counselors.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- **Strong implementation** – This program is designed to empower employees to seek and provide emotional support to fellow employees. Rigor in the selection and training of MITR counselors is key for success, as are some other factors such as extensive communications to socialize and familiarize employees in all sites, the frequent check-ins with monthly meets and the availability of the EAP partner for input when needed and for handling the tougher cases. The program is integrated with Wipro's Workplace NCD Program - Fit for Life - so issues that emerge in either program can be addressed accordingly.
- **Confidentiality** – One of the key reasons for the success of this program is the intense focus on confidentiality. What is discussed between the employee and MITR counselor is completely confidential and that we believe this is why this program has been successful for so long (more than a decade).
- **Detailed program analytics** - Wipro spends significant energy and resources on tracking metrics and data analysis, including demographic subgroup analyses. And the company uses the data to improve the MITR program, provide additional training to the counselors year after year, and address the areas of stress that emerge.
- **Management support** - The support of senior management is a pillar for any successful initiative at the company. Business leaders have helped spread

awareness about the importance of emotional wellness and several senior managers have served as MITR counselors over the years. This has helped remove the stigma around mental illness and in counseling, within the company. MITR reports are regularly reviewed with senior managers who work with the team to develop and support action plans to address root causes of stress. Management sometimes steps in to provide support to employees, in critical cases, at short notice.

THE MITR ADVANTAGE

Wipro sees MITR as having many advantages, as compared to offering counseling purely through external professional counselors:

- More economical for Wipro
- Saves time - the employee can get help right on campus
- The MITR counselors have better knowledge about the internal workings of the organization & are able to often guide the employee better than external professionals

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Wipro looks to continuously improve this program by identifying gaps & varying the training each year, adding topics such as relaxation techniques, cognitive behavior therapy etc. Since the attrition rate is low, this helps in increasing the overall knowledge base of the MITR counselor group, and the team members usually help each other out.

Data Mining: Wipro is unique amongst Arogya World's Platinum Healthy Workplaces in the degree to which the company mines its mental health program data to identify, investigate, and address sources of stress that impact the mental wellbeing of their workforce and families. This is a global best practice.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Prevalence data could be used to set reasonable goals for program participation rates against which to measure the effectiveness of marketing, communication, and mental health awareness strategies – this may help increase program participation.
- To calculate the value on investment from such programs, a company could use validated tools at initial onset, during, and certainly after the conclusion of the program.



To learn more about our programs, goals and impact visit our website, www.arogyaworld.org.