

Cultivating a culture of mental health in organisations: Reading the room



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Orientation: There is a worldwide emphasis on mental health in the workplace to support employee well-being and promote organisational performance. A core part of the roles that industrial and organisational psychologists (IOPs) assume in the workplace includes understanding mental health and exploring the root causes of mental health issues.

Research purpose: This article highlights the importance of IOPs in developing strategies, frameworks and mechanisms to address mental health and well-being in the workplace.

Motivation for the study: Industrial psychology practitioners must consider trends and strategies to effectively manage mental health in the workplace. These practitioners must be at the forefront of developing strategies to address mental health issues in the workplace.

Research approach/design and method: This article is an opinion paper that includes a review of the literature and opinions of the authors.

Main findings: The management of mental health in the workplace should ideally combine individual interventions with organisational structural changes. Furthermore, industrial psychology practitioners are uniquely positioned to implement these strategies, leveraging their scientific-practitioner expertise to create healthier workplaces.

Practical/managerial implications: Industrial psychology practitioners are best suited to contribute to theoretical, policy-making and practical applications in managing workplace mental health. This includes exploring the drivers and enablers of mental health issues from the perspective of behavioural scientists.

Contribution/value-add: This article contributes to the broader discourse on workplace mental health by emphasising the role of industrial psychology practitioners in managing mental health effectively. It explores how a strategic framework for organisations could address mental health challenges in the workplace.

Keywords: mental health; industrial and organisational psychology; workplace counselling; work related wellbeing; employee assistance; organisational performance.

Introduction

Growing recognition from industry worldwide currently speaks to the importance of effective mental health management. The World Federation for Mental Health has made a global call to action with its 2024 theme, *It Is Time to Prioritise Mental Health in the Workplace*. This reflects the urgent need to understand that attending to employees' mental health not only aids the individuals but also contributes to creating thriving, high-performing organisations (Akiyama, 2024). Similarly, the topic of the 2024 Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa's (SIOPSA) annual conference, *Mindful Organisations, Productive People: Cultivating a Culture of Mental Health & Wellness*, implies that priority should be given to addressing mental health needs in the workplace. The SIOPSA 2024 annual conference recognised the critical issue of mental health, where industrial and organisational psychologists (IOPs) are particularly well-suited to address and provide solutions in the workplace. The conference brought different role-players, such as psychologists, psychometrists, organisations advocating mental health, human resource practitioners and business leaders to explore and devise effective strategies to ensure psychological well-being and productivity. The conference's focus encouraged organisations to adopt mindfulness practices and cultivate cultures prioritising employee well-being, ultimately leading to a more productive workforce.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the SIOPSA Conference collection titled 'Mindful Organizations, Productive People, Cultivating a Culture of Mental Health,' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Willie Chinyamurindi and Prof. Nasima Carrim.

The world of work

The world of work is changing because of technology, globalisation and emergencies such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Graupner, 2021; Veldsman, 2021). The pandemic has disrupted labour markets and accelerated the pace of change – especially in remote work, e-commerce and automation (Moralo, 2021). These changes can impact mental health, as job roles evolve and stress increases. It is important to consider the significance of mental health in the workplace because mental health conditions considerably impact productivity and economic growth worldwide (Kelloway et al., 2023; WHO, 2022). Globally, organisations are developing a supportive workplace culture that positively influences individual performance and organisational success.

In South Africa, addressing mental health and well-being in the workplace is particularly vital because of the country's unique socioeconomic challenges. The Mental State of the World Report (2021) indicates that South Africa faces significant mental health challenges, with younger generations showing notably lower mental health quotient (MHQ) scores, suggesting a generational decline in mental well-being (Ramalepe, 2024). Similarly, an alarming concern is the widespread workplace stress and mental health issues, nearly 52% of employees experience mental health issues in South Africa (Mashamaite, 2024). This decline in mental health highlights the need for targeted mental health interventions and resources to address this growing public health concern. However, efforts to address these mental health concerns need to be made. For example, improving mental health in the workplace is paramount for preparing work's future and organisations' holistic well-being in a dynamic global environment. This enhancement of mental health in work settings is essential to safeguard the fundamental human right to good health, including mental well-being (Kelloway et al., 2023; WHO, 2022). It is integral to advancing progress aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 3, on health and SDG 8, on decent work for all (Goodwin & Zaman, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Industrial and organisational psychologists are central in organisations formulating and executing interventions prioritising well-being and bolstering productivity (Graupner, 2021). Notably, by addressing the distinct challenges encountered by employees and organisations in South Africa, IOPs can contribute meaningfully to the broader global discourse on the importance of fostering mental health in work environments, thereby underpinning sustained individual and organisational performance. Industrial and organisational psychologists focus on psychological processes such as cognition, affect, perception, attention, motivation and behaviour (Hayes et al., 2020), essentially listening to the employees' voices or 'reading the room' (defined by McLeod [2024] as the ability to perceive and respond to a group's mood, emotions and dynamics in a social setting). As behavioural scientists, IOPs utilise the scientist-practitioner approach to manage mental health in the workplace effectively.

Therefore, comprehensive training in workplace mental health and its root causes is essential for IOPs.

Managing mental health in the workplace

The scientist-practitioner role of IOPs is ideally suited to manage workplace mental health effectively. Utilising this unique expertise, IOPs play an important role in exploring and addressing mental health issues using a holistic approach. According to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2019):

Industrial and organisational psychology is the science and practice of professionals who function in organisational and occupational settings to ethically explain, assess and influence human behaviour and its reciprocity at individual, group and organisational levels, with all efforts directed at human flourishing and the sustainable development of all affected stakeholders. (p. 3)

Apart from focussing on human flourishing, the field of industrial psychology emphasises that strategies and interventions should be rooted in scientific models specifically tailored to address mental health in the workplace. However, Rugulies et al. (2023) note that research on work stress models, such as job strain, primarily stems from an interest in cardiovascular diseases rather than workplace mental health. Therefore, it is imperative to design mental health programmes based on insights from employees with lived experiences of mental health issues (Fleming, 2023; Rugulies et al., 2023). Besides these experiences, literature reviews and meta-reviews accessing clinical and counselling literature provide valuable strategies. In addition, the trends and strategies such as those highlighted by the 2024 SIOPSA conference should be taken note of, such as creating trauma-informed organisations (Van der Merwe, 2024), developing holistic multiple-level interventions (Johnson et al., 2024) and increasing involvement from the management level (Jonker, 2024).

Integrating such research findings with evidence-based industrial psychology models, such as the job demands-resources model (Bakker et al., 2023), can contribute to creating healthier and more productive organisations. This will allow for the exploration of co-creating healthy, productive organisations by considering both possible inherent problems and who is responsible for the solutions (Meyer, 2003). It is important that employees feel safe to discuss their mental health concerns and are co-involved in formulating content for mental health management. This will ensure a culture of psychological safety in which employees are more likely to engage and be productive. Involved and engaged employees could contribute towards accurately identifying inherent risk factors for mental health problems and mobilising an immediate response to potential mental health problems as they could be initiated (Rugulies et al., 2023). Mental health management programmes should involve a comprehensive strategy, including the early detection of workplace accommodations and the adoption of a focus on developing positive aspects of work and worker strengths.

Rugulies et al. (2023) highlight three main focus areas wherein workplace mental health interventions evolved over the past 30 years, namely securing employees against harm, promoting work-related well-being and health, and supporting individuals at risk of developing mental health issues. Industrial and organisational psychologists implementing an integrated approach should combine these threads into a comprehensive framework, ideally suited to manage individual-level interventions, as the literature questions the effectiveness of individual interventions alone. In a United Kingdom (UK) study, Fleming (2023) found that these interventions do not significantly improve mental well-being, challenging much of the existing literature. A possible explanation is that individual interventions are only effective when combined with organisational structural changes. Various studies confirm how combining support from supervisors and colleagues with critical aspects such as workplace adjustments and reduced working hours could assist in recovery and return to work (Bakker et al., 2023). Industrial and organisational psychologists are in a position to develop multiple-level interventions from a holistic scientific level and couple these with traditional wellness and employee assistance programmes (EAPs) to allow access to mental health professionals and stress management resources. Such a framework should proactively and reactively address mental health management at the organisational, individual and team levels. Industrial and organisational psychologists, especially as behavioural scientists, play an important role in interventions, providing insights and knowledge that ignite open discussions about mental health challenges in the workplace (HPCSA, 2019).

Recommendations for policy and practice

Practice

Organisational initiatives and interventions to manage workplace mental health require a comprehensive approach that includes preventive and supportive strategies. At the 2024 SIOPSA conference, various strategies were proposed, such as a comprehensive behavioural science approach to cultivate a culture of mental health (Johnson et al., 2024). Industrial and organisational psychologists play a vital role in uncovering the systemic issues that contribute to workplace stress and mental health issues. This includes evaluating organisational culture, the impact of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), leadership styles, communication patterns and aligning organisational values with employee well-being. The essential actions highlighted at the conference included developing stated mental health values, transparent policies, regular employee training, open communication about available resources and employee involvement in mental health strategies (Boikhutso, 2024; Jonker, 2024). Although support systems such as EAPs are crucial (Mercer, 2023), using IOPs' resources in organisations as first responders is even more critical in embedding the mental health culture (Graupner, 2021; WHO, 2022). According to Mercer's studies, adjusting workloads, increasing transparency and incorporating technology enhance the employee experience and impact mental well-being (Mercer, 2023).

In South Africa, addressing workplace mental health involves recognising the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence the perception and treatment of mental health issues (Morar et al., 2024). Tailoring interventions within the local context, for instance, through culturally sensitive training programmes, can bridge the gap between global best practices and local requirements, thereby ensuring the effectiveness and inclusivity of mental health strategies. Furthermore, it is imperative to highlight that industrial psychologists should conduct more randomised controlled research studies to substantiate the effectiveness of work-based counselling when integrated with prototypical structural interventions.

Another recommendation that needs serious attention is addressing the gap between accessing EAP services and identifying employees needing such services. This training should provide basic counselling skills, knowledge of signs and symptoms of psychological ill-health, and an effective referral strategy to staff, often the first contact in the workplace, such as line managers and human resource (HR) staff (Graupner, 2021). The integrated approach to workplace mental health is a good example to working to prevent harm while proactively building meaningful work strategies (LaMontagne et al., 2014). However, the approach also acknowledges and manages illness as it manifests in the workplace. Developing a white paper for IOPs in South Africa could be beneficial for managing mental health in the workplace through a strategic and visionary approach.

Policy

The new directive published by the HPCSA in 2021 is a significant document for such a white paper. Health professionals registered with the HPCSA enjoy certain rights and privileges, including the right to practise their professions and the privilege of being recognised as qualified and competent in their respective fields. This recognition is a testament to their difficult work and dedication. It is crucial to maintain professional standards and ensure public trust in the healthcare system – a responsibility that we share. The HPCSA's new directive addressed two key concerns: (1) there were numerous complaints from psychological practitioners across all categories regarding the non-payment of their claims by various medical schemes; and (2) these claims were rejected because the practitioners were deemed to have acted outside their professional scope of practice.

The HPCSA directive indicated that Regulation 704 of 11 September 2011 (the Practice Framework for Psychologists, Psychometrists, Registered Counsellors, and Mental Health Assistants) was an outdated document and emphasised that the document should not be used to define the scope of practice and should be withdrawn in its totality. Regulation 993 of 16 September 2008 (Scope of Profession) remained in place, protecting only appropriately trained and registered

psychology practitioners who could perform psychological acts. The minimum standards for the education and training of psychologists should primarily guide education and training institutions to train different categories of psychologists and the minimum competencies expected of the different psychological practitioners. The minimum standards for the education and training of psychologists should not be used to determine the scope of different categories of psychologists. As such, the minimum standards of education and training of IOPs (HPCSA, 2019) indicate that these practitioners should be able to implement 'interventions that identify, understand, and manage physical and psychological health challenges that influence employee capability and productivity' (p. 6). This includes 'applying short-term counselling as part of individual and systemic interventions such as post-trauma counselling, crisis counselling, and job stress-related counselling' (p. 5).

Recognising the importance of this directive, proactive measures should be taken to effectively train IOPs in the skills needed to manage mental health in the workplace and address organisations' concerns. Tertiary and internship institutions are recommended to ensure that training curricula include significant training in psychological principles, including counselling techniques, referral techniques and identifying workplace psychopathology. Training should include a specific focus on brief therapeutic models. Evidence suggests that acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) as a brief therapy is especially suitable for industrial psychologists (Van Lill & Van Lill, 2022). Acceptance and commitment therapy focusses on psychological processes such as cognition, affect, perception, attention, motivation and behaviour (Hayes et al., 2020), which could be especially helpful in addressing mental health issues in the workplace as part of a holistic approach. Recently, SIOPSA established the Mental health@Work interest group to facilitate fast-tracking IOPs' involvement and engagement in counselling, position, capacitating an implementing various programmes in different workstreams. This initiative is a good example of adhering to the HPCSA guidelines and aims to educate members about the changes that could affect them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we summarise the strategies we view as IOP practitioners' contributions to enhancing the understanding and management of workplace mental health, incorporated into the main themes of the 2024 SIOPSA conference (i.e. context, content and conduct). Industrial and organisational psychology practitioners offer a distinctive lens for cultivating a culture of mental health in organisations:

1. *Organisational analysis (context)*: Industrial and organisational psychologists play a vital role in uncovering the systemic issues that contribute to workplace stress and mental health issues (e.g. organisational culture).
2. *Evidence-based interventions (content)*: Industrial and organisational psychologists offer scientific-based solutions and best practices for managing mental health in the workplace. Innovative practices are incorporated

to enhance workplace well-being, such as flourishing, mindfulness and resilience practices, using technology and AI to predict and address mental health issues proactively.

3. *Holistic multi-level framework (conduct)*: The unique approach to managing mental health in the workplace from an IOP perspective involves a multi-level framework addressing individual, team and organisational levels. This framework aims to build a culture of mental health and includes both preventive and reactive components, promoting psychological resilience and well-being throughout the organisation.

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Authors' contributions

R.K., L.I.G. and S.B. equally contributed towards this opinion article.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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