TAKING MENTAL HEALTH SERIOUSLY

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How are you feeling? Not just that stiff lower back but, you know, in yourself? Maybe a bit anxious about family stuff. Perhaps you've found yourself a bit low during some periods of COVID lock-down – I know I have.

You wouldn't be alone. According to the charity Mind, mental health problems affect one in six British workers each year and mental health is the leading cause of sickness absence. And COVID has had a dramatic, worsening impact. The Office for National Statistics reports that mental health problems have worsened across all age-groups in the past year.

It's not too long ago – particularly in 'traditional' workplaces like ports – that a response more indicative of issues than 'mustn't grumble' would be given short shrift. At best a brief exhortation to look on the bright side or keep your chin up and a swift change of subject. At worse, an experience that could compound the difficulties you were facing. More likely, silence on both sides and the topic never aired.

It's really pleasing to see this situation changing, both in society as a whole and in the ports sector more specifically.

The recent Port Skills and Safety survey of a number of port operators was encouraging in that it demonstrated that the issue of mental health is being recognised and organisational strategies and process are being put in place. Of course, one needs to be careful of over extrapolating from a small sample of volunteers. But it has to be positive that of those responding to the survey all were incorporating mental health into an integrated 'Health and Safety' toolbox – policy, activities, monitoring and reporting. I have to say that this matches my own experience of speaking with UKMPG members.

That does not however – and cannot – be taken as a sign of 'job done'. We must be realistic that we as a sector are at an early stage of the journey to addressing mental health. We are way behind where we are on physical health, where I think the sector would agree there's still important room for improvement. But it's a positive place to start from. The journey will not be smooth, but it is one I believe the sector is increasingly committed to travel.

From an employer's perspective the case for taking action on mental health is clear and increasingly recognised by port operators. There are estimates that mental ill-health costs employers overall £26 billion each year. In a physical environment like ports the link between mental health and not just physical health but potentially life changing safety is vital – you want people's minds on the job when they are dealing with heavy loads or working at height, for example.

The importance of good mental health will only become more integral to the success of a port as the technologies of digitisation and automation become more relevant and the services that ports offer to customers expand. The future ports workforce will need less 'grunt' and more 'meta skills' - related to how people think and behave at work, how they develop and refine their critical thinking, and how they can cultivate negotiation and leadership skills through work. Good mental health, I would suggest, is particularly critical for the deployment of such 'meta skills'.

So, how do I feel? Like a lot of us I've learned I need to work on my mental health, similar to how I know I need to maintain and develop my physical health (although don't always act – just one more hob nob and then no more). I'm really pleased to be part of a sector that's also learning this and committed to not only taking it seriously but to action.

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