

Rail leadership and SMEs say it is time to listen when it comes to mental health

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Listening is key – that’s the message coming from a sector-focused wellbeing seminar which was brought to the rail industry thanks to the Railway Industry Association (RIA) and Sopra Steria.

Hosted by RIA’s Policy Director Kate Jennings, the event focussed on the importance of awareness of mental health issues and how the upcoming Rail Wellbeing Live could play for those in the sector.

Opening the event was Jeroen Boomsma, Client Director at Sopra Steria. On the back of this exciting time of growth and an ever-strengthening connection to rail, Jeroen said mental health was crucial. He said: “As an organisation, the health and wellbeing of our people is our first priority. During the last 18 months, we have taken positive steps to enable them to fulfill their potential whilst feeling supported, empowered, encouraged and inspired. This focus also extends to our customers, partners and supplier networks.

“We all know good health is about the mind as well as the body, being physically fit and feeling good about ourselves and our environment. Making sure both are in a healthy balance means we can achieve more of the things we want to do in life, at home, as well as at work.

“By far the best way to be healthy is to take care of yourself and finding out about the wide range of support. That’s where Rail Wellbeing Live comes in.”

Rail Wellbeing Live is the biggest health and wellbeing movement in the history of the rail industry. It was set-up in 2020 by a cross industry group, the Rail Wellbeing Alliance, with a simple mission of improving the health and wellbeing of everyone who works in rail. The event, on 17 and 18 November, will have speakers discussing mental health wellbeing best practice – and will include everyone from health practitioners to celebrities like Fearne Cotton.

Also speaking at the seminar was Glenn Clark, Managing Director for RCU Solutions. He said his sentiment was his business is only as good as its people, and so their wellbeing is essential. He explained how he had ensured their team gets mental health training as well as the opportunity to become a mental health first aider.

But, crucially, it was often a case that small moments make a big difference.

“It can be as simple as having a small conversation in the hallway, or in the office or in the car park and just five minutes of listening can have quite a good impact on people’s mental health and wellbeing because they understand they have someone who will listen to them and talk to them,” he said.

John Halsall, Network Rail managing director of the southern region and chair of the Rail Wellbeing Alliance, showed how an organisation can work through mixed fortunes. On the one hand, the southern region has a rich variety of flagship stations and a vast customer base, on the other he said that of its team, over the last two and a half years or so, three people had taken their own lives.

Rail Wellbeing Live was part of a series of initiatives he is in charge of to help deal with this devastating problem. “Although Network Rail and the industry has a vision of putting passengers first,” he said, “I am a great believer that if we put our people just before that, then it will help us to deliver that longer-term vision.”

He explained it was important to bring mental health into the conversation. “We’re doing an awful lot just trying to talk about the subject and get it on the radar.

“We’re also trying to do a lot of quite small things, particularly with people working from home, to try and demonstrate and evidence that we care.”

This, he said, included employing a kids’ entertainer to keep employees’ children entertained during the height of COVID in the school holidays –and maybe, he joked, create a few future rail engineers in the process. There was also a Friday coffee club where staff can share personal challenges, and Christmas events for those who are on their own for the festive season.

He said developing initiatives that work for staff requires “caring and doing our best and being open to new ideas”.

He mentioned how they used councillors during particularly difficult times, as well as, like RCU Solutions,

mental first aid training.

He said there was no consistent reaction when it came to those faced with trying times. “We all react differently to these tragedies,” he said. “Sometimes you can take things in your stride, next time it happens it’s completely different.”

He added he concurred with Glenn about the importance of listening to staff, but said a usually very positive solution-based rail mindset meant that delivered a few challenges: “I think listening is the most important thing. When people come to us with problems we often try and solve them because that’s what we do, we fix problems. My experience and understanding is that’s exactly what people don’t want you to do. They want someone to listen and talk things through and potentially give support after that. Listening is the first thing.”

He said staples such as exercise, sleeping well and eating well were the first things he would remind people of who were heading up strenuous situations out on the rail infrastructure.

John also discussed the £5.3 billion of renewals procurement for the region. He said the way the southern region is approaching work from this point onwards is to develop close-working partnerships on outlined projects first before signing off work with regulators – something he says is proven by the likes of Sellafield and Anglian Water.

Rail Wellbeing Live is open to Britain’s 240,000-strong rail workforce for free. About 13,000 people have already signed up for this year’s event, but it is not too late to register. To secure your place, visit www.railwellbeinglive.co.uk. By registering, you will also be able to watch all 75 sessions again 24/7 for up to two weeks after the event.