



## Managing mental wellness amid uncertainty

WRITTEN BY MELONY JAMES, B.SC., MOSH, GRADIO SH, CFM  
OSH CONSULTANT

In the 21st century many employees and employers have come to accept one aspect of life as constant – that is change. Companies are constantly required to adapt to global changes, changes in the economy and changing consumer demands. However, for some, this constant change brings uncertainty that can lead to some mental discomfort, as normalcy or regularity are not established. With the advent of the 24/7 economy in Barbados coupled with the changing nature of the employment relationship to ensure productivity, employers must be aware of the importance of ensuring the mental wellbeing of their employees and independent contractors.

Why is an employer responsible for the mental wellness of an independent contractor? While it may be easier to see the connection between the employer and his employees, under the Safety and Health at Work Act sec 7 (3), it is the duty of every employer to conduct his business in such a way to ensure, so far as

is reasonably practicable that all non-employee individuals are not affected or exposed to risks to their health and safety. Therefore, the way an employer schedules his contract work and the culture of business operations can have negative or positive health impacts. Simply put, the law requires the employer to consider how his operation may affect even his sub-contractors.

Let's study the life of Anika who is employed as a seasonal contractor at a hotel for the past 14 years. She has grown to expect the call from the hotel in October to assist with housekeeping until April of the following year. However, the company has downsized and subsequently plans to close in September. The employer only had discussions with the employees and the only time Anika was made aware of this change was via a newspaper article two days prior to the closure. How do you believe Anika may have felt knowing that she has a daughter studying overseas who depends on her mother's additional income to continue her studies?

The overwhelming feeling coupled with uncertainty lends to a mood of despair and ultimately depression. Has the hotel contributed the ill-health of this employee? The answer is yes, the employer created the environment of uncertainty which caused Anika to become unwell.

The employer's responsibility is to ensure as far as possible the health and wellbeing of all employees and non-employees who may be affected the company's operation. Remembering that health includes both mental and physical, it becomes clear the correlation between the employer and the contractor. While I shared the story of Anika, there are various instances where consideration must be given. Some of these include:

- Fluctuating workforce and the impact on the employees and the contractors who or providing temporary services.
- The change in business models, moving from staunch contractor to the utilization of tenders and bids for business.
- Extensively acting in temporary positions for prolonged periods of time.

As an employer bridging the gap between uncertainty and business opportunity is the best way to help reduce the negative impacts to mental wellness. The employer is tasked with assessing the strengths and weaknesses of his subcontractor to determine the types of jobs, duration and intensity the contractor can manage. Proactive planning of business not only helps for financial management but ensures successful completion of projects ensuring the health and wellbeing of all involved. Therefore, both the employer and the independent contractor understands the nature of the business for a projected period of time.

The stress of adjusting personal operations for adhoc requests or conversely getting accustomed to a routine for it to be subsequently changed, makes it difficult for these contractors to cope.

At the BEC we do acknowledge that the nature of business changes, but all organisations must employ a strategic approach to its overall management which includes staffing and contractor needs. There will be some persons who can cope with the intensity of changing scenes, but we must also consider those individuals who are predisposed to negative repercussions due to their already compromised mental health.

To help individuals who may be predisposed to mental

ill-health concerns, employers can employ the following strategies to ensure that they manage their contractors in a manner that does not jeopardise their mental wellness.

**Planned Dialogue** – employers must intentionally seek to communicate clearly the required services and deliverables required from the contractor. The communication should seek to highlight and clarify all questions both parties may have in order to eliminate any uncertainties and grey areas. This not only creates a better environment for working relations, but it also can become the basis for exclusion from liability due to the thorough nature of discussions and protection offered due to confirming understanding.– employers must intentionally seek to communicate clearly the required services and deliverables required from the contractor. The communication should seek to highlight and clarify all questions both parties may have in order to eliminate any uncertainties and grey areas. This not only creates a better environment for working relations, but it also can become the basis for exclusion from liability due to the thorough nature of discussions and protection offered due to confirming understanding.

**Acting with Empathy** – employers must seek to treat contractors humanely which also includes considering the individual's circumstances. This does not mean that the organisation plans business around the contractor's needs but that some consideration is given to consequences of all actions taken.

**Actions** – employers are reminded to be consistent in the way contractors are treated. Be mindful not create bad precedent that can negatively affect the business operation or the individual.

Looking back at Anika's situation, as a regular seasonal contractor, the company could have contacted her to inform of the impending changes. Change is inevitable but the way it is managed is the difference between a successful organisation with engaged employees and productive contractors. The BEC is equipped to assist organisation with the development of comprehensive plans to manage contractors and proactively addressed employment concerns.