

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO TO MITIGATE COVID-19 STIGMATIZATION AT THE WORKPLACE

By Anita Wiafe-Asinor, OML Africa



The Coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China, and was first reported by officials in Wuhan City, China, in December 2019. The virus quickly spread globally due to the global economy that includes frequent domestic and international travel. People who traveled to China and caught the virus carried the virus to other parts of the world unaware due to the incubation period of the virus. The incubation period ranges from one to 14 days before symptoms emerged. The incubation period of the virus partially explains how the disease spread so quickly and widely before being detected. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic on 11th March 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major blow to the world affecting all aspects of life. Great and strong economies are crumbling down, social activities have been brought to a standstill and the list goes on. According to a World Bank Press Release dated June 8, 2020, the world is expected to experience the worst recession since the credit crunch of 2008/2009 with the global economy expected to reduce by 5.2%.this year. Despite all the measures in place to slow down or stop the spread, infection rates remain high in many countries the measures applied to fight the virus include

lock downs, social distancing, and enhanced hand hygiene practices among others which are collectively developing into an emerging “new normal”.

Stigmatization in the workplace

One phenomenon that has accompanied this virus is the issue of stigmatization. Admittedly, stigmatization did not start with COVID-19, stigmatization is also attached to HIV/AIDS and more recently Ebola. Stigmatization in the case of COVID-19 has been reported across many countries and many spheres of life including the medical field specifically frontline health workers. It is rather sad to note that after patients have successfully battled and recovered from COVID-19 they have to progress to fight Stigmatization. Stigmatization is having a significant impact on those affected. They are often isolated, face verbal abuse, shorn by family, friends, and their communities.

The WHO defines Stigma as ” a mark of shame, disgrace or disapproval which results in an individual being rejected, discriminated against, and excluded from participating in several different areas of society”. This is having an impact on victims of stigmatization concerning their mental health, stress, and livelihoods. Stigmatization is not just occurring in communities but is also happening in the workplace. This is having an impact on a worker's mental health, affecting performance negatively due to persistent absence, stress, and anxiety. In a special paper on stigma around COVID-19, the WHO also said the discrimination stemmed from three related factors. First, it is a disease that is novel and for which there are still many unknowns. Second, everyone is afraid of the unknown, and third, it is easy to associate that fear with others. While the WHO said anxiety is “understandable”, stigmatizations that stem from it exert a heavy toll on COVID-19 patients.



There have been reports in some workplaces where stigma is immediately initiated once a worker is heard coughing and seen in an unhealthy state. For some, once a notification is sent to the HR department, like wildfire, the message of a worker allegedly contracting COVID-19 or showing signs of the virus spreads and the stigmatization begins. The worker is greeted with “Sorry” as it may be,

while others show signs of “please don’t come closer”. In the case where the affected employee reports to work with a result stating the recovery from the virus, the employee is greeted with “are you sure you are fine”. Strict use of sanitizers and social distancing when colleagues are around the said employee, “stay away from me” attitude from colleagues or some employees running away when they see recovered work colleagues approaching making it unbearable for victims of stigmatization. The pain is real, stigmatization of recovered patients is real. They go through the pain of loneliness and rejection.

What Employers can do?

Human Resource Departments have a role to play in managing stigmatization in the workplace and the well-being being of workers for optimal performance. An infectious disease policy that includes COVID-19 should be developed and implemented. The policy should cover the protocol for handling workers who contract an infectious virus such as COVID-19 and how recovered workers shall be reintegrated back into the workplace without being stigmatized. The HR and the leadership should champion educating the workforce on the effects of stigmatization through awareness campaigns and talks from victims of stigmatization. Stigmatization should be defined and regarded in the same light as victimization, harassment, discrimination, and bullying and therefore, employees who are found to be exhibiting such behavior should be disciplined and sanctioned accordingly. The Human Resource department should ensure that COVID-19 cases in the workplace are handled confidentially by ensuring information about infected workers are treated as sensitive and managed to take into account data protection laws.



In conclusion, Employers through their human resource departments should ensure that education on COVID-19 is provided and is ongoing to employees and managers to minimize stigmatization. The focus should be on empathy, education as well as the positive aspect of COVID-19 concerning the high percentage of recoveries and preventative measures. Furthermore, emphasis should be

placed on the consequences of stigmatization such as its impact on productivity and the risk of forcing infected colleagues to hide their illness to avoid discrimination and stigmatization which imposes a risk of spread to other colleagues in the workplace. Employers should encourage employees and managers to look out for one another by showing empathy, support to affected colleagues.

References

- World Health Organization (WHO) | World Bank | Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) | OML Africa



CONTACT US

OML Africa

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 973379

Email: services@omlafrica.com

Website: www.omlafrica.com