

CARING FOR WORKERS' MENTAL WELL-BEING

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Mr Francis Ung is the Project Director at Zheng Keng Engineering and Construction Pte Ltd. A recipient of the bizSAFE Partner Award 2020 and the bizSAFE Enterprise Exemplary Award 2020, Zheng Keng strongly believes in taking care of their employees' mental well-being and by offers workplace safety and health programmes to their staff.



Tell us a bit more about your company and what it does.

My name is Francis Ung. I am the Project Director at Zheng Keng Engineering and Construction Pte Ltd, a local Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME). Even though we are a small construction company, we have a diverse portfolio spanning building institutions, student hostels, food and beverage (F&B), nursing homes and bus depots.

Many SMEs think that only MNCs can afford looking after mental well-being as they have more resources and bandwidth. What made your company think otherwise?

MNCs are bigger in terms of size, have more resources, and a bigger budget. Therefore, more professionals are likely to be attracted to MNCs, enabling them to have a larger talent pool.

On the contrary, as an SME, we have limited resources, and we work within a smaller budget. That said, we are proud of our identity and strong in our own branding. We believe in having healthy mental well-being, and we implement it within our means and abilities. Our employees' mental well-being is important to us for the following reasons:

- A safer workforce and reduced employees' injuries
- Reduced workplace stress and anxiety especially during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Reduced absenteeism and overall healthcare cost
- Improved productivity and business performance

Were there challenges that held your company back initially from embarking on mental well-being initiatives? How did you overcome them?

Yes, we initially faced several challenges. Our company was hesitant to participate and embark on the initiatives in view of uncertainties such as costs, resources, and how to go about implementing it. Fortunately, I chanced upon the Total Workplace Safety and Health (Total WSH) programme while attending a seminar organised by the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council in 2019. I learnt that the programme was fully funded by the Government, and having recognised its benefits, I signed up our company for the programme.

What are some of the mental well-being initiatives that your company has in place? Why were these chosen, and who else within the company did you partner with in implementing them?

In caring for the mental well-being of our employees, we organised several workshops:

- A "Stress Management" workshop — we recognise that all of us inevitably face pressure in our lives and as a result, we are likely to feel stressed. However, if a person is constantly under stress, it could lead to a loss of concentration and eventually, health problems. This will have a detrimental effect on our employees.
- A "Nutrition for Healthy Living" workshop — a nutritious diet is beneficial for our bodies and brains. By shaping our diet, we can improve our mental health.
- A "Heart Health" workshop — our employees will be better informed of the importance of heart health.

In addition, we chose to include a workshop on "How to talk so people will listen". We believe that effective communication skills are essential in sending messages across properly, thus avoiding misunderstandings and forming good working relationships among employees.

We also organised the following safety awareness workshops:

- A "Slips, Trips & Falls" workshop — it is important that our employees understand the importance of safety and thereby able to identify any potential hazards, know the associated risks, and practice safe work procedures as implemented in the workplace.
- A "Working at Height" workshop — We place a huge emphasis on our employees' safety, especially when they are doing such high-risk activities. We expect our employees, while working at height, to know how to identify possible hazards and mitigate the risks, follow the control measures implemented in the workplace, and attend regular safety talks and trainings provided.

Our top management is very supportive of these programmes. Together with the Human Resource department, administrative staff and WSH Officers, we had much success in improving the overall health and mental well-being of our company.

How have your employees benefitted from these initiatives? In turn, how has your company gained from such improvements?

Our employees have certainly benefited from the programmes. Now, they know how to better manage their stress at work by adopting good practices such as taking deep breaths, eating right and sleeping well. The company also helps employees by encouraging open, comfortable and secure communication, offering flexible work schedules and time-off, as well as introducing group meditation classes and other well-being workshops.

In return, our company has benefited from having a healthier and safer workforce, with less injuries. We have also seen a reduction

in absenteeism and healthcare costs, and improved productivity and business performance.

What advice would you offer other SMEs in creating a more conducive and supportive environment to encourage open conversations about mental well-being at the workplace?

Some SMEs may not be aware of the availability of such programmes. In addition, most SMEs, similar to our situation at the beginning, might not understand and appreciate such programmes, and thus have concerns and face issues such as budget and resource constraints. All these factors might make them hesitant to participate in the programmes. As such, I encourage SMEs who have benefited from these programmes to spread the word to other SMEs. We could share personal experiences and insights having gone through the programmes ourselves. SMEs who are unsure of how to begin their mental well-being journey could also engage the WSH Council for advice and more information.

What advice would you offer to employees who may be affected by mental health issues at work?

It is important that employers provide a safe environment for their employees, so that they will feel at ease to speak openly. Employees who face mental well-being issues at work are encouraged to communicate with their managers so they could identify the stressors and work together to come up with possible solutions. Employees can also participate in mental wellness programmes to help manage their stress.

What is your wish for the mental well-being of Singapore's workforce?

Everyone needs to recognise that taking care of our mental well-being is just as important as taking care of our physical health. Mental well-being programmes should be actively promoted to Singapore's workforce so that more employees will be aware of them, and hence can benefit from them. In addition, I also wish that employees' mental well-being can be integrated within the organisation and inculcated in its culture, leadership and people management.

What do you think the government can do to better support SMEs?

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on many industries. Many SMEs are still struggling to survive and sustain their operations. With workers' mental health being a growing concern, I hope the Government can extend support to SMEs by providing grants to assist us during this difficult period, as we take up programmes to support our employees' mental well-being needs. We all hope to see healthier, more efficient, and safer workplaces around Singapore.

Find out how your company can manage your employees' health and safety in an integrated way, and educate them on how to better care for their well-being through our **Total Workplace Safety and Health Programme**.