When Nigel Jones was a teenager, he wanted to be a doctor. In the event, he became a lawyer, spending 32 years at Linklaters, the Magic Circle law firm. Medicine’s loss has been the City’s gain. Not only because of Nigel’s talents as a lawyer – that goes without saying. But also because he has been willing to put his head above the parapet to champion those suffering from mental ill health in the workplace and to encourage businesses to help employees keep themselves well.

His biggest intervention on this front was to co-found the City Mental Health Alliance (CMHA) – a group of banks, professional services firms, law firms and corporates in the City that recognise the importance of improving the way mental health is addressed in the workplace.

Deloitte research reveals that poor mental health is costing the UK economy up to £99bn a year, of which £42bn is falling to employers. For Nigel, setting up the alliance to improve the quality of the working environment for City professionals – and thus their mental wellbeing – not only made good business sense, he says it was also “morally and ethically the right thing to do.”

City experience

Nigel’s own time in the City has been hugely positive – an experience he wants others to have. It has allowed him to amass a range of new skills and work with “fantastically gifted, kind and generous people”. He even met his wife through work.

However, the City was never his intended destination. His father was a geologist and his mother was a part-time teacher. His grandparents came from the farming and teaching professions in the depths of the West Wales countryside, so there were never any footsteps to follow into the Square Mile. His ambitions to be a doctor were frustrated early on in life by poor careers advice, so he ended up reading biochemistry at Oxford University. It was his undergraduate research project that sparked an interest in a preventative approach to tackling ill health in general. It also sparked a realisation that he didn’t want to be a research scientist, but did want to put his scientific skills to good use in some way when he left university.

At the time, intellectual property (IP) was an emerging area of law. Legal firms were looking for science graduates who could understand the technical intricacies of the work pharmaceutical firms were doing. On completing his legal education in 1986, Nigel joined the IP practice of Linklaters, where he stayed for his entire career. Shortly after making partner in 1995, he set up Linklaters’ first industry sector group, focused on healthcare. It was through this work that he realised we as individuals are ultimately responsible for keeping ourselves well and that the workplace could have an influence on that. Linklaters was already doing a lot on this front, providing an in-house gym, a staff restaurant, health insurance and an employee assistance programme. What the firm didn’t have was a senior partner to say to the firm and the outside world that its focus on health and wellbeing was important.

Nigel became Linklaters’ first health and wellbeing partner champion. One of the first things he did was sign off a stress management policy, which had been sitting in a drawer unapproved because it had never had partner backing. He also went on a roadshow around the firm with the in-house GP, rolling out the policy and explaining why it was important to take it seriously.

Launching the CMHA

During this time, one question that plagued Nigel was why the firm engaged in work practices that partners knew to be counterproductive to the quality of client service, profitability and the health of employees. The answer? That the clients, including the banks and accounting firms, demanded it. So he decided to ask the clients why. An informal conversation over a coffee with two contacts (one from a City bank and one from a City accounting firm) led to the creation of the CMHA.

They recognised that people were their most valuable asset, so why were they, separately, putting so much pressure on them? Could they work together to tackle...
Not everyone has been convinced, however. Making the health and wellbeing of staff a business consideration would require major change across the City, not just to its notorious long-hours culture. Those who have worked in the Square Mile understand that a nine-to-five-working day isn’t feasible if tight client deadlines are to be met, but that’s what Nigel is advocating. He is looking for a more nuanced approach.

“It’s about changing the way we interact with people so that they understand why they’re working hard, that they feel they have a purpose and that if they have worked hard for a period, they are then going to get a bit of a downtime so that people are not working 24/7, 52 weeks a year without this sign of where the light at the end of the tunnel may be,” he says.

Unhealthy behaviour

He also believes City firms shouldn’t reward unhealthy behaviour – such as presenteeism, answering emails within two minutes of them arriving, and checking work messages at 3am – with promotion and pay rises. It is better, he says, to have people who are well rested doing quality work during the working day.

There are managerial behaviours that the City needs to move away from, too, such as issuing work with a deadline on a Monday deadline at 6pm the previous Friday. “That happens a lot, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately,” says Nigel. “I think that one of the key things that we should look to move away from is putting too much pressure on the quality of life of the people involved, but also so that we can recruit and retain those people into our organisations and ensure that they can, over their careers, continue to provide that quality of life and responsiveness to whoever is asking the question.”

Nigel makes a point of asking about his team’s personal commitments so that he can do his best to accommodate them. It may not always be possible, but the two-way communication flow is one way to make people feel valued within the workplace. According to the unrealistic deadlines, other factors of City life need to be tackled: constant pressure; shouting at employees; not treating them as individuals; and not caring about their lives outside work. “All of those things can increase stress on people unnecessarily and, if you think about it, there’s too much of that, for certain people that can move on to create illness,” says Nigel.

// IT IS BETTER TO HAVE PEOPLE WHO ARE WELL RESTED DOING QUALITY WORK DURING THE WORKING DAY

He wants to see City leaders demonstrate more positive behaviours. Question unreasonable deadlines set by clients and offer more realistic alternatives, doing this in front of junior staff gives them permission to question unrealistic internal deadlines, too. Encourage people to take time away from their desks to rest and re-energise at a time that suits them. Talk openly about weekend activities and ask colleagues about their weekends, it gives them permission to have a personal life. Most importantly, leaders should actively listen to their team members, ask how they are and show a genuine interest in their welfare. If you do that regularly and not just in response to something, says Nigel, you will instinctively know when something is different – or even wrong.

Change is coming

As positive as it is, might be, how much can they really change? The City rewards, through promotion, people who work long hours, don’t complain and don’t question anything. People who succeed in that way transmit that mindset to the next generation. However, Nigel believes a change is coming.

“I think we’re at a point where the younger generation isn’t prepared to just do it the same way, therefore, I think adaptability, creativity and change is necessary at the more senior end,” he says.

Nigel is now starting to see things differently because that’s the way people have behaved for a long time. It’s been an advantage, he says, but a very difficult transition because that’s the way people have been conditioned to work. “It’s been a long journey, it’s the way people have behaved for too long,” he adds. “We’ve seen a real change. The way people think now is very different. It shows that governments get distracted by all sorts of things.”

To this end, Nigel stresses that business leaders should not wait for the government to take the lead on this issue. A practical CMHA guide on how to implement the recommendations of the Stevenson-Farmer review has generated more positive feedback from members than anything the alliance has done, he says.

Moving on

As Nigel moves to a portfolio career, he plans to remain involved in the campaign for a better working environment in the City and beyond. Through coaching and leadership development work, he aims to help people recognise the importance of their health, and he will continue to tell the story of the CMHA – a role he has held since 2016 and which he gave up at the end of May 2019.

When Nigel retired from Linklaters in 2018 and ceased to be fully active in the City, he made a decision to also step down as chair of the alliance – a role he has held since 2010 and which made a decision to also step down as chair of the alliance – a role he has held since 2010 and which he gave up at the end of May 2019.

He also wants to see more public debate about the topic. “We can’t assume, he says, that everyone understands all the things we’re trying to do and we have to think about how we take those views into account.

Outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May took the debate to the public in a big way when, in January 2017, she appointed Mind’s Paul Farmer and Lord Dennis Stevenson, a former chair of Halifax Bank of Scotland, to lead an independent review of mental health and employers. Nigel sat on its Expert Advisory Panel.

The resulting report – Thriving at work: a fairer, healthier future for all, published in October 2017 – calls on employers to adopt six ‘mental health core principles’, covering areas such as raising awareness, line management responsibilities and monitoring staff mental health. The report has been little action from the government since it published its response to the report in November 2017, accepting its recommendations in full.

On advice for organisations

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“We are social animals. We need human interaction, and organisations that discourage it or don’t actively promote it will do well less than those who do.”

On the importance of sharing

Nigel stresses that businesses need to share their experiences and solutions with other organisations, and that the City needs to do more to help people and organisations accelerate the pace through this journey, both by sharing what they have done and, importantly, understanding that may take some time to achieve.

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