

Business Network Briefing: why menopause is a workplace issue

Tuesday 09 February 2021

Q&A

Professor Jo Brewis:

One comment centred on the difficulties experienced in open plan offices where there is no temperature control. This is a perennial difficulty and I'm afraid I don't have an easy solution to it. I suppose what I would say is that, where it is possible to open windows (e.g. in Michael Young Building at the OU), a request to be moved next to a window that opens is certainly a request for a reasonable adjustment. Otherwise I often recommend USB desktop fans which are less likely to disturb colleagues working alongside you. Again, as I suggested during the presentation, wider discussion and awareness raising of the issues which women with menopausal symptoms can face at work also goes a long way in getting colleagues on board.

Office lights were also mentioned as a potential problem – I couldn't agree more, especially in my own workplace where the lights are motion sensitive and cannot be turned off. I very much hope that whatever the new normal is post-pandemic will be a much more flexible approach to work so that those who prefer to (not possible or desirable for everyone of course) can work from much more frequently to avoid some of these environmental difficulties.

Another comment suggested that “the drop in confidence/ cognitive energy in high-performance, highly measured workplaces needs some focus too”. This is absolutely spot on. My own experience is that the cognitive effects of menopause (as well as hot flushes, acne and urinary incontinence) have been very challenging. I am lucky in that I have a lot of autonomy at work so I can arrange my days around my symptoms more easily. I think more flexibility in working patterns will go a long way to supporting women with these psychological symptoms as well as helping with physical symptoms. To reiterate, an understanding and supportive organizational culture is really important here as well.

Someone also suggested that recruitment bias is an issue for mid-life women, and another comment centred on them being the more likely candidates for redundancy. Again I agree entirely but this to me underscores the need for much wider myth busting around menopause as a workplace issue so these harmful stereotypes can be dispelled. As I suggested during the presentation, and although we are not in any way perfect on these issues, we have moved an enormously long way in addressing pregnancy and maternity discrimination at work in the last 40 years or so. I want to see the same happening around menopause, and I do believe we are on the right track, in the UK at least. Certainly since I started doing this work in January 2016, and with the wonderful provision from Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace, thousands of employers are now tackling menopause, from a standing start of a literal handful in the UK with any provision at all.

Another comment centred on headway also being made in Ireland, which is wonderful to hear. I know Henpicked have at least one trainer who is based in Ireland and would be happy to put you in touch with them if that would be helpful.

I mentioned some research by Hardy *et al.* on management training around menopause at work. The full reference is:

Hardy, C., Griffiths, A. and Hunter, M.S. (2019) 'Development and evaluation of online menopause awareness training for line managers in UK organizations', *Maturitas*, 120: 83-89.

I also mentioned the limited number of studies evaluating workplace interventions. This is definitely an area of research which needs more attention. Those I am aware of (as well as the Hardy *et al.* paper above) are as follows:

Ariyoshi, H. (2008) 'Development and evaluation of a women's health support system at a Japanese company', *American Association of Occupational Health Nurses Journal*¹, 56 (7): 289-296.

Ariyoshi, H. (2009) 'Evaluation of menopausal interventions at a Japanese company', *American Association of Occupational Health Nurses Journal*, 57 (3): 106-111.

Hardy, C., Griffiths, A., Norton, S. and Hunter, M.S. (2018) 'Self-help cognitive behavior therapy for working women with problematic hot flushes and night sweats (MENOS@Work): a multicenter randomized controlled trial', *Menopause*, 25 (5): 508-519.

Rutanen, R. Nygård, C-H., Moilanen, J., Mikkola, T., Raitanen, J., Tomas, E. and Luoto, R.. (2014a) 'Effect of physical exercise on work ability and daily strain in symptomatic menopausal women: a randomized controlled trial', *Work*, 47 (2): 281-286.

¹ Now known as *Workplace Health & Safety*.

Rutanen, R., Luoto, R., Raitanen, J., Mansikkamäki, K., Tomás, E. and Nygård, C-H. (2014b) 'Short- and long-term effects of a physical exercise intervention on work ability and work strain in symptomatic menopausal women', *Safety and Health at Work*, 5 (4): 186-190.

Verburgh, M., Verdonk, P., Appelman, Y., Brood-van Zanten, M. and Nieuwenhuijsen, J. (2020) '“I get that spirit in me”- mentally empowering workplace health promotion for female workers in low-paid jobs during menopause and midlife', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 1-21. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17186462.

I have also done some evaluative research myself at a hospitals trust but unfortunately can't share the report because of confidentiality.