



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

## **Is client behaviour a contributor to putting at risk the mental health of agency personnel?**

**“47% of marcoms employees believe that demands from clients are playing a part in bringing about their personal stress at work”. These were the words of Spencer Gallagher, CEO Cact.us and author of *Agencynomics*. He was proposing the motion, 'Client behaviour is a contributor to putting at risk the mental health of agency personnel' at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 20 May 2019. The debate was sponsored by the Marketing Agencies Action Group (MAAG) and chaired by Daniel Zeichner, Labour Member of Parliament for Cambridge.**

Spencer Gallagher felt he was in a unique position to discuss this ‘skeleton in the closet’, with no client conflict to restrict his point of view. As a Board Director working daily with agency leaders and their wider teams, he witnesses first hand examples of the ever increasing deteriorating state of mental health issues in the agency workplace. He is not debating the holistic cause of mental health in agencies today, but arguing that there is a problem and that client behaviour is contributing to it. He has empathy for agency clients who also have their own stresses and mental health challenges. It must be very challenging for them too at times to deal with their own organisational decisions to drive unrealistic deadlines, expectations and bringing procurement to the process, which often removes any opportunity for a true agency-client partnership focusing on the mutually successful outcomes everyone wants to achieve.

Spencer Gallagher presented findings from a survey conducted by *The Drum*, working with Opinium, a leading market research company and the University of Warwick in April/May 2019, to examine the mental well-being of Marcoms agencies. James Endersby, CEO of Opinium, presented the findings during mental health awareness week at the MAAG Festival of Happiness. The findings showed that marcoms workers have significantly lower mental well-being scores than the wider working population. 85% have struggled with their mental health compared with 53% of the wider population.

Spencer Gallagher pointed out that a ‘contributor’ is defined as someone who plays a part in bringing something about and therefore the fact that employees believe that demands from clients are playing a part in bringing about their personal stress at work is of concern.

He described his experience of working with agencies all over the world and contended that their businesses are very progressive in terms of culture; they have staff well-being at the heart, compared with other sectors. Office spaces are created to be more like second homes than a work space and

agencies are leaders in offering progressive benefits such as flexible working as standard. The dozen or so agencies he works with all have leading tools in place to measure employee satisfaction or eNPS scores (employee net promotion scores). Many of the agencies have well over +50 and as high as +75 against an average of +10 across Europe. When points are dropped, it is the result of hours worked, the stress of unrealistic deadlines and the demands of clients and their behaviours.

A Digiday survey, among 446 agency professionals in 2019 pointed to a correlation between mental health and the number of hours agency professionals are working a week. Our industry is driven by pitches, re-pitches and tenders. That work is carried out either in hours or out of hours. In hours means other client work will be done out of hours to catch up. Out of hours means staff are working nights and weekends in a large number of cases. Spencer Gallagher believes there is a 'wilful blindness' when it comes to free pitching. He compared the situation to Nike in the '70s, '80s and '90s, saying they did not realise that their Asian manufacturers who were delivering high quality competitive products were running sweatshops. Shouldn't brands remove the procurement process, take more personal care and interest in the health of agencies, remove the unpaid pitch process and create a more transparent system? The work outcomes would be more likely to be successful for the brands, and prices for projects and campaigns will more than likely fall not rise.

There would be massive upsides: a more efficient, less tired, less stressed staff and lower sickness and employee turnover rate in the workplace.

There are other ways clients can contribute to stress of agency personnel e.g. excessive payment terms, bullying, stealing agency ideas, and even sexual harassment.

Spencer Gallagher did not suggest that client behaviour is malicious or with intent, but there is a real problem with the behaviour of many clients and the lack of empathy and understanding of the stress they cause.

### **Pastoral care**

Opposing the motion, **Josh Krichefski, CEO, Mediacom**, stressed that he is on record in saying there is nothing more important than the mental health of employees. Mediacom is an industry leader in mental health awareness. It has trained 55 of its people to be Mental Health Allies – there to listen and support anyone with mental health issues and also to signpost mental health professionals, if that is needed. All senior level staff have been trained so they can use (and role model) the right language, behaviour and support, as well as assisting when issues are escalated. The staff are actively encouraged to come up with ideas of things they want to see in place, to help shape the direction of working this area. Mediacom has shared its progress so far in this area with the wider industry through events and booklets. Over 150 clients and media owners attended a recent meeting to share this thinking. Progress is audited and reflected in the fact that staff churn rate is about half the industry average.

Mediacom is not doing this because it thinks that an agency is a place that causes mental health problems, but because there is a very high incidence of mental health problems in society at large, especially among young people – the age range that makes up a major part of the agency.

Because people spend a significant part of their lives at work, companies have a duty to take their pastoral care very seriously indeed. "We believe that when you come to work, you should feel completely accepted for who you are. You should feel safe. You should feel that you belong. And if you don't feel OK, you should be able to speak to someone without any risk of judgement".

The reasoning behind the motion is that clients are demanding more for less; this is putting pressure on agencies, creating stress for their people and causing mental health problems.

Mental health is a very complex area, but the idea that stress causes mental health problems is simplistic and often misleading. According to an article in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, "there is a clear gulf between public and professional beliefs about mental disorders". MIND, the UK mental health charity, says, "Mental health problems can have a wide range of causes. It is likely that for many people there is a complicated combination of factors". For instance, the following factors could potentially result in a period of poor mental health:

- Childhood abuse, trauma or neglect
- Social isolation or loneliness
- Experience of discrimination and stigma
- Social disadvantage, poverty or debt
- Bereavement
- Severe or long-term stress
- Having a long-term physical health condition
- Unemployment or losing your job
- Homelessness or poor housing
- Being a long-term carer for someone
- Drug and alcohol misuse
- Domestic violence, bullying or other abuse as an adult
- Significant trauma as an adult e.g. military combat, involvement in a serious incident in which you feared for your life; being the victim of a violent crime
- Physical causes e.g. a head injury or a neurological condition.

It is a long list and, of course, it is often going to be a combination of factors that are involved. Stress *is* there, but it is very clearly defined as 'severe and long-term stress'. It is not having 'a bad day at work', 'facing a demanding deadline' or even, 'being a victim of rude behaviour, but 'severe or long-term stress'.

Stress itself is not a negative thing. According to the classic definition of stress – the Yerkes-Dodson Curve – lack of stress is as bad for us as too much stress. We need a certain level of stress to function at our best. Work is meant to be stressful. That kind of stress can be good for us.

Josh Krichesfski acknowledged that clients are putting more pressure on their agencies to do more for less. But he believes that this should never translate into 'severe and long-term stress' for agency personnel. If on rare occasions it does, this is *not* the client's fault. Clients want more for less. They want great work consistently and at times they may, like any business paying a fee, exert some pressure to help achieve that. But it is the job of agency leadership and senior account management to manage the pressure that comes from clients so that excessive long-term stress does not arise. This is transformative teaching – that we can learn to manage feelings more skilfully and play our part in ensuring that the pressures of life generally do not overwhelm us. We can choose how to respond.

If clients put too much pressure on the agency, agency leaders and managers should push back in discussions with their clients and have open and honest discussions with them. Managers and other personnel must be trained so they are protected and can protect themselves. Protecting people is part of a manager's job. Personnel must be educated about how to manage their stress. Each person is responsible for managing their stress and pressures.

Increased pressure does not inevitably create stresses for agency people and it should never create the kind of 'severe and long-term stress' that could cause mental health issues. If that is ever allowed to happen it is the fault of the agency leadership and management, not the client.

### **Moral compass**

Seconding the motion, **Thomas Duncan Bell, MD, The Kingsman, and mental health expert known as 'The Bipolar Businessman'** agreed there are lots of issues contributing to mental health.

He feels the biggest injustice in our society is that people are seen as a commodity, whose time can be bought and sold with little or no value, but all we really have as human beings is time. It is no wonder that people within businesses across the UK, irrespective of industry, feel used and frankly not well cared for by the companies they work with.

Thomas Duncan Bell contended that we are all human beings on the same spectrum. We are all one mind and millions of evolutions and variations of it. Every one of us will know sadness in our lives, every one of us will experience fear, anger or hatred at some stage.

You only know the reality of your own story. We must not presume to make assumptions about each other, we need to embrace humanity and rid ourselves of our societal multi-dimensional anxiety.

In addition to a big budget agency with limited concerns in terms of their evolving customer base, the motion is also on behalf of the 15,000+ smaller agencies across the UK today, 83% of which suggest they suffer primarily because of clients contributing to the mental ill health of the individuals within their business. The concerns we are debating are not something that can be argued with a single subjective study: just because some companies thrive off each other financially, does not ensure a happy workplace.

Companies in our major cities are primarily operating at only 60% efficiency, because of the mental well being of their staff. 45% of onset mental health issues stem from the working structure or working environment.

Thomas Duncan Bell confided, “During my time, I’ve been violently sworn at and verbally abused by drunken clients after hours, I’ve been forced to accept ridiculous payment terms that put my company at risk, for fear of not winning a given bid. I’ve been paid late, anywhere between 60 and 360 days, across a portfolio of 650 clients. I’ve spent time, money and energy delivering opportunities for customers, even celebrities, who’ve shafted me out of any money at the point of closing the business and I’ve spent thousands of pounds as an SME, attempting to win big bids or tenders, that have been granted to others with no further contact from the people requesting my involvement after submission...I represent the everyman, and if we tackle this issue head on, then we can effectively rid the UK of nearly half the mental health issues we face through working life, or at the very least, manage those issues”.

Societally, for the most part, we are not about individuals. We are weighed and measured based on gender, age, race, sexual preference, bank balance and beyond, to enable our processors in the UK to categorise our ‘needs’. The reality is, that none of these elements mean we have the formula we need..... Because none of these elements define what it is to be truly human. The debate here tonight is about a given issue, in a select industry, but it is also about how every business interacts with every other business, in an economy that is still relatively volatile and will continue to be for some time.

14 years ago, people were happy to be spoon-fed a product or service proposition, but the nature of the human being over time is that we desire more. Companies need to begin to interact more readily, based on their core values. It is not about vanity, the bubbly on contract sign-off, the fancy invitations to suave events, only really used to lobby a sale. It is what we are trying to achieve in terms of an overarching ethos of ethics

Until our business leaders sit down and establish a protocol, a standard to meet and to be chastised by if necessary, then we can never hope for any more than a wild west scenario. Everyone here has an internal moral compass. If a decision feels wrong, then more often than not, it is.

Thomas Duncan Bell argued that our UK businesses are burdened primarily by pride. They ask the following questions:

- Do we turn over enough money?
- Are our clients well-known brands?

- Do we need more staff?
- Who's right in the state of conflict, the client or the agency?

Thomas Duncan Bell suggested different questions, a way of honour and intention, taking care of the compass within:

- Who cares who's right or wrong? Is it worth focusing on that in your mind while your wife just wants a family dinner together?
- What does it matter about the next bid, if you miss your children's first steps?
- Who cares if your clients are well-known, if their ethos does not match your own?
- What's the point in more staff, if your foundation is flawed?

He went on to confess "my father passed away while I was sweating anxiety for someone else's private wealth to accumulate".

He believes that every organisation which has ever claimed its company does not suffer because of the mental health of its workforce, has on deeper analysis been found wanting. 25% of our UK population suffers from some extremity of mental health disorder, but 100% of the population still suffer everyday as they find their way through the extremities of life.

Thomas Duncan Bell concluded "If you ask me whether I think client behaviour is a contributor to putting at risk the mental health of agency personnel, I will tell you that I do.....but until every business, from the one-man band to the blue chip, stands proud alongside its values and holds aloft that moral compass that guides us all as human beings, we can never hope to change the state of play. We can never hope to truly connect; which in essence is the only real purpose of this thing we term life".

### **Business cultures**

Seconding the opposition, **Kerry Chilvers, Brands Director, Direct Line Group**, pointed out that clients are human – real people who like other people and do not want to cause harm. "Even if you think clients are selfish, inhuman corporate animals, who would be happy to put other people's mental health at risk, *why* would we do that? What good could it possibly do to us? Do clients want more for less? Yes, we do. But the question is – *what* do we want more of? Do we want more agency personnel working under horrible levels of stress? No. How could that possibly help us? Do we want our account teams working so miserably that people are constantly leaving? No. How could that possibly help us?"

Kerry Chilvers went on to point out that when people are under severe and long-term stress it causes defensiveness, lack of motivation and difficulty in concentrating. It affects people's health, resulting in errors, reduced productivity and interpersonal conflict, which can lead to disenchantment, absence and churn. Of course clients do not want their agency teams to be working like that.

What clients want more of is Great Work – ideas that will differentiate them; ideas that are brave and that make them braver. They want brilliant executions that – in a highly competitive market – will drive results for their brands and businesses. And you do not get great ideas from people working in unbearable conditions and you do not get great ideas from agencies whose staff are in constant churn. What you get in that situation is 'will this do?' work – work that is just barely good enough, work done to 'get the client off our back'.

Kerry Chilvers maintained that to get the great work her company wants, it thinks very carefully about how it works in its own teams and how it works with its agency partners. It thinks very carefully about the culture it creates

- so that people can work at their best
- so that people can be creative

- so that people can be free to challenge
- and so that people can work effectively together.

Sometimes the company gets it wrong, but great client service is not about saying ‘yes’ to everything.

Great client/agency relationships are built on frank conversations that focus on how best they can work together. Even if it seems difficult. The more open the conversations are, the more likely it is that there will be something that works for both agency and client. “If we do get it wrong and are asking for more than is sustainable, tell us”.

Like agency leaders, clients are responsible for driving successful business. They also lead large teams under pressure. They face many of the same challenges as agencies – rapidly changing business models, the data revolution, economic uncertainty, disruptive technologies. These macro factors have been building globally for many years.

Kerry Chilvers stressed the importance of resilience and adaptability to change. Change is relentless and clients cannot shield their people from it or shield their agency team.

What we can do is make sure that the company helps its people to manage change – to be mindful, resilient and flexible. And it gives them the tools they need to achieve this.

We are all becoming more aware of the mental health crisis in the UK and its impact on people and businesses. The Direct Line Group recognises the positive change it can drive by making mental health an open conversation.

Kerry Chilvers stressed the importance of supporting employees when they have mental health issues and the role the company can play in protecting mental well-being, including making people resilient to change. She outlined the ways in which the Group is tackling this issue:

- Training 135 mental health first aiders
- All the staff have access to free confidential support – with independent, impartial advice and trained councillors on any issue affecting their well-being
- All people managers have had Mental Health Awareness training
- The Group has partnered with Mind.
- It has run a Mental Health First Aid Conference with over 650 colleagues coming together to collaborate with mental health campaigners.
- The Group expects its people to work with partner organisations, like its agencies.

The normal day-to-day pressures of work are not the cause of mental ill-health. Clients do not want to place horrendous levels of pressure on their agencies which lead to severe and long-term stress. They are real people and respect other people. But there is also no business benefit in such behaviour.

Clients cannot change the world in which we operate. Neither can agency leadership. What we can do is focus very clearly on building cultures where our people can thrive; and where they feel supported in managing their lives, including their mental health.

### **Discussion from the floor**

For the motion

- Every client tends to be larger than their agency and the larger they are the slower they tend to pay. People running agencies get very stressed when clients do not pay.
- Certain client behaviour e.g. pitching for work; delay in paying, contribute to mental health issues. It is not the client himself/herself.

- Demanding that people create great work contributes to stress, but this is a symptom of the industry. People working in the industry tend to be right brain and prone to anxiety. Employers are not bad, but they do not necessarily have the resources to support their employees. It is not individual clients who are the problem.
- We have to have the right balance and the more transparent the relationship the better. The pressure on agencies to perform is always there and this creates mental health challenges.
- The discussion of stress and mental health in the workplace is something new.
- There is a collaborative process with good clients, but some clients treat agency personnel like employees.
- In some cases even clients with good policies about client/agency relationships, contribute to agency stress.
- Client/agency relationships are an industry-wide issue, not an agency problem.
- A lot of stress is created before the agency gets the job. A lot more thought should go into the pitching process. Once the client/agency relationship is formed, things usually work OK.
- The structure of client/agency relationship needs to be managed. Inability to manage this structure can contribute to mental ill health.
- It is the responsibility of client and agency to work together so that inappropriate behaviour is not unchecked. It should not be left as an issue.
- Stress is caused by clients asking people to work overtime and stay away from their families, as well as not paying on time. If these factors are caused by the client, it is difficult for the agency to manage.
- The contributor from Japan referred to stress caused by cross-country misunderstanding and uncertainty and the need for open discussion to avoid this.

#### Against the motion

- The contributor, who had grown up in the war, with the fear of bombs, suggested that experience of stress is different according to your age. He suggested that if stress is handled well, people can be conditioned to cope with it. We try to make business stress-free, but it is inevitable to have stress and pressure in the workplace. People working in marcoms feel it because they tend to be sensitive people. He believes it is bad employers who lead to the problem, not clients.
- It is the job of the agency to have a structure that spots issues and deals with them.
- We are facing other causes of stress in our industry e.g. working in London; overtime.
- Stress affects people's coping mechanism. Creative people tend to be very subjective and if a client is not happy, it can feel like bullying. Clients do not behave badly intentionally.

#### Undecided

- It is very important to differentiate between stress and mental ill health. Stress is not a bad thing. Mental ill health is not something that appears because of work; it is usually there.
- The word 'contributes' is important. We are a relatively new industry and the tools to measure behaviour are constantly changing. We have to justify our position in the workplace and this contributes to stress.

#### Summing up

Summing up for the opposition, **Josh Krichefski** admitted he suffered from anxiety and insomnia which is related to work. There is no question that we get stressed at work, but client behaviour does not cause mental illness anymore than life itself. Life is stressful, whether in the workplace, at home, in relationships with friends or within families.

Sustained, long-term pressure of any sort may cause all sorts of serious conditions but surely that is not what we are talking about here. We are talking about the ordinary rough and tumble of commercial life in this industry and to isolate such client behaviour as a contributing cause of mental

illness or even an increase of such is to distort cause and consequence in a way that would be unhelpful in the management of real mental illness.

A mental health issue may have been exacerbated by such behaviour but to think that it has been the cause of it might misplace and misdirect the appropriate remedy.

We are all subject to pressures of one kind or another which make us unhappy and cause us distress. That is not mental illness. Clinical illness is an altogether more serious condition. The ordinary stresses caused by client behaviour in this industry may give rise to unhappiness, indeed, distress, but that is a far cry from mental illness.

Summing up for the motion, **Spencer Gallagher** argued that stress from work among marcoms agencies was staggering. It was difficult to have conversations with clients and the procurement process adds to the stress. He cited the last pitch he had made when he had 36 hours without sleep. The competitive environment is very stressful and the client has to play some part in this.

He called for more empathy from clients and better margins so that agencies can invest in training.

Today's workplace with continuous emails is a much harder place to work than in previous decades. He argued that 85% of people in marcoms companies are suffering from stress caused by clients.

### **The result**

The motion was carried.

### **Next debate**

The next debate will take place on **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2019** sponsored by the Direct Marketing Association. For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, e-mail: [doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com](mailto:doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com)