

The role of small business advisers recognised in mental health challenge

This year has played havoc with many small-medium enterprise (SME) owners, with a 2020 study commissioned by the Department of Innovation, Science, Energy and Resources (DISER) reporting that nearly one in three had been diagnosed with stress, depression or anxiety in the past 12 months.

It's an issue reinforced by global small-business platform Xero, whose own research revealed that 42 per cent of Australian small business owners are concerned about their own mental health and 44 per cent about the mental health of their employees.

With trusted business advisers often playing a frontline role in recognising the challenges, a raft of resources and training has been developed this year for advisers to understand more about mental health and how to provide support to someone who might be struggling.

Xero has collaborated with Beyond Blue to develop a free online mental health and wellbeing course, [Mental wellbeing: support yourself and small businesses](#), designed to give small business advisers the skills to care for their own mental health and that of their small business owner clients. Xero's support for the course was driven by its research and awareness that owners regularly turn to their advisers during challenging times.

With this in mind, the course has been developed to improve business advisers' mental health and wellbeing literacy and give them the skills to have an empathetic conversation with their small business owner clients.

"Small business owners turn to established and trusted business networks for advice and support, particularly during tough times," says Beyond Blue Board Director and Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman Kate Carnell. "This course will provide advisors who often see first-hand how stress can affect small-business owners with the confidence and tools to play a crucial support role that goes beyond advice on accounts and assets."

Vital training for accountants

A program to help accountants better support the mental health of small business clients will be rolled out in 2021 thanks to a \$2.4 million grant to Deakin Business School's (DBS) [IPA-Deakin SME Research Centre](#).

DBS researcher Professor Andrew Noblet said the project, funded by a DISER grant, would deliver a sector-wide accountant professional development program online via Australia's three accounting professional bodies. "The DISER funded project will upskill accountants so they can provide mental health first aid to their SME clients," Professor Noblet said. "It recognises the significant mental health challenges facing both SME owners and accountants (who provide advice to SMEs) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic."

The DISER project builds on the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) project that DBS researchers have been working on with Beyond Blue, WorkSafe Victoria, the Institute for Public Accountants (IPA) and Mental Health First Aid Australia.



Jimmy Trpcevski, Managing Partner, WA Insolvency Solutions

Deakin Vice-Chancellor Professor Iain Martin said the grant was supporting sector-wide continuous professional development for accountants. “The program will upskill accountants to provide mental health first aid to their small-medium enterprise clients. It also provides an important avenue for the early identification, management, or prevention of various mental health conditions,” he said.

Jirsch Sutherland is committed to continually increasing its mental health literacy across the firm – and was this year accredited as a Gold Mental Health First Aid Skilled Workplace by Mental Health First Aid Australia. The majority of its Partners, Principals and Managers have undertaken the Mental Health First Aid course and the firm continues to shine a spotlight on the topic.

“COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on many people’s mental health and unfortunately it will continue to impact our lives in 2021, which is why it’s so important to keep making mental health a priority,” says Jimmy Trpcevski, Managing Partner of WAIS (Jirsch Sutherland’s WA division). “Resources such as the one developed by Xero and Beyond Blue, and the research being undertaken by DBS are crucial, and we applaud these initiatives.”