

John Lee, CE of HKSAR, welcomes focus on Mental Health.

John Lee's workplace mental health agenda is built around a voluntary "Mental Health Workplace Charter" that he presents as a cornerstone of his response to Hong Kong's growing mental health crisis at work. The Charter is intended to encourage employers to move beyond ad-hoc wellness activities towards a more structured, principled approach to mental health as part of how they manage people and risk. At the same time, it is a soft-law instrument: it relies on voluntary commitments, public recognition, and peer pressure, rather than new legal duties, to shift behaviour within organizations.

At its core, the Workplace Charter is a pledge system. Employers that sign up commit, in broad terms, to fostering a mentally healthy work environment, promoting early help-seeking, and reducing stigma. Typical elements include raising awareness among leaders and staff; reviewing workloads, hours, and management practices that drive chronic stress; providing access to support, such as counselling, employee assistance programs, or medical benefits; and training managers to recognize warning signs and respond appropriately. The government has linked the Charter to an annual campaign, with themes such as work-life balance, stress management, or psychological safety, and offers public recognition to organizations that participate and report progress.

John Lee consistently links this Charter to his wider policy narrative that mental health is not only a social or medical issue, but also a competitiveness issue for Hong Kong. In speeches and policy papers, he frames mental health as part of the city's talent and productivity strategy: a financially and emotionally exhausted workforce is bad for business, and poor mental-health practices are a drag on performance, retention, and innovation. The Charter is therefore presented as a practical way for employers to protect human capital, reduce absenteeism and presenteeism, and align with rising ESG expectations around the "social" pillar, particularly for listed companies and financial institutions that face global scrutiny.

The Charter sits alongside related initiatives, such as school-focused mental-health charters and the adoption of a "stepped-care" model for mental-health services. This positioning is important. It signals that the government now sees mental health as something that must be addressed across the lifespan and across systems: schools, communities, workplaces, and clinical services. By mentioning the Workplace Charter alongside education and community programs, Lee normalizes the idea that employers are part of the solution, not passive bystanders waiting for government clinics to fix the problem.

In practice, however, the Charter operates within some clear constraints. First, it is entirely voluntary. There is no legal requirement for employers to sign, and no formal sanction for failing to deliver on the principles once signed. Participation tends to be

driven by larger, better-resourced organisations that already have some interest in wellbeing or ESG, while many smaller employers remain untouched. Second, the Charter focuses mainly on awareness, culture, and access to support, rather than on the harder structural drivers of psychological harm at work, such as extreme hours, chronic understaffing, unrealistic targets, or bullying and harassment.

Another limitation is that the Charter has not, so far, been matched by significant reform of underlying labor and safety laws. Key statutes such as the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance and the Employees' Compensation Ordinance still focus primarily on physical hazards and injuries. Psychological injury arising from overwork, toxic cultures, or organizational failures is not clearly recognized in the way that, for example, a fall on a construction site would be. This means that, despite the Charter, many employees experiencing serious work-related mental-health problems still find themselves with weak legal protection and limited access to compensation or formal adjustments.

There is also a gap between the scale of the problem and the speed of change. Surveys in Hong Kong have shown high rates of stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression among workers, particularly in high-pressure sectors such as finance and professional services, and a significant proportion of employees report taking mental-health-related sick leave or considering leaving their jobs because of mental health. Yet only a minority report receiving concrete support from their employers, such as access to evidence-based treatment, reasonable adjustments to workload, or supportive return-to-work plans after a mental-health-related absence. The Charter, while symbolically important, has not yet been in place long enough or at sufficient scale to materially close that gap.

On the positive side, the Workplace Charter does create a language and framework that senior leaders can use to talk about mental health in business terms they recognize. It gives HR teams and wellbeing champions a government-backed reference point when advocating for better benefits, manager training, or policy change. It also offers a platform for public recognition, which can matter to reputation-sensitive employers. For organizations that were previously doing very little, signing the Charter can be a useful starting signal that mental health is now on the agenda.

On the critical side, many observers argue that voluntary pledges alone are not enough. Without clearer standards on psychosocial risk, stronger incentives to improve insurance and support, and more robust enforcement, there is a risk that the Charter becomes another ESG-style badge: something to put on a website or annual report, without necessarily transforming the day-to-day reality of employees living with depression, anxiety, or other serious conditions. From this perspective, the Charter is best understood as a necessary first step in changing attitudes and creating political space for more ambitious reforms, rather than as a complete solution.

In summary, John Lee's Workplace Mental Health Charter marks a significant shift in how the Hong Kong government talks about mental health at work: it explicitly links mental health to productivity, talent, and ESG, and invites employers to make visible commitments to do better. Its strength lies in its ability to legitimize the topic in boardrooms and give early adopters a framework to follow. Its weakness is that it remains voluntary and largely promotional, operating in a legal environment that still treats psychological risk much less seriously than physical risk. For finance and other high-pressure sectors, the challenge — and opportunity — is to use the Charter as a platform to push further towards concrete standards, tangible benefits, and accountable, evidence-based support for mental health in the workplace.