Optum

Case study

Safeguarding content moderators' mental health

Tailored wellbeing support addresses content moderators' unique workplace needs for a global professional services company.



Overview

Today, people between the ages of 13 and 34 devote half of their weekly media consumption time to user-generated content (UGC),[1] a proportion that is expected to continue growing. As UGC explodes, content moderation has become a vital function in the digital era. The rise in UGC and content moderation has also spurred legislation across the globe, including the European Union's new Digital Services Act, creating new regulatory compliance demands for companies. At the same time, employers, regulators and the public have become increasingly aware of the unique mental health challenges that content moderators face.

To continue enabling content moderation in a safe online environment while minimizing ethical and legal risks, Optum partnered with its client, a global professional services company, to deliver a multi-tiered mental health strategy. Its proactive, solution-focused interventions have significantly boosted engagement and helped moderators cultivate stronger coping mechanisms, resulting in increased resilience and job satisfaction.

The background

In an increasingly online world, content moderators serve as digital first responders, screening UGC for potentially harmful items, from offensive comments to potential fraud or exploitation. While this critical work protects society by keeping the internet safe, it also comes at a cost.

Individuals who wade through disturbing materials as part of their job may experience mental health challenges or develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), much as traditional first responders do. In recent years, studies have demonstrated that viewing violent images or media increases the prevalence of PTSD[2] and can lead to so-called vicarious, or secondary, trauma,[3] with symptoms including insomnia, anxiety and depression.[4]

Fortunately, research has also demonstrated that comprehensive mental health care strategies can minimize these harms.[5] Preventive mental health interventions, access to 24/7 support, and a combination of individual and group mental health coaching can equip content moderators with healthy coping mechanisms that build resilience while safeguarding their wellbeing.

98%

of content moderators express satisfaction with the support provided[6]

86%+

say individual coaching improved their wellbeing or resilience[6]

The challenge

A global professional services company partnered with Optum to provide dedicated workplace support services to the content moderators it employs across multiple countries. The company, which has provided content moderation services for more than a decade, wanted to deepen its commitment to proactive mental health services. Accordingly, it sought a trusted partner to deliver tailored services across every employment phase, from hiring to on-the-job support and offboarding.

While managing employees' mental wellbeing is always a sensitive task, the stakes were significantly higher in this engagement because a growing number of media stories and legal actions have taken aim at tech platforms over content moderation's psychological toll. In 2020, Facebook agreed to pay $52 million to current and former moderators to compensate them for mental health issues developed on the job.[7,8] Reddit, TikTok and YouTube have also faced similar lawsuits.[9,10,11]

The solution

As one of the most experienced health care organizations in the world, Optum is well-versed in providing comprehensive and flexible employee wellbeing programs that extend beyond the traditional employee assistance program (EAP) structure. Because Optum already provides telephonic, digital and in-person support to organizations and employees across more than 200 countries, the organization was prepared to rapidly implement and scale tailored support for employees engaged in technology trust and safety issues. As a result, the professional services company felt confident engaging Optum to deliver support for content moderators through its Dedicated Workplace Support offering.

Optum worked closely with the client to design, implement and deliver tailored support to employees while enhancing and promoting existing services, such as internal occupational health referrals. Recognizing that proactive and ongoing interventions are critical, the client engaged Optum to provide training and support throughout the employee lifecycle, from recruitment to onboarding and on-the-job training. By meeting regularly with Optum wellbeing consultants, employees quickly gain an understanding of the role's psychological impact and develop coping strategies that evolve to meet their changing needs.

Each moderator participates in regular individual and group sessions with an Optum consultant — a licensed or accredited behavioral health professional. The level of support is flexible and varies based on the type of content a moderator is currently reviewing and the level of risk it introduces.

If an employee misses a session, the consultant follows up proactively to reschedule and, if deemed necessary, will alert the individual's manager to identify potential concerns. When content moderators display mild to moderate mental health symptoms, Optum consultants refer them to formal services such as counseling and therapy. They also provide rapid access to crisis intervention services, such as emergency counseling and psychiatric care, when a situation becomes acute.

Depending on the project, some engagements are entirely virtual. In others, on-site consultants conduct informal "floor walks" in addition to scheduled sessions. Together, these check-ins establish a routine of frequent monitoring, enabling Optum professionals to spot early indicators of distress and gauge the intensity of moderators' symptoms.



Industry

Professional services, technology



Company size

700,000+ employees, including content moderators across multiple countries



Goal

Deliver proactive, effective wellbeing support

"Organizations may ensure that their employees can do their tasks efficiently without jeopardizing their mental health by prioritizing content moderators' wellbeing through clear limits, resilience training, flexible work arrangements, and an open communication and support culture. This comprehensive strategy not only benefits the moderators, but it also increases general productivity and job satisfaction, resulting in a more sustainable and enjoyable work environment."

– Optum wellbeing consultant, Hyderabad, India

This dedicated approach establishes professional rapport and positive consistency while removing the stigma around mental health assistance. It also allows counselors to deliver customized support related to stress management, trauma awareness, resilience development and mindfulness practices. In one example, after content moderators voiced concerns about potential reassignments, a consultant conducted sessions about adjusting to workplace change. Other sessions focus on current events that impact the moderators' day-to-day work, such as global conflicts or natural disasters.

Consultants also hear about personal challenges outside of work that contribute to daily stress, such as parenting, caregiving and finances. One consultant, for example, counseled moderators who had relocated to a rainy, cold city from a tropical environment. Topics of motivation, long-term goals and productivity also arise frequently. By coaching content moderators to identify and act on their personal values, as well as by encouraging health-promoting behaviors such as getting sufficient sleep and physical activity, Optum consultants help workers establish small wins that create a sense of empowerment.

"I do a lot of work with content moderators around psychological needs – determining which ones aren't being met and how they can change that," says one consultant in Dublin who has a PhD in performance psychology. "Over the last few weeks, we've talked a lot about meaning and values and trying new things outside of work – and you start to see glimmers of progress. People who are living a fulfilling life outside of work are going to feel better when they're at work."

The results

Within the global professional services client engagement[6]:

- Nearly 98% of content moderators expressed satisfaction with the support provided
- 86%+ said individual coaching improved their wellbeing or resilience
- 78%+ said group coaching did the same

Across all Emotional Wellbeing Solutions engagement:

- 80% of individuals report feeling more confident coping with issues[12]
- 1.5-day global reduction in absenteeism[13]
- 3.7-day global reduction in presenteeism[13]

Want to learn more?

Talk to our team today to see how we're supporting employee wellbeing or visit optum.com/emotionalwellbeing

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