

The Organizational Impact of Mental Health Issues

A Call to Action

By:

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The organizational impact of mental health issues has a profoundly and challenging impact on the health of working populations and the organizations they work for.

Profound because a large part of our wake-time is work-time and work affects us emotionally, socially and financially.... and challenging because work and the workplace both influence mental health for good or ill.

The complexity of these issues means employee benefit experts and HR professionals to play a more pivotal and pro-active, strategic role to help mitigate the harmful workplace risk factors.

The need for action demands a call to action. Here's why.

The Brutal Truths:

- 25% of Americans and Canadians suffer some form of mental illness each year. That number soars to 43% in the US and 37% across the lifetime.
- Seven out of ten of those who suffer are in the workplace.
- Depression and anxiety are the most common and the most disabling across the greatest number of people and frequently life-threatening.

- Mental disorders are now the leading and fastest-growing cause of workforce disability.
- Job performance is significantly impaired – Seven fold when an employee lives with depression, than one who does not.
- On-the-job injuries are 40% more likely among employees with mental health and addiction problems.
- Mental health issues wipe out 4% of the GDP of Canada, US and most European nations each year.
- Stress related issues represent 40% of employee turnover costs
- Almost half of mental health cases are co-morbid with other medical conditions: Heart disease, diabetes, cancer,
- Suicide is the leading cause of violent death of all kinds in both Canada and the US.

Emerging Issues:

- *Mental Injury:*
 - Canadian Judicial experience is notable. Courts have recently rendered legal decisions and awarded financial remedies for mental injuries of acute stress caused from catastrophic psychological harm in the workplace.
 - The courts and tribunals have also rendered decisions in favor of employees for negligent and chronic stress caused by excessive work demands and the conditions in which work is carried out that affects their ability to function at work or at home.
 - Employers are now being faced with mounting legal pressures to ensure psychological health and safety in the workplace.

- *Workers Compensation Conundrum:*
 - Across North America, on-the-job physical injuries and mental injuries from acute stress are now being covered by Workers Compensation Boards but there has been a resistance by them to accept claims for compensation of mental injury resulting in whole or in part from 'gradual onset of workplace stress' (chronic stress).
 - In Canada, a successful ruling through the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms advances the definition of chronic job stress as an on-the-job injury. Workers Compensation Boards will soon figure into this decision.
- *Cognitive impairment*
 - Science has now established that depression impairs the cognitive capacity of working people.
 - This is notable because employers in new global economy put a premium on jobs requiring brain skills and human cognition to ensure business success through innovation and productivity.
 - In fact, cognitive deficits are the principle mediator of workforce performance.
 - Return to work strategies must take this into account because the functionality of employees is heavily dependent on cognition and sensory balance under these circumstances.
 - And the recovery of 'functional capacity' or health of employees tends to lag relief and recovery from medical symptoms.
 - Therefore, the effectiveness of treatment plans and the challenges of getting back to work must encompass an understanding of the cognitive requirements of the job demands and the state of the functional health of the individual.

- This is critical to reducing the risk of relapse.

Hope for the future

- Paying attention to psychological health and safety at work is simply good business. Employers who set a strategic direction of improving mental health and well-being at work are rewarded with:
 - Better employee retention
 - Lower days lost from absences
 - Improved productivity
 - Lower health costs
 - Higher returns on shareholder value
- Personalized medicine using genetic data to make the right kinds of choices concerning treatment offers a lot of hope for the future in terms of improved care and better healthcare outcomes for employees.
- The same is true of the 'collaborative model of care' to improve access, clinical recovery and functional return to work. The results show improved recovery, shorter duration periods of absence and significant cost savings.
- The development and deployment of personalized medicine, in fact, will increasingly involve training of family physicians by neuroscientists and psychiatrists, and in itself a form of collaborative care, is certainly taking it to a new level.

A call to action

The business case for mental health has been made time and again over the course of the last 15 years, largely from outstanding academic institutions and researchers in the US and Canada.

In response, The Mental Health Commission of Canada has developed a National Standard to help employers create psychologically healthy workplaces and has attracted international interest. The internet is also replete with strategies, tools and resources, many free. That said, the pathway for action is clearer than ever --yet there has been a reluctance to act. Inertia, it seems, stems from conflicting business principles and the value that employers actually put on people.

Yet according to Dr. Michael Porter, internationally renowned professor at Harvard University, the call for action is fundamentally a challenge of asset management – the asset being people. In this brain-based economy, the building blocks of productive capacity will be ideas, inclusion, productive engagement, trust, loyalty and motivation not the inanimate objects of equipment, glass and steel of the old economy. All of which makes good business sense.

I call on all employee benefit experts and HR professionals to become champions of mental health in the workplace. It will require determination and a passion for the common good it achieves to ignite excitement in businesses to act. Keep focused and know this simple truth: Brain Health + Brain Skills = Brain Capital.