

CORPORATE MENTAL HEALTH (Submitted by Burlington Chamber of Commerce)

Issue:

Mental health issues and chronic job stress negatively impact workplaces in the form of disability costs, absenteeism, productivity, quality of work, and employee safety incidence rates. Opportunities exist for improved business success, especially in today's knowledge-based business economy.

Background:

One in five Canadians suffers a mental illness every year, often in the form of depression and/or anxiety. Currently, mental health claims (especially depression) have overtaken cardiovascular disease as the fastest growing category of disability costs. Today in Canada disability represents 4% to 12% of payroll costs¹ and the World Health Organization predicts depression to be the number one form of disability by the year 2020. This is alarming – especially in today's knowledge-based economic culture – since mental disorder interferes with a person's cognitive skill and therefore impacts their ability to work.

The cause of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety are complex but consistently stress is found to be a factor. The health of today's workplace has been negatively impacted by an era of downsizing, doing more with less, and the 24/7 expectation associated with technology. These factors led to increases in job stress, poor people management practices, and the resulting cost of mental ill-health.

Overwhelming stress and mental illness also impact employee physical safety. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reports on research indicating that stress due to work overload or time pressure increases the chances of safety procedures and safety gear being neglected. Stress compromises a person's ability to think clearly, therefore stressed-out employees are more likely to act without thinking.

Employee mental ill-health leads to absenteeism, decreased productivity and quality of work issues, which in turn impact business success. This is critical at a time when brain-based cognitive skills are required to provide competitive advantage locally and globally.

Opportunities exist to protect employee mental health through corporate leadership, improved management practices, and improved treatment and return-to-work practices. Every \$1 spent on mental health and addictions saves \$7 in health costs and \$30 in lost productivity and social costs².

Health conscious workplaces can promote early diagnosis and reduce the impact of mental health problems, mental illness, and addictions. If a person receives effective treatment in the first few months of their illness, the duration, frequency, and severity of symptoms will be reduced. In addition, early and effective treatment increases the chances of the individual making a full recovery. When short-term disability becomes long-term, there is a lesser chance that the person will be able to return to previous levels of proficiency.

¹ Mental Health Commission of Canada

² http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/mentalhealth/minister_advisgroup/pdf/discussion_paper.pdf

The annual cost of mental illness and addictions in Ontario today is estimated to be \$39 billion². Billions per annum could be saved by discretionary modifications to the organization and management of work to make it less injurious to employee mental health. At one time a similar crisis existed with workplace physical safety. Measurement and tracking of incidence rates, coupled with public awareness, played a strategic role in turning the tide – proving the adage that ‘what you measure is what you get’. The same can be true of workplace mental health.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) was established in 2007 to develop a mental health strategy for Canada. The Workforce Advisory Committee, one of eight MHCC committees, is developing a work plan to help improve the workplace’s capability to deal with mental health issues – for the betterment of both the workforce and the workplace.

Provincial leadership in the form of a Mental Health Workplace Strategy, building on the work of the MHCC, can impact workforce health and business success through the delivery of more effective prevention and treatment programs. Synergy can be gained by coordinating national and provincial policy and programs where applicable.

Ontario’s mental health centres provide valuable treatment and support to individuals but too often are challenged by inadequate funding when initiating, or attempting to sustain, innovative programs to reach further out into the community.

Augmenting these mental health centres with a workplace focus, enhancing their skill set to provide mental health service and support to local workplaces, could result in sustainable partnerships between regional health centres and local businesses. Workplace services would include awareness education, mental health treatment and rehabilitation for employees, return-to-work case management, and crisis intervention.

Corporate awareness messages should include the business case that improved profits, growth, and employee retention are more likely in psychologically healthy workplaces. Without awareness and knowledge, mental health issues may be mistaken for performance, attitude, or motivation issues and the management strategies meant to improve these outcomes may unintentionally worsen the illness and the workplace.

Employee awareness messages should include the research finding that work is healthy and can be a part of treatment and recovery programs, and that recovery from mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety is possible and likely with early intervention and treatment.

Investing in human capital is a necessary part in competing in the global economy, and as such, protecting human capital – or “mental performance” – should be encouraged and rewarded.

Recommendations:

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Develop a comprehensive Workplace Mental Health Strategy, as a part of Ontario’s mental health system, building on the existing work of the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC).
2. Establish metrics by tracking the incidence of employee disability due to mental disorders in organizations with a large number of employees. This includes collecting periodic data stating the number of employees, number absent due to disability, number of disability cases related to mental health, number of days absent due to disability, for the specified period.

3. Broaden the focus of regional mental health centres to include workplace mental health issues enabling them to refer to agencies or for-profit local providers or to treat employees of local workplaces by providing workplace-oriented programs. These programs would include mental health awareness education with a focus on anti-stigma, mental health treatment and rehabilitation services for employees, reintegration back into the workplace, and crisis intervention.
4. Create a public education and awareness campaign on the social and economic value of workplace mental health and the availability of community workplace-oriented resources.
5. Introduce tax-based incentive programs to encourage employers to develop their own workplace mental health plan utilizing existing public domain websites for guidance, and incorporating the services of mental health agencies and centres. Investments should be based on evidence-based approaches that promote psychological health of employees.