

MENTAL HEALTH

At The Crossroads:

Role Of Treatment In Workplace Strategy

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For more than a decade, it has been well-established that Canada is in the midst of a workplace mental health crisis. This has led to an annual cost to employers estimated at \$21 billion by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The economic impact

includes everything from the cost of disability and medication to that of reduced productivity, absenteeism, and declining output of those struggling and still at work (so-called presenteeism).

In response, Canadian employers have invested heavily in some of the best awareness and anti-stigma programs in the world, with wide ranging dialogue across the political and eco-

nomic spectrum. Ironically, this success may well result in higher disability volumes and costs over the next five to 10 years.

A few years ago, estimates were that about 70 per cent of employees would be unlikely to identify themselves as suffering from a mental illness for fear of stigmatization and marginalization by their employers. While still too early to

quantify, it appears that number could be headed downward as employees see less stigma as a result of identifying themselves as requiring help. Even a 10 per cent decrease will mean a major increase in absence and disability.

Demographics also point in this direction. Millennials, our future leaders, are the best educated and aware demographic cohort we have ever seen on mental health. They also report they are the most stressed of any other age group. They will have no issue reporting their struggles in the workplace. Post-millennials (born in 1996 or later) have their own issues. They were the first to grow up in the artificial world of the iPhone and social media. This generation is “on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades,” says psychologist Dr. Jean Twenge in her book ‘iGen.’

Employers continue to struggle to find efficacious solutions to help their employees. That doesn’t mean current programs aren’t working. Wellness, employee assistance, management training, employee resilience, and culture improvement initiatives continue to have an important prevention role.

Lagged Far Behind

However, until recently, medical and therapeutic treatment has been under-represented in mental health toolkits. While our awareness has greatly improved on mental health as a ‘problem,’ literacy on the illness itself has lagged far behind that of other major illnesses like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. This has affected the perceived immediacy of combating the clinical side of the problem. But this is changing quickly. Employers have begun to institutionalize services that recognize there will always be a percentage of the employee population, including those present and absent from work, who require medical support. In short, employers realize they need access to treatment.

Like most mental health issues, the path forward on treatment is complicated.

Psychiatrists, the only medical doctors trained to treat mental illnesses and mood disorders, are in short supply. When my company, Medaca Health

Group, was founded in 2005, our credentials presentation listed wait times at six to 24 months depending on where you lived in Canada. Almost 14 years later, that slide hasn’t changed and this is a stain on Canada’s reputation as a mental health innovator. Yet, it is reality and it will get worse.

In a survey of psychiatry in 2015, the Canadian Medical Association showed that 52 per cent of psychiatrists in Canada were over the age of 55. In 2025, the majority will be at or approaching retirement age. This will mean declining access and more pressure on family physicians, who already treat the vast majority of patients with mental illness in Canada.

This lack of resources has collided with more progressive employer attitudes. More and more view a mentally healthy workplace as a strategic asset with a direct impact on organizational performance.

Health Benefits Trust of Alberta, which manages the benefits of Alberta’s 100,000 healthcare workers and is a leader in mental health programs, is an example. The trustees who oversee governance and direction of the trust “look at mental health as a strategic issue, with a direct impact on our performance collectively and as individuals,” says Gayle Shurvell, its director of policy and governance.

This attitude is likely to become commonplace in the next five years.

Employers today are operating in the midst of a technology revolution that is resulting in a dramatic disruption of workplace skillsets. This is increasing the stakes for recognizing the role of mental health in improving performance, not just as a cost irritant.

“We have experienced the advent of a brain-based economy where 80 per cent of all new jobs coming on stream demand cerebral, not manual, skills,” says Bill Wilkerson, former chairman of the Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health.

“Social skills, such as persuasion, emotional intelligence, and teaching others will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills,” the World Economic Forum stated in its ‘Future of Jobs’ study in 2016.

Within this environment, it stands

to reason that employers with the healthiest people will win. Action won’t be viewed as an altruistic sign of an enlightened employer. It will be seen as a fundamental need for building and sustaining competitive advantage. Maintaining the mental health of employees to avoid a workforce breakdown will be as important as maintaining technology systems to avoid an operational collapse.

Access to medical treatment is a critical component of this new mindset. It will require innovation from both the private and public sectors.

Considerable Progress

In addition to the crucial role of government and public institutions, the private sector will have to provide much of the leadership in bringing the benefit of medical technology to our employees. There has been considerable progress in this regard. Leading edge solutions in digital cognitive behavioural therapy are starting to make an impact.

We need to organize medical and therapeutic resources so we get the most out of what we have.

Finally, we need to integrate and coordinate medical and therapeutic treatment. The effective combination of both modalities is the gold standard in care for moderate and severe depression and anxiety disorders.

The good news is that employers are acting and investing. More and more, they are seeing the direct line between organization-wide mental health, performance, and profitability. It is only a matter of time before they demand solutions that support a strategic model for mental health and it becomes a normal course of business. **BPM**



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