

# OTTAWA CITIZEN

## Public sector 'a toxic place to work'

**It's time for a major study into what is 'sabotaging taxpayers' investment': mental health expert**

**Kathryn May, The Ottawa Citizen**

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Canada needs a national inquiry into the management and working conditions of the public sector, which is a "toxic place to work" for a growing number of employees who are stressed, burned out and slipping into depression, says a mental health expert.

Bill Wilkerson, chairman of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, said the absenteeism, disability claims and distress among Canada's nurses, doctors, teachers, police, military and bureaucrats have reached such crisis proportions that it's time for a major study into what is "sabotaging taxpayers' investment" into these critical services.

"We are seeing absences, disability rates and illness among public sector organizations that beg a national evaluation of what it is about these workplaces that creates such high levels of distress," he said.



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Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

"And I would argue, conceptually, that this goes beyond the question of too few nurses, for example, doing too much work. There is something wrong with the culture of these workplaces."

Disability claims in Canada are climbing and between 30 to 40 per cent of claims are for depression. The cost to the economy is \$51 billion, or four per cent of GDP.

The problem isn't confined to the public sector, but it requires attention because the cost is footed by taxpayers. It also raises questions about what is happening to the quality of public services, such as health care.

"This is the greatest issue we have faced concerning the health and quality of public services in this country's history and we, as Canadians, have to wake up to this."

Mr. Wilkerson has been a driving force in getting mental health on the national agenda. Last year, the Harper government created the Mental Health Commission, headed by former senator Michael Kirby, to help develop a national mental health strategy. He and Mr. Kirby plan to convene a workplace summit in the fall into the productivity and health of public sector, especially the hardest hit health care sector.

Studies abound of the depression and absenteeism rates soaring beyond the national average for nurses, teachers and physicians, but a new study on the health of senior bureaucrats in the federal public service drives home that poorly managed workplaces are creating sick cultures and employees.

Mr. Wilkerson said what's disturbing is that 15 per cent of the top executives say they are "verbally harassed and tormented" and it jumps to one in four among entry-level executives.

Mr. Wilkerson said this harassment could be caused by a combination of factors. Senior bureaucrats could feel "politicized" -- torn between being neutral, non-partisan professionals and being drawn into the political arena. The harassment could be coming from all sides -- from deputy ministers and ministers at the top to fellow executives and even employees who work for them.

The study's findings into the stress, burnout, depression and work overload of federal executives are so worrisome that the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service, which ordered the survey, is planning consultations across the country to get a handle on the problem with the intention of holding a summit in the fall on how to fix it.

Michel Smith, the association's executive director, said the mental health issues have to come out in the open and be tackled with a "system-wide approach." He said disability claims are increasing, but executives are burying their own problems because admitting stress and depression carries a stigma they believe will kill their careers. Instead, he said executives are using their vacation rather than sick leave when taking time off for stress.

Mr. Wilkerson argued the association's study is unique because until now, it was unions and rank-and-file employees pushing for changes to tackle stress and depression, not top executives.

"I don't think you would find the same level of concern about harassment among executives in the private sector. I mean, these are the people at the top. If the bosses are being harassed, you have to ask, what's happening to the rank-and-file public servants?"

The association's concerns were also echoed by Morris Rosenberg, Health Canada's deputy minister, who told a recent conference that mental illness is a management issue that must be part of the government's drive to "renew" and reform the public service. He said the public service is "brain-based" work and "mental illness hits us where it hurts."

Mr. Wilkerson said the study is a wake-up call that has created "unprecedented interest" among federal executives into what's wrong with their workplace. The RCMP and the military have also made the issue a top priority in managing their work forces.

Mr. Wilkerson said the APEX study is also the first to show the toll of cellphones, Internet, e-mail and BlackBerries on senior executives and how the reliance on technology has become "counter productive." About 75 per cent of the nearly 2,100 surveyed say technology increases their workload; 66 per cent it adds to their stress and 49 per cent it decreases their productivity.

He argued workers are so bombarded by e-mails "with the practice of copying everyone taken to new heights." It all boils down to good management, which means bringing back "human decency" and respect to the workplace, he said.

"People are drowning in technology and risk averseness and the lack of clear lines of accountability," he said.

"I believe employers should call for an e-mail ceasefire. We are driving each other crazy. We have to find ways to talk to each other again. Isolation can take place in a crowded room as we all stand around and click, click the BlackBerry."

The "churn" of the public service, characterized by the rapid and high turnover of people in jobs, has been identified as a big problem. The APEX survey showed 64 per cent of executives think of leaving their organization at least every month. More than half want to leave because of lack of recognition.

Although 90 per cent of the reported they were in good or excellent health, Mr. Wilkerson said the high incidence of chronic illnesses -- cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, musculoskeletal, mental health and addictions -- are warning bells of problems "routinely connected to depression." About 84 per cent said they feel a sense of accomplishment in their jobs, but 75 per cent scored high for burnout and extreme fatigue.

Part of the problem in the public sector is the ambiguity around who is in charge. Departments have to manage with a slew of "one-size-fits-all policies and answer central agencies, from Treasury Board to Privy Council Office. As a result, departments don't feel like they are employers in their own right," said Mr. Wilkerson.