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Top execs expand dialogue on workplace stress

Charter sets out objective: Ease worry, anxiety But others warn complex problem very hard to tackle

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Bill **Wilkerson**'s goal of creating a workplace full of healthy minds has taken an important step forward.

The former president of Liberty Health emerged triumphant from a three hour-long meeting this week at the Scotia Plaza in downtown Toronto. Behind him, in a corporate meeting room, more than 60 senior business executives, government and non-profit group representatives had just put the finishing touches on a business charter that aims to promote corporate awareness of mental health issues in the workplace.

As well, the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health declared the first "business year for addiction and mental health," which began Wednesday.

"This issue is no longer an orphan," **Wilkerson**, the roundtable's chair, announced at a news conference after the meeting. "We've begun a journey which will be many miles and many steps, but it's one that has now officially begun."

The charter sets out four core objectives to promote mental health in the workplace, including early detection and treatment of mental disorders and preventative management practices. The initiative was born of a series of meetings and discussions between high-level corporate executives, physicians and insurance company representatives who saw Canadian corporations losing billions of dollars because of problems stemming from employee stress and anxiety.

Statistics show that mental disorders, sometimes referred to as the "forgotten child" of the healthcare system, afflict roughly one in five Canadians per year. Depression strikes 3 to 4 per cent of the population, alcohol abuse 3 to 5 per cent.

More than 80 per cent of emergency psychiatric treatment involves patients between 18 and 44, those in their prime working age.

That translates lost earnings and productivity for businesses, as well as a rise in the number of people receiving disability payments, **Wilkerson** said. The roundtable's scientific advisory committee estimates mental disorder costs the Canadian economy some \$11 billion per year in productivity and triple that amount when indirect costs are added.

To remedy the situation, the charter outlined mandates to be implemented by chief executives at their respective companies. Particular goals are to curtail the rate of absenteeism in Canadian workplaces, and to attempt to reduce the "top ten" sources of workplace stress. Those include: high workloads, frequent interruptions, "vicious" office politics, poor management practices and communications and fears about job security.

In November, another roundtable meeting will be held to discuss progress.

"We've reached a point where we could call it a take-off," said Michael Wilson, chair and chief executive of UBS Global Asset Management Co. and former federal finance minister.

"We can move from where we are today, having established this base of information, into dissemination of that information and the injection of best practices into a broad range of employers throughout Canada."

But those with experience in the field say there will likely be many obstacles.

For one thing, it will be a significant challenge to take what is essentially a mission statement and transform it into something tangible for employees and their managers.

"It's a very, very complex problem," said Howard Seiden, whose consulting practice does employee impairment and disability assessments for insurance companies in Toronto. "And it isn't usually acted upon because often it's almost impossible to act upon."

Seiden, who is also a professor at the University of Toronto's Institute for Human Development, Life Course, and Aging, argues that many of the things that create stress and anxiety for employees in Canada's workplaces are due to larger economic forces over which executives and managers have little control.

A competitive market means that companies often must make quick decisions that can lead to layoffs, restructuring or uneven policies toward promotions, he said. To make matters worse, many times those decisions are made by people far away from Canada and Canadian workers. "A lot of times we're dealing with multinational companies," he said. "A lot of those directions are coming from outside the country."

"I don't know if you can really do much about it."

Barbara Everett, chief executive of the Canadian Mental Health Association's Ontario branch, knows just how hard it can be to effect change in the country's workplaces.

For the past two years, the association's Mental Health Works Project has provided resources for employers and employees to help alleviate anxiety and stress. The project targets human resources departments and mid-level managers working closely with workers.

However, Everett said her experience has shown her that only so much can be done to improve workplace environments without the support of senior-level executives, who are often most responsible for shaping company-wide policies and practices. And until recently, most have been unwilling to address the issue, she said.

Other stumbling blocks stem from a continuing sense of stigma that often accompanies mental health issues. Whereas people are generally comfortable discussing most physical ailments, recognizing that they can afflict anyone, the same can rarely be said for mental disorders, Everett said.

"Mental illness and mental health have too often been shaped as compassion for the afflicted," said Everett. "This is almost the last thing out of the closet."

Still, **Wilkerson** is optimistic about the initiative.

"It's a matter of degree and cultural change," he said, adding the issue has come a long way since he spoke out on the subject at a 1998 Vancouver event.

"You know how many people were in that room?" he asks. "Zero."

"Last week, there were 1500."

Illustration(s):

: Dick Loek/TORONTO STAR Bill **Wilkerson**, left, of the Global and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, and ex-finance minister Michael Wilson unveil charter at conference in Toronto this week.

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