workopolis.com CANADA'S BIGGEST JOB SITE

Print

Out of the shadows: mental health at work

It's the "invisible disability" of the workplace. A new report cites a handful of organizations that are leaders in raising awareness, reducing causes and better dealing with it, VIRGINIA GALT reports

VIRGINIA GALT -
Wednesday, March 29, 2006

In a novel initiative aimed at safeguarding the mental health of employees, managers and staff at Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board have jointly formed a committee to monitor workloads.

At Ontario Power Generation Inc., whenever there is a measurable spike in stress levels in any one department, human resources staff immediately move in to investigate.

As well, managers are rewarded when the people who report to them score high ratings on employee engagement surveys.

And when expectant mothers go off on maternity leave from Toronto-Dominion Bank, they are sent off not only with the bank's best wishes but also information and advice on where to get help should post-partum depression or other issues strike.

In the meantime, with a view to making all such kinds of practices more commonplace in the future, McGill University in Montreal now requires all of the first-year students in its MBA program to take a mandatory seminar entitled Mental Health and Productivity: Sustainable Performance in a Brain-Based Economy.

These organizations are among a handful cited in a report to be released this week as leaders in the fight to raise awareness, reduce causes of and better deal with mental illness in the workplace.

It's the "invisible disability" that results in the loss of 35 million workdays each year in Canada, according to the Global Business And Economic Roundtable on Mental Health.

For the past six years, under the leadership of chief executive officer Bill Wilkerson and Michael Wilson, now Canada's ambassador to Washington, the roundtable has documented the debilitating effects of mental illness on the Canadian work force.

Depression and anxiety are the most common mental disorders afflicting employees.

Mental-health-related claims now account for up to 40 per cent of all disability insurance claims in Canada.

Yet, while awareness levels have risen in the workplace, stress levels are actually getting worse, says Maria Gonzales, vice-chairwoman of the roundtable and chairwoman of the MBA advisory committee at McGill.

In a report to be released in Vancouver on Friday, the roundtable advises employers that, while they are not expected to become "amateur shrinks," there is much more they can do to ease the stress levels in their own organizations and support those who do become ill.

A best-practices model to help employers improve the mental health and productivity of employees will be posted this Friday on the roundtable's website.

Its best practices include determining the extent of the problem by tracking the number of absences related to mental-health issues, supporting employees when they are ready to return to work and auditing current disability management practices "to isolate the reasons why some files have lingered," the report says.

As well, HR staff should be assessed for their attitudes and knowledge about mental disabilities, so they can assist managers in dealing with these cases. Workplace practices should be examined by managers and employees alike to identify conditions increasing stress levels. And constant interruptions, unrelenting work demands and long hours, which have all been identified by the roundtable as triggers, should be reduced.

Many of the most effective preventive measures are striking in their simplicity, says Robert MacLellan, TD's executive vice-president and chief investment officer, yet common sense is not always applied in today's highly competitive business environment.

However, most employers are now coming to realize that the mental health of employees in a knowledge-based economy "is one of the most important workplace issues today, and it is only going to get bigger as life becomes more complex and more fast-moving."

This is something the next generation of leaders will be expected to address if they hope to manage their organizations successfully and responsibly, adds Peter Todd, dean of the faculty of management at McGill.

OPG, with more than 11,000 employees, is "trying to de-stigmatize" mental health problems by treating them like any other condition affecting the health and well-being of employees, says Diane Westcott, the company's director of wellness.

OPG's stated goal is to create "a high energy environment in which work stress is positive and motivating -- not demeaning, demanding or demoralizing," the roundtable reports.

Ms. Westcott says the emphasis is on prevention and on letting employees know there is help available through the employee assistance plan and other avenues if they feel the pressures of day-to-day life are getting to them.

The company also has an early-intervention plan through which it contacts all employees off sick for more than a week with either physical or mental problems. The goal is to get them the help they need to recover, and return to work when it is safe to do so.

In the case of mental distress, OPG offers employees and their physicians the support of a consulting psychiatrist -- cutting short the standard six-month wait that many Canadians endure when they need help, , Ms. Westcott says.

Mr. Wilkerson says Canadian employers do a fair job of supporting physically ill and injured employees, but once mentally disabled employees go off on disability leave, they are generally "out of sight, out of mind."

Toronto-based Purolator Courier Ltd., which has established a national, employee-directed health workplace committee, has found that stress -- the inevitable byproduct of busy lives -- can lead to more serious ailments if preventive measures are not adopted, says Doug Kube, the firm's director of environment, health, safety and security.

"If you don't intervene early in psychological cases, they become much more complex and much more difficult. People tend to slip deeper and it's much more difficult to pull them out and get them healthy again," he says.

In focus groups conducted with employees across the country last year, Purolator found that stress was the No. 1 issue that employees wanted the company's support in managing. It now offers stress workshops, helping employees "build the resilience" they need to cope with the conflicting demands of work and family. The company is also setting up walking clubs at all its locations across the country, because there is a demonstrable link between physical well-being and mental well-being, Mr. Kube says.

While stress will never be totally removed, Purolator aims to create an environment where employees can flag concerns and ask for help. If the workplace culture is not supportive, standard fitness and wellness programs will not make much difference, he notes.

At WSIB, the employer and the Canadian Union of Public Employees negotiated a precedent-setting "work-life balance clause" in their collective agreement last year, which led to the establishment of the joint employer-union workload committees, says Ian Thompson, a national staff representative with CUPE.

WSIB workloads are very difficult to control because they are driven by caseload. "If you've got 80 cases, you have got 80 cases, there are not automatic checks and balances," Mr. Thompson says.

The agreement, therefore, calls for monitoring of employees' workload and the employer undertakes to maintain adequate staffing levels to cover for absences and vacations. This, in itself, has lifted an enormous weight from employees, Mr. Thompson says.

"It was a big issue for us: If I'm carrying 80 cases and I go on vacation, what is going to happen to those 80 cases?"

Mr. Thompson says WSIB management has demonstrated a genuine concern in "undertaking to protect the health of employees in assigning work."

TD has introduced an on-line survey which employees can take, in confidence, to measure their stress levels and to help them pinpoint any conditions that might require treatment.

The bank also offers accommodation -- for instance, an employee suffering from seasonal affective disorder would be seated where he or she could get as much natural light as possible, Mr. MacLellan told McGill MBA students at their compulsory seminar on mental health and productivity last November.

The roundtable reports that 85 per cent of all new jobs are "knowledge jobs" that require mental agility rather than physical strength.

For this reason, it is essential that the issue of mental health be brought "out of the shadows and into the foreground of management education," says Ms. Gonzales, who helped design the McGill course.

"As business leaders, one of our key interests is sustainable performance. There can be no sustainable performance without organizational health."

Signs of stress

Telltale signs stress has reached unhealthy levels:

Growing irritability and impatience, "no-end-in-sight reactions" to even routine requests for information.

Inability to stay focused, finishing other people's sentences to save time, wincing at new ideas -- who needs another new idea?

Staying out of sight, keeping the world at bay, being testy about casual interruptions, such as the phone ringing, not looking up when talking to others.

Stretching the workday at both ends, calling in sick a lot, persistently late for meetings.

Working at home to avoid the "negative energy" of the office.

Finding small talk hateful. Tuning out what others say. Missing deadlines. Losing faith in yourself and others. Resenting and even alienating customers.

Management practices that make things worse:

Continuous imposition of unreasonable demands and withholding information that employees need to more effectively carry out their jobs.

Refusal to give employees reasonable discretion over the day-to-day methods of their work and failing to credit or acknowledge success.

Rejecting "out of hand" employee concerns about workload and deadlines; creating a treadmill effect in the allocation of work and priorities.

Talking to direct reports only when there is a problem.

Changing priorities without giving notice or providing reasons.

Being unclear about objectives and expectations.

Source: Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health

The high cost

The toll that stress, depression and other mental illnesses take in Canada:

35 million

NUMBER OF WORKDAYS LOST EACH YEAR DUE TO MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS.

30% - 40%

PERCENTAGE OF DISABILITY INSURANCE CLAIMS ATTRIBUTABLE TO MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES.

20% - 25%

PERCENTAGE OF CANADIAN EMPLOYEES WHO SUFFER FROM SOME SORT OF MENTAL CONDITION IN ANY GIVEN YEAR.

$35-billion

ESTIMATED ANNUAL PRODUCTIVITY LOSS RESULTING FROM MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS.

85%

PERCENTAGE OF NEW JOBS THAT REQUIRE MENTAL RATHER THAN MANUAL SKILLS.

SOURCE: GLOBAL BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC ROUNDTABLE ON MENTAL HEALTH

--

© The Globe and Mail. Republished with permission. All Rights Reserved. No part of this article may be reproduced or republished or redistributed without the prior written consent of the copyright holder.