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CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL WELLNESS PROGRAMS



THE PHANTOM IN THE ROOM

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A 2013 poll by Ipsos Reid found that nearly half of working Canadians considered their jobs the most stressful part of their lives. For those in demanding managerial, administrative and professional occupations, the likelihood of being highly stressed increases significantly.

Here's the problem with stress: it negatively affects individual employee health and performance, and erodes team cohesion, which in turn negatively impacts productivity. Mental health issues costs the Canadian economy a whopping \$6 billion a year in lost productivity, due in large part to employee absenteeism or presenteeism. (Presenteeism is when a worker is physically present, but is suffering with a malady that diminishes his or her productivity.)

Corporations develop strategies to increase profits, expand distribution, invest in technology, and to recruit the best people. But when it comes to maintaining the workplace, mental illness is the phantom in the room: it is invisible, ever present, and rarely – if ever – talked about. This is in part, due to the enduring stigma and lack of understanding of mental illness and health. With employees more stressed than ever, and jobs more taxing on employees' brains than ever before, workplaces are facing a mental health crisis of epic proportions. It's an epidemic that affects both individuals, and corporate bottom lines. And it's time to confront the phantom in the room.

Confronting the phantom

In today's stressful corporate environments, investing in mental health is a sound strategy that hedges against impending mental illness and its associated costs.

Workplace wellness programs work in two ways. They prevent mental illness by relieving the pressure of work on our brains, and provide valuable coping strategies for individuals who are taxed and needing to refocus. Wellness programs not only prevent mental illness, they empower individuals to achieve greater results while fostering more trust, loyalty and team cohesion.

In Canada, corporations lose an average of 16 days of productivity a year per employee due to stress, anxiety and depression-related issues. In 2010, mental health issues were one of the top three causes for short- and long-term disability claims made by more than 80% of Canadian employers. The largest area of increase in long-term disability claims has been in mental health.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada defines mental health as: "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community." Investing in mental health is investing in people with the long game in mind.

Alarming statistics

Perhaps the most profound statistic related to mental health is this: 40% of worker turnover is due to on-the-job stress. If these numbers pertained to diabetes or heart disease, they would be considered epidemic. But today, despite these alarming statistics, mental health in the workplace remains an afterthought, a mere ghost. Bodies go missing, and the associated costs to any company that fails to take mental health seriously are staggering.

A Canadian Community Health Survey found that nearly one in three Canadians described their average day at work as stressful, and that the amount of stress correlated with the income he or she earned. This study determined that women were generally more stressed than men. Another study found that women (6%) were twice as likely as men (3%) to have experienced a depressive episode in the past year. Further, employees with children are less likely to get a full night's sleep, which negatively impacts their ability to cope with stress. An American study found that Millennials and Gen Xers were the most stressed out groups of all.

When stress goes unchecked

When stress goes unchecked, it can lead to general unhappiness, anxiety, moodiness, poor listening and communication skills, difficulty managing life in general, unfinished tasks, unmet deadlines, anger issues, irritability, absenteeism, loss of motivation, loss of interest, decreased productivity, higher insurance costs, accidents, short- and long-term leaves of absence, an increase in workers compensation cases, and so on... all of which are toxic to the workplace and negatively impact productivity.

The signs of stress are not always obvious. They can require the expertise of a trained psychologist or mental health professional to recognize them early on. When 62% of employees complain of neck pain at the end of their work day, 44% report eye fatigue, and 34% struggle to get a good night's sleep, it doesn't take a psychologist to recognize that people are stretched to the point of exhaustion. But here's why expert intervention is required: untreated fatigue will lead to increased anxiety, and when this occurs, depression and mental illness are not far behind. For corporations, the aggregate of these numbers amounts to huge losses in productivity.

Absent, present and unaccounted for

A 2014 study found that in Canada, half a million workers are absent each day due to mental health issues. Absenteeism is a common coping mechanism for people who are stressed out in the workplace. They take all their sick days and then some, in an attempt to avoid what is hurting them. They could be struggling with work overload, an overly demanding boss, bullying from colleagues, a toxic relationship, or budget cutbacks that threaten their position, financial security and self-worth. Absence is a form of avoidance but avoidance never fixes anything. Anyone who has ever received counselling or any medical attention knows that being proactive is best way forward.

Another consequence of poor mental health is presenteeism, when employees show up but their state of mind affects the quality and quantity of their work, to the point where they are not producing or negatively impacts the productivity of others. A 2012 review by McIntyre, Liauw & Taylor in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* indicated that half of working individuals suffering with depression will not request a short-term leave at any point in their careers. This same study asserts that a supportive work environment can go a long way in preventing episodes of depression from descending into a disability.

Workplace stress can also lead to substance abuse, eating issues, conflicts between colleagues, resentment toward management, and even stealing from the company. Alternately, employees may be dealing with issues in their personal lives that spill into the workplace, like a family dispute, money concerns, spousal problems. There could be an illness in the family, or poor health generally that affect one's performance at work. One in five Canadians in their lifetime will experience a mental health issue, and this will invariably affect their work life.

The case for investing in mental health

Investing in mental health now is preparing your team for the future. Supervisors and managers and those in contradictory class locations experience tremendous anxiety and depression due to a heavy workload, functioning within a large bureaucracy, and/or feeling unrecognized for their efforts. Highly educated employees are more prone to anxiety and depression because of the complexity of their jobs, and driven, ambitious employees are susceptible to mental health issues due to perfectionist attitudes.

When it comes to employee mental health, a Canadian study indicates that those who access treatments demonstrate higher productivity than those who do not. Productivity losses to an organization that did not provide treatment were five-fold relative to an organization that did.

When mental illness is treated early and effectively, costly disability leaves can be avoided. Most programs are comparatively inexpensive — as little as \$500 per individual per year — and they effectively reduce costs for healthcare and losses due to absenteeism and poor productivity.

Employees who are mentally fit can handle the stress of their jobs. They are more resilient in the face of criticism, challenges, setbacks and other adversities. Improved stress management results in fewer colds and other minor illnesses, and a reduction in cases of substance abuse. The benefits include improved focus, attentiveness and concentration, increased productivity, reduced absenteeism and presenteeism, reduced staff turnover and recruitment, hiring and training costs, fewer employees on disability, better workplace morale and higher job satisfaction. The adage that a happy employee is a productive employee holds true. Workplace wellness programs offer an effective, preventative strategy against losses from mental illness.

The solution is clear

Mental health issues remain the highly stigmatized phantom in the room, so much so that many are reluctant to talk about their challenges and struggles or seek preventative help. The first step to prevention is awareness through education, open discussion and dialogue. The second is to find or design a program tailored to your corporate culture. Programs range from group info sessions and conflict resolution to career coaching and individual counselling.

Wellness programs teach individuals how to deal with mood and anxiety with a wide range of strategies including diet and exercise and how to best organize one's time. They encourage and cultivate ambition and concentration through various means, including meditation, yoga, exercise and counselling. They provide strategies for dealing with bullies, preventing burnout and stress build-up. They teach employees how to build a solid team, resolve conflicts, and how to balance career and family. Wellness programs also open the channels of communication between management and staff that lead to greater collegiality and team cohesion.

The stats are evident, the cost is measurable, and the solution is clear. Investing in the mental health of your employees is investing in the long-term stability and value of your company. Help is just a click or a call away.



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