

## Mental health a priority in the Canadian workplace

SURVEY I Long, short-term disability linked to stress, depression and anxiety

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MONTREAL -- It comes as no surprise to anyone observing our stress-filled working lives -- problems with mental health are becoming a priority in the Canadian workplace. They are responsible for increasing costs and problems with productivity.

That was the message of a massive survey completed recently by the Canadian research firm Watson Wyatt, in conjunction with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Global Business and Economic Roundtable.

It showed both long- and short-term disability leaves were related first and foremost to mental-health issues of depression, stress and anxiety.

According to the survey, the leading cause of short-term disability is mental health, followed by musculoskeletal and back problems, then accidents and cancer. For long-term disability, it's mental health followed by cancer.

"Mental health," said Claudine Ducharme, a consultant with Watson Wyatt's health-care and disability management team, "is always at the top of the list."

The survey, the fourth since 1997, was based on information gathered from the human-resource offices of 94 Canadian businesses representing more than 300,000 employees in companies ranging from financial and insurance, manufacturing, public sector and high tech.

The link between mental health and healthy business has never been clearer. Fully 76 per cent of employers who responded to the survey said mental health is a leading cause of short-term disability and 81 per cent said it was their top concern in terms of long-term disability.

And while the organizations surveyed in 2002-2003 claimed psychological problems were their top concern for both long-term and short-term disability, it turns out long-term disability program costs have increased a whopping 27 per cent since then. Short-term costs, the survey suggests, remain unchanged.

"According to the study findings, more than half the respondents show an increase in mental-health claims," Ducharme said.

The second concern raised in the 2005 survey is the aging workforce, Ducharme said. Companies surveyed, then rated employee engagement as their No. 3 priority.

But here's the catch.

Few participants, according to the survey, have any measures in place to address the stigma of mental health, which, according to Ducharme, potentially presents one of the largest obstacles to dealing with the problem.

If they don't acknowledge it, how can they take the initiative to handle it?

"A lot of companies are still doing reactive practices instead of proactive," she said, though she believes companies are beginning to see the need for a more integrated approach to absence management and employee productivity.

"At this point they don't know what to do, but realize there is a need to do something," she said.

Companies might become more proactive if they could tally the costs associated with employee absenteeism.

"Measurements continue to be informal," Ducharme said, "and many don't track or capture disability-related costs, which are essential to a more accurate diagnosis."

Without these measurements, companies that claim their priority is to reduce short-term absence costs and increase employee engagement really don't have much to go on. Given the increase in disability claims, that poses a real challenge for the 20 per cent who answered the survey by stating they wanted to reduce their health-benefit costs.

With so little understanding of their employees' problems, it's no wonder companies are unable to grasp the growing trend to so-called "presenteeism" - employees whose chronic health problems don't stop them from working but inhibit them from being active participants in the workforce.

These are the colleagues who complain of low energy level, loss of concentration, change in attitude, difficulty in accomplishing work. They're on the job, but not effective participants in the workplace.

"Often this is a lead indicator of a short-term disability," Ducharme said, "because when an employee starts having problems related to mental health, sooner or later this employee becomes sick."

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