

Battling rising work absence across Canada

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Most employees, given the opportunity, would rather return to work as soon as possible after being off with an illness. And most employers are only too happy to make this happen by offering appropriate programs. However, work absence rates among Canadian employees have been steadily increasing for more than a decade and there is no sign of a reversal to this trend. So what can employers do to effect this positive change?

Uncover the underlying cause of the absence

Part of what has been missing from the equation is a personal, “de-medicalized” approach to disability management. This approach emphasizes a person’s capabilities, and it also addresses the underlying causes of why an employee stays off work. Some of these factors include a lack of work/life balance, strife between an employee and his or her manager or simply an absence of good childcare.

We know that each person responds differently to the same diagnosis, so managing disability by solely focusing on one type of diagnosis and its related symptoms does not solve the real issues and return the employee to work.

Psychological disability claims have increased significantly and are on the way to being the leading cause of disability in Canada. Healthy workplaces start at the top

Employers can take action now to help their employees remain healthy and productive. A healthy workplace starts at the top, and this requires a buy-in by senior management. Effective policies and programs woven into the culture of the company, and tracking and measuring results are key.

Organizations need to be aware of mixed messages they might be sending. For example, including a budget for a health and productivity framework is essential, however some of these programs are the first to be cut when HR managers are asked to later reduce their budgets.

Some fundamental ways that employers can create a healthy workplace and reduce absences of a psychological nature include:

- offering flexible working arrangements;
- reducing excessive workloads;
- providing clear job expectations;
- creating a conflict resolution program;
- offering appropriate training and tools for the role;
- ensuring transparency in your communications; and
- offering opportunities for employees to have input.

Trust: the critical component

One critical aspect to reducing workplace absences that is not talked about enough is mutual trust between employees and employers. This is sometimes at the root of what is impeding the success of good programs. For example, it is one thing to have a flexible work policy, but do you trust your employees to work from home? Employees off on disability could benefit from an employer providing such accommodations through a difficult time. Tangible options are key to creating a healthy culture.

Employers and employees typically have a common goal as it relates to work absences—to return the employee to a healthy, productive lifestyle as soon as possible. Ensuring a healthy workplace is a crucial step in the right direction to achieving this.

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