



Depression, stress cost economy \$33B a year: Business leaders not dealing with issue, Mercer study finds

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Productivity losses due to mental illness cost Canadian businesses an estimated \$33-billion a year, but employers remain ill-prepared to deal with growing cases of stress, depression and anxiety in the workplace.

In a recent study, 77% of employers surveyed said more workers were using group benefit plans because of mental illness issues, and 75% saw an increase in short-term disability claims for the same reason.

While business leaders are aware of mental health problems at work, the majority do not plan to take action to address them within the next 12 months, the report by Mercer Human Resource Consulting said.

About 90% of employers said workers are facing increased workloads, 68% have noticed an increase in employee absence and 64% said emotional tension is prevalent among employees.

"These are all indicators of potential strain on employees," said Anne Nicoll, a principal at Mercer. "In terms of the overall organization, all of that translates to reduced productivity, reduced output and can affect the bottom line quite significantly."

Still, very few workplaces have front-line managers trained to recognize



mental health problems, she said.

"Employers haven't quite recognized that there are things that they can do within the workplace that are within their control."

Bill Wilkerson, CEO of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, has encouraged business leaders to address mental health issues since he co-founded the group in 1998.

He said poor management practices -- such as levying unreasonable demands on employees, ignoring employee concerns about stress and creating an atmosphere of perpetual doubt about job security -- can lead to depression and anxiety disorders.

These practices create "frustration and rumination" among employees and cost companies about \$33-billion in lost productivity a year, he said.

But businesses can take steps to address mental health issues, experts say. Mary Ann Baynton, director of Mental Health Works, an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association, said increased communication between managers and employees can help remove the stigma surrounding mental health.

"It isn't a very terrifying, awful thing," she said. "It really comes down to managers understanding mental illness so that they're not afraid of it and then applying the communication skills that exist anyway." Retaining skilled workers who suffer from mental illness can benefit both employees and the company, Ms. Baynton added. "In the long run, it affects your bottom line in a very positive way."

Employers can preempt mental health problems at work by ensuring workload is allocated fairly and training managers to identify signs of mental illnesses, Ms. Nicoll said.



"It's all about early identification. Otherwise we find employers face increased disability claims."

Alcan Inc., the Montreal-based aluminum producer, has taken a leading role in addressing these issues, Mr. Wilkerson said.

Managers at Alcan are being trained to identify indicators of stress and employees are encouraged to raise concerns with their bosses, said Steven Price, director of human resources at Alcan's head office. Communication between management and employees is "absolutely critical" to reduce mental health problems, Mr. Price said.

Alcan also has a medical centre, where employees can seek treatment for mental illness, and a confidential assistance network, where they can find advice and support.

"Why are we working so hard on this? We treat our employees as people." Mr. Price said. "It's as simple as that."