

By *Martha Porado*

Optimizing wellness programs to reduce absenteeism



Rates of workplace absenteeism reached peak levels in 2016 compared to the last five years in both the public and private sectors, according to Statistics Canada. The public sector lost 13.5 days per employee on average, up from 12.5 in 2012. The private sector had been trending down from 8.3 days in 2012 but returned to that same level in 2016.

No single effort by a company will address the many reasons for employee absences. However, a 2015 study by Morneau Shepell Ltd. found that the reasons for workplace absenteeism aren't random and, as such, employers should focus on discovering the root causes of their employees' absences and implement wellness strategies to help address them.

"We found that the higher the investment in workplace wellness, the lower the absenteeism," says Paula Allen, vice-president of research and integrative solutions at Morneau Shepell.

An older study, in this case from Harvard University in 2010, reported that for every dollar employers spent on wellness campaigns, costs associated with absenteeism fell by \$2.73.

Despite those positive findings, putting in a program with a demonstrable causal link between it and a reduction in costs is easier said than done, says Lisa Roberts, company health director at Heidary Health. "People throw in what they think is a wellness plan, which may be a gym and a fitness challenge, but they don't really measure it. They don't monitor it."

Roberts stresses that the first step should be tracking the issue. But what are key elements of a wellness program aimed at addressing absenteeism?

Fostering a sense of caring

As a major driver of engagement, fostering a sense of caring in the workplace is particularly helpful, according to Allen. "If the wellness program is authentic, it's strong, then it actually does reflect caring about employee well-being," she says. "And that actually correlates with engagement as well: the stronger the engagement, the lower the absenteeism."

When it comes to building a custom wellness program, Ed Kane, assistant vice-president of university

services at Carleton University, suggests the three key components are mental well-being, physical health and work-life balance.

From knitting clubs to flexible working hours, Carleton's wellness programs for its employees are expansive, says Kane. Since it started focusing on the three components in 2009, absenteeism has gone down in most areas, he notes.


When it comes to mental health, managers can't be afraid to have "fierce conversations" about difficult topics, says Kane. "We've been bringing in outside consultants to help us train our managers, to help us provide a way of de-stigmatizing mental health."

As for physical health, apart from the standard fitness facilities, a wellness program can address ailments early on to prevent an employee from developing a chronic condition that could lead to long-term disability leave, says Kane. "Let's catch the blood pressure issue before it becomes more of a disease."

That's where an organization's benefits carrier can provide insight on health trends by showing how much employees are using services like drug plans and counselling, says Kane. With that data, organizations can make informed, proactive choices about where to invest further.

Also worth considering is the role of work-life balance and family issues. When employees have young children or aging parents to care for, they can easily bring the stress of dealing with those responsibilities to work, says Kane. In Carleton's case, it provides flexible working hours to help employees handle busy times. In addition, staff members who have gone through a difficult event, such as the death of a parent, volunteer their time to talk with colleagues who are now experiencing a similar situation.

Kane stresses that the ideas implemented within the three areas should take into account the diversity of needs in the workplace to ensure they remain effective.

"We're on a journey," he says. "We'll never get to the end. There will always be something." 

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WHY THE GAP BETWEEN THE PUBLIC, PRIVATE SECTORS?

With statistics putting the average number of **days lost** in 2016 at **13.5** per public sector worker versus **8.3** in the private sector, what's behind the gap?

Statistics Canada has pointed to the large number of women and older workers in the public sector as well as high rates of unionization:

- ▶ In 2015, **21.7%** of **women** attributed an absence to family or personal responsibilities, whereas only **9.3%** of men did.
- ▶ In 2012, workers aged 20 to 24 took **6.1 sick days** on average; for workers aged, 55 to 64, they took **12.4 days** on average.
- ▶ In 2014, **71.3%** of public sector workers were **unionized**, as opposed to **15.2%** in the private sector.

Source: Statistics Canada