

To be blunt: It's time to embrace the benefits of marijuana

Marijuana. Cannabis. Pot. Weed. Bud. Grass. Reefer. Kush. Mary Jane. Ganja. Doobie. Trees. No matter what you call it, marijuana is dominating the Canadian news cycle in 2018. And I think it's about time.

At *Benefits Canada*, it's cropping up in every area we cover, including how employers can add medical marijuana coverage into their benefits plans and how they should be amending their human resources policies to factor in the legalization of recreational cannabis. It's even crossed into our pension and investment coverage, as we've investigated whether pension funds should be considering the sector.

But despite the hype, several surveys published in the last few months have shown organizations aren't quite ready for this brave new world. In August, 62 per cent of Canadian employers said they expect legalization to have a significant impact on their workplace policies, but just 36 per cent said they feel prepared, leaving 64 per cent either somewhat or not prepared at all, according to a survey by Mercer Canada. And that's not a huge improvement from seven months earlier, when a Human Resources Professionals Association survey found 71 per cent of employers felt unprepared for legalization.

So what's the problem? This has been on the radar for all Canadians since Prime Minister Justin Trudeau first made the pledge to legalize recreational cannabis during his election campaign in 2015. In the three years since, the topic has rolled along so quickly, it's been nearly impossible to avoid.

With all the information available, shouldn't the benefits and HR industries be lighting up the subject for employers?

Many organizations are on the right path. But unfortunately, no matter how often it's written about or discussed, marijuana is still an extremely polarizing topic. And the associated stigma is still a major hurdle — and crutch — for its critics.

Canada's path towards legalization has been cluttered with

mixed messages. Back at the turn of the 19th century, Upper Canada's lieutenant governor distributed hemp seeds to farmers in an effort to stimulate the economy. More than 100 years later, in 1923, cannabis was deemed illegal under the Narcotics Drug Act Amendment Bill. After a handful of failed attempts at decriminalization, the federal government finally legalized cannabis for medical use in 2001, allowing licensed patients to grow their own. But it would take more than a decade for medical marijuana's commercial industry to be fully regulated.


This is a very condensed timeline, with many more steps and missteps along the way. No matter how far we've come, the clash of opinions still comes back to that underlying stigma. People need to get over the image of the lazy stoner with a constant case of the munchies; it's outdated and reductive. To put it bluntly, people who backslide into that stereotype, and prop it up in their crusade against marijuana, are the lazy ones.

Canadians have to educate themselves, and in the process normalize marijuana, before its wider uses can be fully appreciated — and accepted.

It grows like any other natural plant. It's

generally accepted as beneficial for adults with chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, for those with chronic pain and for patients with multiple sclerosis-related spasticity. And that's just the beginning. Besides its medicinal merits, it's also a nutritious food source, a useful industrial crop and a renewable energy source.

Clearly, the issue of marijuana — and its legalization — attracts a lot of different opinions, but I see it another way: it opens a lot of doors. We'll be covering the many angles for employers in the days, weeks and months ahead. After all, as this magazine hits desks, Oct. 17 is just a few days away.

There's no stopping the momentum now. The joint is already being passed around. Either take a haul or leave the party. 



By **Jennifer Paterson**
jennifer.paterson@tc.tc

Watch for . . .

TOP 40 MONEY MANAGERS

Benefits Canada's biannual list of the top 40 money managers is coming up in the **November issue**.

LIKE US

Benefits Canada is expanding its social media presence to Facebook. Like us at bit.ly/2x5C5GG.

SAVE THE DATE

The 2019 Benefits and Pension Summit will be held in Toronto on **April 17**. We look forward to seeing you there.