

The benefits of happy workers Disability claims jump as stress levels rise

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As the mother of two young children and a former practicing lawyer, Aimee Israel knows first-hand about stress. She and two colleagues launched LifeSpeak Inc. in 2004 to provide seminars taught by experts that could help employees balance their lives.

A recent survey by Watson Wyatt Worldwide supports what Ms. Israel and her colleagues already knew. It found it pays to keep employees healthy and happy, as a productive workforce contributes to a stronger bottom line.

The survey, which questioned nearly 100 Canadian organizations with more than 250 employees, indicated mental health concerns are taking the greatest toll on productivity. Fifty-six per cent of respondents claim employees are suffering more from stress, depression, and other mental health-related issues.

Watson Wyatt says this has contributed to a dramatic increase in long-term disability claims, which rose 27% since 2003. An ageing workforce and a lack of employee engagement also contributed to the rising claims.

Colleen McKinnell, a senior health and productivity consultant for Watson Wyatt, says employers need to reduce stress in the workplace to improve productivity. "Employers need to recognize and manage the stresses present in the work environment," she said.

"There are such things as positive stressors. Those are things that engage and challenge employees such as training, new assignments, chances for growth and active team work. It's critical to find a balance between the positive and negative stressors."

Don Tapscott, a professor at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, agrees. "Brains are very fragile. Unlike bodies they can be rendered temporarily ineffective by a single sentence. We know that the lack of control at work -- the lack of control over everyday things that allow people to do their jobs -- is a major impediment to productivity and worker health."

Ms. Israel said work often joins forces with issues at home to bring about increased stress and depression levels in today's workers.

LifeSpeak has designed three comprehensive programs aimed at helping employees manage these concerns, and Ms. Israel says the response has been overwhelmingly positive. She claims companies that have used the workshops found 90% of their staff felt they had a supportive and positive workplace.

Sean Weir, national managing partner at Borden Ladner and Gervais law firm, is an enthusiastic supporter of programs that provide support to employees.

He attributes a recent increase in company morale and productivity to a variety of services offered by his firm workshops, employee assistance programs, and family counselling programs.

"We want happy people, healthy people, and from a business perspective, productive people," Mr. Weir says. "If things are hectic at home, then employees won't be happy at work. It's up to us to support our staff."

Ms. McKinnell says not enough companies are following the lead of firms such as Borden Ladner Gervais in addressing mental health issues. She contends that negative stereotypes are a major factor in the lack of action taken by both employers and employees.

"Another area that's a challenge for employees is the stigma surrounding mental illness. Most people won't want to come forward and admit that something is wrong. It's important for organizations to take the time and effort to educate people as to the causes and effects of mental illness and how to integrate people back into the environment."

The survey results support the fact more proactive programs do help the bottom line: Companies that offer stress management and counselling services to their employees have noticed a decrease in benefits claims, as well as an increase in employee productivity.