

# Workplace morale needs maintenance

## Canadian firms urged to show understanding of worker stress

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Market meltdowns, faltering real estate prices, job cuts and economic uncertainty across Canada have many workers worried.

**"Watching the headlines every day can make anyone crazy - many of us can't help but be worried," says Aimee Israel, CEO of Toronto-based workplace consulting firm LifeSpeak.**

With more and more employees stressed out about finances, it's clear that the stock markets aren't the only things taking a hit. Productivity levels also drop when workers are stressed - and that's why some Canadian companies are going on the offensive.

Amgen, a Mississauga biotech company, recently invited well-known financial expert and TD Waterhouse vice-president Patricia Lovett-Reid to help staff understand what's happening in the economy and to give them tips for handling their own finances.

**"Employers need to be showing their people that they understand it's a difficult time and giving employees the tools they need to be successful on all fronts," says Israel, whose firm organized the workshop. "The maintenance of workplace morale during the current economic climate is crucial - this is how you keep employees motivated in tough times."**

Even in good times, stress can take a big bite out of the bottom line. As a risk factor, it has twice the financial impact on an organization as that of chronic health-related issues such as allergies, asthma, back problems, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease and depression combined.

"It's probably the single largest health issue that (employers) face," says Zorianna Hyworon, CEO of Winnipeg-based Info Tech.

"It affects an employer at every level, from decreased productivity to increased disability claims to the business impact if stressed-out employees are in client-facing or supervisory roles, yet it's not very well understood and it's not very well addressed."

Working with global blue-chip companies to measure, track and correlate a broad range of factors impacting employee health and productivity, Info Tech's Wellness Checkpoint program has gathered significant data on stress.

From a survey of 60,000 Canadian workers, it found that more than 61 percent reported "moderate to high" or "very high" stress levels, with almost 80 percent of employees stressed at work "sometimes to always."

Perhaps more surprisingly, only 14 percent of respondents indicated a willingness to change.

"If you take a factor like over-eating and 40 percent say they're at risk, at least half say they're ready to change," says Hyworon. "But with stress, not only are there more people at risk, they're also much less likely to change and we see this consistently."

Theorizing that many people may think stress is beyond their control, Hyworon says many companies often make the same mistake - either ignoring stress as a risk factor or not realizing how much it costs a company.

Yet, according to the Wellness Checkpoint data, stress is the single largest health-related productivity cost at work.

Based on an annual salary of \$50,000, people who report stress at home have \$3,300 in lost productivity alone and \$3,900 in lost salary time for stress at work.

While depression, at \$5,400, and heart disease, at \$5,500, in lost productivity cost more per person on an individual level, the sheer number of people suffering from skyrocketing stress levels - 61 percent versus 21 percent for known depression and only 1.5 percent for heart disease - adds up fast.

"When we apply the individual cost to the percentage of people who have stress, it will cost on average \$2.4 million in lost productivity alone per 1,000 employees," Hyworon points out.

"Compare that to kidney disease, which is more expensive on an individual level at \$5,400 (in lost productivity per \$50,000 salary). Far fewer people have it so it only costs \$26,000 on a population level (per 1,000 employees)."

With stress - from both job-related issues and external issues including home life and financial concerns - playing such a big role in workplace productivity, it may be surprising to learn that more companies aren't doing more to manage stress.

"Most employers don't realize how big the impact is," Hyworon says.

"What they have is claims data, the people that are, in fact ill, but many workers are the walking wounded and (businesses) don't see the pipeline coming in. It's that submerged part of the iceberg that's the problem."

One Canadian company that has been looking beneath the surface in an attempt to help manage employee stress for several years now is CIBC.

Banking on the fact that happier employees will be more productive and provide better service, CIBC has been using several methods, including confidential employee questionnaires, to gauge and track staff stress levels.

"What our numbers are showing us is that stress is an issue for employees," says Dr. David Brown, CIBC's corporate medical adviser.

"People everywhere are more stressed these days and standing there and telling people not to worry about stress - what's the point of that? People still feel it, it's still real and the bottom line for a company is what are you doing about it?" CIBC is taking a multi-faceted approach. From emergency daycare to financial and legal counselling, the bank is trying to lessen the load on its employees.

"It's all about flexibility," says Dr. Brown. "We've looked at things like personal days, where employees can take a certain number of days in a year for any reason. They're not sick days, they're not vacation days, so if your child has a toothache, you can take the day off and there's no repercussion for that."

"If you're taking control away from people, it can increase stress levels but on the reverse, if you're giving control back to people then they're not on this knife edge, bouncing all the time."

While many smaller businesses and organizations may not think they can afford to implement stress-management programs, workplace wellness experts say they can't afford not to.

For companies that have them, Hyworon says employee assistance programs can be a big resource, as can group health-care providers such as Blue Cross.

"There is help out there and the most important thing management can do is be aware of the big business impact stress has and try to keep a finger on the pulse of their organization," she adds.

"Sometimes they'll find that it may not be the employees who have the problem but that it's their supervisor that's the problem and that's why they're stressed out."

Indeed, workplace stress is often the result of a poor employee-manager relationship. After over two decades as a corporate medical adviser, Dr. Brown can't stress enough the importance of supportive supervisors.

"Study after study has shown us that one of the chief factors affecting an employee's health is their relationship with their manager," he says. "If you ask what a company can do to help with employee stress, having a supportive manager is pretty key."

For those seeing first-hand the rising stress levels of Canada's workforce, supporting staff in these testing economic times is more important than ever.

"As the workforce is being called on to be more adaptive and money is more stretched, your employees' ability to think clearly, interact well with others, be creative and be able to cope will be the difference between your business's success and failure," cautions Hyworon.

"Things just aren't the way they used to be and the agile organization needs agile employees."