

Special

Healthy workplaces

WORKING WISE

While the costs of inaction are clear and rising, new solutions to foster healthier workplaces are coming to the fore. No wonder savvy employers are paying attention.

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Workplace health a business imperative, urge experts

According to the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, stress, depression and mental illness caused by unhealthy workplaces cost Canada's economy an estimated \$35 billion in lost productivity and 35 million lost workdays each year.

As awareness of these costs grow, business leaders, organizational experts, academics and health care professionals are increasingly working together across disciplines to foster healthier workplaces.

Deborah Connors, president and managing director of the Health Work & Wellness Group, and founder of the annual Health Work & Wellness Conference, says, “We launched our first conference 15 years ago to provide a forum for sharing big ideas on achieving high performance organizations through culture change.” This year, more than 500 delegates – leaders in the organizational health community and senior management in both the private and public sectors– will attend the conference in Toronto.

One of the themes of this year’s conference is the importance of strategic thinking in addressing these critical issues. “Business leaders are generally very action-oriented. They like to jump into the strategic planning phase, often without dedicating time to strategic thinking upfront to ensure they’re moving in the right direction,” says Lynda Curtin, an Opportunity Thinking coach and consultant who will speak at the conference.

The results can be damaging to the well-being of employees as well as the organization, she says, citing BP’s oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico as an example. “The culture at BP demanded quick decisions to keep projects moving forward at a fast pace.”

Investing time in strategic thinking helps insure against outcomes that can otherwise cause immense damage to brand value, employee engagement and health, and profitability. “It’s essential to know how to constructively challenge your current thinking about your business. If your employees aren’t great thinkers, you’re not going to achieve strong results. If your thinking is weak, rushed or incomplete, you’re going to run into problems,” says Ms. Curtin.

Effective thinking requires optimum mental health, another theme of this year’s conference. At a round table dialogue sponsored by Great-West Life and the Canadian Mental Health Commission at last year’s conference, the 40 expert participants and audience identified the need for resources to help improve the emotional intelligence of front-line managers as their single most important priority. “Emotional intelligence refers to our ability to be self-aware of our own emotions and self-regulate or modulate those reactions, as well as our ability to recognize the emotional states of others and respond effectively,” says Dr. Joti Samra.

“When we think about the factors that create toxic workplaces – that increase individual levels of stress and the probability of psychological health problems – emotional intelligence proves critical.” With input from emotional intelligence experts Dr. Steven Stein and Dr. Cary Cherniss and organizational stakeholders across Canada, Dr. Samra developed Managing Emotions, online resources created for the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace that will be launched at this year’s conference. “There are a number of interactive learning resources, starting with a confidential skills assessment that takes about 10 minutes to complete and provides immediate feedback on areas of strength and areas for improvement,” says Dr. Samra.

Videos and quizzes help individuals develop and strengthen their skills over time. “Individuals will be able to improve their ability to be effective in understanding and managing other people’s negative emotions in the workplace – to be able to understand what’s happening for a person who is distressed and to develop good strategies to help manage that distress,” she says.

The strategies and resources presented at the conference are all designed to support organizational leaders and employees in a global environment in which wellness is no longer just a human resources or occupational health issue, says Ms. Connors. “The positive impact on the bottom line and improved employee retention and productivity are driving these concerns right to the top of organizations. In healthy organizations, workplace culture, leadership practices and the psycho-social environment enable people to be at their best. Workplace health is a business imperative.”