

eap

newsletter



Managing Employee Health and Performance



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Combining Your Resources For Success

It's a no-brainer. Employee wellness should be a priority for all employers. In Canada's increasingly knowledge-based economy, human capital is more than ever a company's greatest asset. Indeed the ability of employees to function at a high level is often the difference between success and failure in an organization.

So why then does it seem like employees are paying ever-higher costs associated with mental illness in the workplace?

There's no shortage of literature on the subject. A 2005 *Financial Post* report notes that "[m]ental health claims are on the rise and depression has overtaken cardiovascular disease as the fastest-growing category for days lost to disability in Canada." (Linton, September 14, 2005)

In its 2006 publication, *Quick Facts: Mental Illness & Addiction in Canada*, the Mood Disorders Society of Canada tells us that 79% of long-term disability claims are related to mental illness, and annual losses to the Canadian economy due to mental illness in the workplace total \$33 billion.

Staggering though these figures are, employers aren't perplexed by them. After all, they provide the statistics that compose them. What perplexes many is that organizations invest in human support initiatives like employee assistance programs (EAP) and disability management

(DM) services, and still the financial burdens associated with mental illness increase each year.

More and more, decision makers see the value of integrating their efforts to stem the flow of costs.

Functioning independently, EAP and DM services do have an impact on issues like employee absenteeism and presenteeism, as well as the frequency and duration of disability claims.

The traditional siloed approach, however, is no match for the stresses and anxieties employees face as the workforce struggles to deal with sandwich generation issues, growing work-life imbalances and ever-present threats of job loss.

In order to have the greatest impact on the skyrocketing costs of mental illness, EAP and DM services need to integrate and function as two sides of the same coin.

EAPs must be capable of helping those at risk. They must also have a mechanism that allows DM professionals to be engaged to help resolve and manage employee issues, while maintaining the firewall of confidentiality that is necessary to make an EAP effective.

At the same time, DM professionals must be able to call upon the EAP so that employees involved in return-to-work initiatives will receive the support they need following reintegration and equip them to manage the issues that

forced them onto leave in the first place.

In 2005, the B.C. Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health released a discussion paper called "Improving the recognition, treatment and reintegration of employees with psychiatric disabilities."

Key among the study's findings was that the workplace plays an important role in dealing with mental health issues, and that the ideal workplace features early detection systems, including front-line managers and EAP professionals who are trained to intervene where necessary.

Employees who do go on disability should know that support, including EAP, is available throughout their leave, and case managed care and treatment plans that are well understood should be in place.

As employees prepare to return to work, trained "go to" co-workers and peers should be established to act as advocates on behalf of individuals, and line managers should take responsibility for their successful reintegration into the workplace.

Gone is the day when merely having EAP and DM options in place gave employers piece of mind around the financial impact of workplace mental illness. Adopting a holistic approach to the delivery of these services will go a long way in helping organizations to get a handle on this evermore pervasive obstacle to success. 🍀

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by **Camille N. Isaacs-Morell**

Disability Risk Management and the role of the EAP

The rising cost and incidence of disability claims, particularly those associated with mental health conditions, have created challenges for employers and insurers. According to the Canada Safety Council, mental health claims are the fastest-growing category of disability costs in Canada, accounting for an estimated 30% to 40% of disability claims recorded by Canada's major insurers and employers. Three-quarters of employers say mental health issues are the leading cause of short- and long-term disability claims in their organization.¹

Insurance companies have an important role to play in providing disability risk management solutions. To be effective, disability management must go beyond claims adjudication. This is because, regardless of the diagnosis, many other factors could have contributed to the claimant's inability to work, and may present major obstacles to his or her return to work. For example, psychological distress caused by psychosocial issues is very often a significant contributor to mental and physical illnesses and disabilities. This is where an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can play an important role.

By integrating EAP services in the various stages of the disability cycle — prevention, early intervention, claims adjudication, ability management, rehabilitation and return to work — the insurer can help both the employer and the disabled employee to find a win-win solution.

Although EAPs are generally designed to support prevention and provide short-term, early intervention services to resolve psychosocial and other personal issues, EAP services should also be used to support the employee during the period of disability and, more importantly, support the employee's permanent and safe return to work.

The claimant's need for EAP services is most likely to be identified when the insurance company uses an integrated service and team approach. By working in partnership with the employer and disabled employee, as well as a team of medical and occupational specialists, it is likely that additional contributing factors to the employee's disability will be un-



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covered early in the period of disability. With the cooperation of the employer, the insurer can recommend the use of EAP services to support the recovery and return to work of the employee.

Financial, legal and marital problems, concerns about child care and elder care as well as the ability to maintain a good work-life balance are commonly cited as contributing factors to both mental and physical disabilities. EAPs provide qualified counsellors, psychologists and reference material that can help the disabled employee address problems and take practical measures to support his or her rehabilitation. Furthermore, EAP counselling and advisory services can have a positive effect on the overall state of mind of the claimant, making him or her more receptive and responsive to support provided by medical and occupational specialists.

Employers should not regard EAP services as a "nice-to-have" employee perk, or as an employee self-referral counselling service. Employers should view EAP services as an investment in the health and well-being of employees, which provides positive returns by way of optimal productivity and disability claims cost containment, particularly when the services are integrated in all stages of the disability cycle. In fact, one single case of depression can amount to a loss of 40 workdays or \$10,000.² Lost productivity due to short- and long-term disability for mental health reasons and early death cost Canadian businesses and employees an estimated \$8 billion a year.³ The services of an EAP can help to reduce these losses.

EAP services are a valuable component in the delivery of disability management solutions, which allow employees and disability claimants to take an active part in managing their health and productivity in the workplace — a winning investment and outcome for all concerned. 🍀

REFERENCES:

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2. Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, 2004
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