

Workplace contributions to the promotion of mental health and well-being

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Employment is a significant contributor to mental health and well-being. Work provides people with structure, social contact, collective effort and purpose, social identity, and regular activity (Harnois & Gabriel, 2000). There are a number of important and interacting factors in the workplace that influence mental health and well-being. Daily life both within and outside work as well as “workplace contextual factors” such as management style and workplace culture, (Watson Wyatt Canada ULC [Watson], 2007, p. 34) all contribute to health and wellbeing and the role of workplaces in employee wellness. In addition to workplace culture, task or job characteristics and relationships with co-workers can be significant stressors (Beehr, Glaser, Canali, & Wallwey, 2001). Further, stress in one life domain can spillover into other areas. Factors such as long-work hours (Galambos & Walters, 1992), scheduling time for tasks (e.g., family, leisure, and self-care), number of daily tasks, and eldercare (Doress-Worters, 1994) contribute to this spillover effect. Moreover, lack of supports and available resources to complete tasks at work and manage responsibilities outside work can add to role strain.

Mental health and well-being in the workplace depend on individual differences (e.g., stress coping styles), organizational factors (e.g., policies and communication), and extra-organizational factors such as life stressors and support within the family (Harvey et al., 2006). A healthy work environment empowers individuals with

opportunities and tools to manage various aspects of their lives, helps reduce stigma associated with mental health and help-seeking, encourages ongoing dialogue, and provides accessible information about mental health and prevention (Watson, 2007; Wilkerson, 2006).

Organizations can actively engage in mental health promotion through ongoing efforts in these four key areas: (a) demonstrate organizational flexibility around work schedules, workload, child care initiatives, and job sharing (HRSDC, 2007); (b) implement management practices and principles that help employees manage workplace change and understand their roles in the organization (Bond, Flaxman, & Loivette, 2006); (c) make information and resources accessible (e.g., in-house workshops, Employee Assistance Programs, and wellness programs); and (d) foster a climate and culture of support, learning, and collaboration among employees, supervisors, unions, and human resources.

Organizations that support learning not only educate but in so doing, also help mediate stress (Mikkelsen, Saskvik, & Ursin, 1998). Inviting employees to become involved in organizational activities beyond regular work responsibilities can promote belonging, personal accomplishment, and a sense of being valued by the organization. Effective workplace solutions result when staff are engaged, empowered, and routinely involved in collaborative dialogue with supervisors.

Mental health and well-being depend on a number of factors, many of which are related to work and working life. A mentally healthy workplace not only supports more satisfied and effective workers, it makes an important contribution to the health and well-being of workers in their varied roles and relationships. Additional research and the development of best practices related to employee wellness, education, illness prevention, and awareness about mental health in the workplace are needed.

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