

# What can be done about depression in the downturn? Influence of workplace social capital on depression and employee engagement in Canada

Nicole M. Aitken, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate, University of Ottawa

Source: Aitken, N.M. (2011). What can be done about depression in the downturn?  
Influence of workplace social capital on depression and employee engagement in Canada.  
*Psynopsis: Canada's Psychology Magazine, 33(1), 10.*

The nature of work in North America has changed dramatically since the recession in the 90's. Gone are many of the "good", well-paid, permanent, full-time jobs with full benefits. They have been outsourced to the third world as a product of the globalization trend or reorganized as part-time or contract positions lacking the stability and the benefits. The current economic situation has not improved. A recent study by Statistics Canada (Bernard, 2009) reported that between 2004 and 2008, Canada lost nearly 322,000 full-time manufacturing jobs. Ontario was hit hardest, losing 198,600 jobs. The high number of job losses in Canada, and particularly in Ontario, creates an environment of uncertainty for workers about the security of their jobs. Job losses lead to an increase in job insecurity for those "lucky" enough to remain employed. Job insecurity is defined as the worker's perceived threat of imminent job loss, and it negatively influences both employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (De Witte, 1999).

My research is part of an ongoing longitudinal project looking at the effects of job loss and social capital on individual health and family functioning in Ontario (Elgar, Davis, Mantler, Prus & Aitken, 2009). I set out to examine the impact of stress from job insecurity on the productivity of the organization in which the work is done (work-related outcome) and on

employees' mental health (psychological outcome). In addition, I looked at whether workplace social capital could mitigate any negative impact of workplace stress from job insecurity. Social capital refers to features of social relationships (i.e., interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity, sense of belonging, and participation in civic organizations) that serve as resources or support for individuals and facilitate activities from which individuals and groups benefit (Field, 2003).

Data was collected from 228 employed adults. Results showed that higher job insecurity was consistently associated with increased levels of perceived stress, increased levels of depressive symptoms and decreased levels of employee productivity. Higher workplace social capital was found to be directly related to lower depressive symptoms and higher levels of productivity for all employees. Increasing network ties, sense of belonging, participation, and trust would appear beneficial for all employees regardless of their stress levels.

An insecure climate at the workplace has implications not only for the health and wellbeing of employees but potentially, also for the profit margin of the company. Organizations need to invest strategically in their people. Increasing the trust, participation, and reciprocity within employee networks is one way to help

improve employee and work-related outcomes. For more information about our research, please contact Nicole Aitken at [naitk050@uottawa.ca](mailto:naitk050@uottawa.ca).

### *References*

Bernard, A. (2009). Trends in manufacturing employment. *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, 10(2), 5-13.

De Witte, H. (1999). Job insecurity and psychological well-being: Review of the literature and exploration of some unresolved issues. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology. Special Issue: Job Insecurity*, 8(2), 155-177.

Elgar, F., Davis, C., Mantler, J., Prus, S., & Aitken, N. (2009). *Tale of two towns: Job loss, social capital and health outcomes in Eastern Ontario*. Poster presentation, The 8th International Conference on Occupational Stress and Health, November 5 – 8, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Field, J. (2003). *Social capital*. London: Routledge. Wade, T. D., & Kendler, K. S. (2000). The relationship between social support and major depression: cross-sectional, longitudinal, and genetic perspectives. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 188(5), 251-258.