

# No separating health from work

Benefits Canada, November 8, 2010

Brooke Smith

When it comes to total attendance and disability management, health and work come full circle. While many employers understand the impact that work has on health, they may need to refocus on the impact employee health has on work.

“Our biggest asset is human capital and most important with human capital is health,” said Jean-Marc MacKenzie, senior vice-president, health management, with Shepell•fgi, speaking at the Shepell•fgi Day of Discovery in Toronto on November 5. “We need to respect and to manage that.”

Employers must consider the impact health has on work for four reasons:

- risk management, in terms of the legal requirements of work on health;
- duty to accommodate;
- operational efficiency (alignment to business objectives); and
- engagement.

MacKenzie said employers are more effective managing the impact of work on health (e.g., workers’ compensation), but that the impact of on work will become more challenging in the next 20 years.

## **Attendance management**

One challenging area is attendance management. According to a study by the London School of Economics, 75% of medical absences are not medical. These absences could be personal (family, alcohol, finances, job satisfaction), organizational (related to the manager, shift, people policies, team or conflict) or macro context (climate, epidemics, day of the week, employment options).

The average length of sick leave is 44 days, MacKenzie said, citing the Conference Board of Canada, and in most absence management programs, employers send employees through an inefficient process. If the absence is not truly medical in nature, sending the employee to a doctor will do little to improve the situation.

A more efficient process is by the “triage” method, he said, meaning that on day five of the absence, the employer does not send the employee to a doctor, but rather contacts the employees directly by phone.

“We have a conversation with them,” said MacKenzie. “It’s not the medical process, it’s the engagement/talk-to-the-employee process.” Using this method, MacKenzie reports the average number of sick-leave days drops to 18.

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*“Employers must consider the impact health has on work.”*

# No separating health from work (continued)

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But even though there may be personal, organizational or macro context reasons for an absence, there are also health issues. Consider the following list of health risk factors:

- poor diet
- high body mass index
- high cholesterol
- physical inactivity
- high stress
- overdue preventative visits
- high blood pressure
- tobacco use
- diabetes/high blood sugar
- alcohol use

MacKenzie said employers have to consider the relationships between health risk and work productivity. "People with risk factors are not going to show up for work," he said. "As a corporation you have to care about this."

So, MacKenzie said employers have to let their employees know they have these risk factors, for example, through workplace clinics and linking benefits and health education.

"Work on health sustainability is the business that corporations are in."

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