Mental Health and the Workplace

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Global Business and Economic roundtable
on Addiction and Mental Health

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‘THE NEW WORKPLACE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY’

(In his full speech on August 8th, Bill Wilkerson will spell out the challenges he sees facing benefit specialists posed by the advent of a ‘perfect storm’ of legal, social and economic pressures now facing employers to build and sustain psychologically healthy workplaces and how those challenges can be met. This PREVIEW touches upon the CEO leadership role in weathering this storm and emerging from it stronger than before.)

Preview

The CEO of the future will lead a new kind of workplace where the link between a healthy culture and healthy future is well understood, and preserved.

The CEO of the future will deem chronic job stress a work hazard just as real as unsafe equipment or air pollution.

The CEO of the future will manage the perfect legal storm building in Canada and other countries around employer negligence, incompetence or recklessness and willful practices that result in employee ‘mental injury’ as defined in law.

The CEO of the future will build and lead workplaces that are psychologically as well as physically safe for executives, managers and everyday employees.

The CEO of the future will assess and redress risks to the psychological health of workers that arise from the ways in which work is designed and people are managed.

The CEO of the future will cultivate management practices which prevent reasonably foreseeable and significant harm to the mental health of employees, rendering them unable to function as normal at work or home.

The CEO of the future will make executives and managers accountable for running psychologically healthy workplaces, recognizing this as a ‘super ordinate duty to care’ (Shain) about the mental health of all employees including peers.
The CEO of the future will quantify what constitutes psychological risk in the contemporary workplace, how it can be mitigated, using this to inform a sense of urgency to design acceptable standards of managerial practice.

The CEO of the future will recognize potential employer liability associated with workplace decisions and behaviors which may contribute to employee suicide. One such case is unfolding in France.

The CEO of the future will purchase products and services from insurance companies and health benefit specialists who demonstrate competence, experience and innovation in working with clients to promote mental health and prevent LTD.

In Canada, these new flow from a new set of voluntary standards for psychologically healthy workplaces developed on the basis of a report by Dr. Martin Shain for the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

Completion and publication of the standards are now in the hands of the country’s top industrial standards setters. We look for an October release date.

While voluntary, these standards refer to employer negligence, bringing psychological health closer to well-established standards protecting physical health and safety. A new beachhead.

These voluntary standards open a new front in the war against chronic job stress and reckless managerial behavior. Understand this: pressure for these standards has not come from trade unions or their lawyers.

But rather from the courts and tribunals themselves. The Shain Report documents a gathering storm of Canadian case law sure to awaken the interest of employers, courts and tribunals in the US and Europe.

This is not a matter of ideology or politics. It is the growing recognition of the impact of work environments have on human health and human rights. The CEO of the future will not sidestep these trends but manage them.

Neither will he or she construe these trends as a threat to running a business or making necessary, tough decisions. In fact, there is plenty of science and business history behind the business and economic value of creating healthy workplaces.

This is also a logical and timely extension to well-established occupational health and safety policies. Depression and anxiety disorders are the greatest threat to the loss of productive capacity through employee absence and downtime.

Chronic job stress is a powerful propellant of this threat.
Businesses that compete successfully recognize that healthy employees are a forward indicator of financial success not a lagging indicator. In turn, employers now ask all their employees to use their brains as a source of marketplace differentiation.

Consider the significance of innovation as a premiere source of competitive advantage in a stressed world economy. Innovation is a function of mental skills, cognitive capacity and psychological balance and incentives.

Years ago, when the roundtable first started, president and CEO the Royal Bank called this “the economy of mental performance.”

Canada’s former ambassador to the United States and our founding chairman, Michael Wilson, described this as the advent of a brain-based economy. Our final report makes the case for a new neurological paradigm of OHS.

The CEO of the future will embrace the psychological health of the 21st-century workplace as an essential precondition to commercial success and competitive stability.

These matters implicate the insurance, pension and health benefits sectors in fundamental ways regarding the design and delivery of your advice, services and products to employers especially larger ones.

The Chinese describe crisis as an opportunity. The dictionary calls it an unmanaged threat. Which ever you prefer, let us be sure to understand that the trends described here are not reversible anymore than is the digitization of our economy and society.

These trends can be channeled and managed and ridden like a fresh steed into a future that will be defined not by employers who remain ignorant of the merits and demands of workplaces where psychological health and well-being can flourish …. 

... BUT RATHER ....

By those who see in these unfolding chapters of workplace history a real opportunity to make money not on the backs of employees but through their psychological health and safety.