

Response to the Consultation Regarding Mental Health
(psychological health and safety)
initiated by the Labour Program

January 2021

1. Introduction

The Chartered Professionals in Human Resources (CPHR) Canada is pleased to contribute to the consultation on mental health in the workplace initiated by the Labour Program.

CPHR/CRHA Canada is a national association of 27,000 human resources professionals across nine provinces and three territories. Established in 1994, CPHR/CRHA Canada is the national voice on the enhancement and promotion of the HR profession. We advocate for public policy issues that ensure a healthy balance between organizational success and employee well-being contributing to the overall success of the Canadian economy.

CPHR/CRHA Canada's provincial bodies are the grantors of the CPHR designation in their respective provinces. Together we are responsible for setting and upholding national standards for the profession.

Our members work in organizations of all sizes and throughout many sectors.

We believe strongly that the health of workplaces and the efficiency of labour markets in Canada are critical not just for the success of our economy, but are fundamental to the quality of life of all Canadians.

While the link between stress and physical and mental well-being has been firmly established, research has highlighted the importance of mental health in the workplace and its costs to the economy. Importantly, the recurrence of mental health problems in the workplace seems to be increasing, while employers remain under-equipped to handle mental health issues and foster their employees' well-being. Stress at work comes not only with human costs, but economic ones, as it makes organizations less efficient, especially when the work environment leads to chronic stress.

CPHR Canada believes that governments must put in place measures to assist employers to address mental health issues and implement best practices to promote their employees' mental health. We welcome the federal government's commitment to include mental health as a key component of occupational health and safety in the Canada Labour Code (Code) and to require federally regulated employers to take preventative steps to address workplace stress and injury. Moreover, we strongly believe that through its actions, policies and examples, the federal government can influence and promote a widespread movement to address mental health in the workplace.

Our submission draws on a report published earlier this year by CPHR Canada and l'Ordre des CRHA that examined four critical human capital issues¹. Additionally, we recently consulted broadly with our expert members on aspects of this consultation.

¹ The report may be viewed here : <https://cphr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Human-Capital-Four-Priorities-for-Sustainable-Economic-Performance-in-Canada.pdf>

2. *The Issues*

In response to the Labour Program invitation to provide input, CPHR Canada undertook a survey² of human resources professionals. Critically, more than 90 per cent of respondents noticed an increase in the number of workers experiencing psychological health issues that stem from the workplace. We were told that COVID-related anxiety, workload and work life balance are factors that explain the increase.

We were also told:

- Tools provided by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the Canadian Mental Health Association and employee and family assistance programs are helpful in dealing with workplace mental health issues;
- Organizational policies such as extending sick leave to mental health and anxiety related leave, increased benefits for counselling, psychological or psychiatric services and harassment prevention plans are helpful practices;
- 60 per cent of respondents say their organizations have introduced measures to deal with COVID-related anxiety. These include regular check-ins with senior leaders, virtual social hours, providing COVID-related time-off, increasing in house wellness training and promoting resources including a self-assessment tool, providing flexibility for remote workers and generally increasing communications with employees.

It is acknowledged that 40 per cent of all jobs can be done remotely. Remote work has provided the needed flexibility for employers and employees alike to address issues raised by the pandemic. By some accounts, return to an office setting will not occur until 2022, and for some workers, remote work may remain permanent. Nevertheless, the informal nature of remote work that emerged during the pandemic will undoubtedly change and processes will be formalized. Policy makers and organizational leaders alike will need to address challenges brought about remote work including addressing mental health issues, harassment and civility.

In this regard, an August 2020 survey conducted for l'Ordre des CRHA, one third of workers said they would not be comfortable reporting harassment from a remote environment. We therefore welcome the coming into force of anti-harassment and violence legislation on January 1 that requires employers in federally regulated workplaces to conduct a workplace assessment, develop a workplace harassment and violence prevention policy, develop and implement violence and harassment training and establish a process for dealing with incidents. Having these processes in place is essential for all organizations. The federal government could launch a national awareness campaign and develop model policies and guidelines aimed at employers of all sizes, not only federally-regulated organizations.

² CPHR Canada email survey on mental issues in the workplace conducted from December 9, 2020 to December 29, 2020. Total respondents 181.

The right to disconnect without fear of reprisal is a recurring theme when addressing workplace mental issues such as burnout. Technology has facilitated work lives and has enabled a rapid transition to remote work for a large number of workers. Yet, the evidence shows that the result has been longer work days. It is our view that organizations must have clear guidelines on the right to disconnect that balance the needs of their employees and their operational requirements. We therefore fully support the recommendation of the Expert Panel on Modern Federal Labour Standards that there not be a statutory right to disconnect at this time and that organizations issue policy statements on the issue of disconnecting with the goal of setting boundaries between work and non-work time. The federal government could set an example by leading the way in this area.

When workers worry about their finances, their work performance decreases. A survey conducted for FP Canada in October 2020 found that 42 per cent of respondents were “not in a strong enough financial position to handle the challenges of the second wave of COVID-19” with an almost equal number (41%) saying they were already worse off financially than before the pandemic.³ It also found that almost a third of respondents (30%) felt they will never fully recover financially from the effects of the pandemic.

We recommend therefore increasing financial literacy education in the workplace with the goal of reducing stress caused by personal financial issues. Tools produced by the Financial Consumer Agency are helpful. We suggest the government consider partnering with organizations representing SMEs and the financial sector in implementing appropriate programs.

3. The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (the Standard)

The Labour Program has specifically sought out the views of stakeholders on the application of the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (the Standard)⁴. In our March 2020 paper, we recommend that resources be increased to allow broader dissemination and implementation of the Standard within organizations of all sizes in Canada. This is why.

Labour Canada’s 2018 survey found that only 17 per cent of Canadian organizations surveyed were aware of the Standard. Compatible with their professional knowledge, almost 50 per cent of respondents to the CPHR Canada survey are aware of the Standard and only about 17 per cent have implemented the Standard in their respective organizations.

Our members have found that the Standard builds awareness of mental health issues in organizations and provides encouragement for continually striving to achieve a psychologically

³ COVID causing major financial stress for Canadians. <https://www.rcinet.ca/en/2020/10/28/covid-causing-major-financial-stress-for-canadians-surveys/>

⁴ The Standard is a set of voluntary guidelines and tools that organizations can fully or partly implement to improve psychological health and safety in their workplaces

safe workplace. The value resides in the implementation process. Its usefulness is well proven to those organizations who have implemented it.

Yet, our members note that successful implementation is dependent on the support of senior leaders, the availability of dedicated human resource leaders and dedicated funding. Implementation often requires a significant culture shift. While the evidence strongly suggests that investing in the mental health of employees is good for business, advocacy is still required within organizations to make the business case.

In response to the Labour Program's specific questions, we recommend:

- Specific job-related factors that are a risk to mental health should be added to the list;
- The Standard should be more closely aligned with requirements of the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (COHSR) particularly Part XIX – Hazard Prevention Program and Part XX – Violence Prevention in the Work Place;
- Increasing awareness must be a precondition to making the Standard mandatory.

In addition, we support requiring organizations to report incidents that cause psychological injuries or illnesses to an employee to the Labour Program on the same level that incidents that cause physical injury are reported with the expectation organizations will then take steps to improve safety conditions in their workplaces, to prevent subsequent incidents. Forty-seven per cent of our members' survey agreed. We caution however that protection of personal information must be addressed.

The lack of qualified, competent human resource professionals in organizations is cited as a barrier to implementation. To remedy this, we propose the federal government create a centre of excellence to support organizations, through coaching, mentoring, sharing best practices and training.

4. Causes and barriers to addressing the issue

More than 90 per cent of members surveyed agreed there is still a stigma associated with psychological injuries and illnesses in the workplace. The following diagram illustrates the barriers that must be addressed to tackle the issue.

people stigma around mental communication employees will Reduced access resources
 training impacts leadership individual issues stigmatization lack Education
 awareness workplace mental health continue need life
 employees Make Stigma help work access
 support Workload employers Funding resources things
 managers understanding Cost management leaders reducing stigma
 increased training support mental health issues around mental health required

Overwhelmingly members speak about the need for senior management support, availability of resources, increased communication and reduced stigmatization as the main barriers preventing the issue from being addressed.

5. Conclusion

Mental health issues in workplaces have a human cost and makes organizations less efficient. Employers remain under-equipped to handle mental health issues. Many organizations have introduced pandemic specific measures to address mental health issues but more remains to be done.

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace is an important tool to help workplaces address the issues. Given these unprecedented times and limited awareness of the Standard, now is not the time to make the Standard mandatory. It is however an opportune time to begin building a base where more rigour can be applied through broad awareness, development of supports for business of all sizes as they work toward its implementation and a broader dialogue on making the Standard mandatory.

CPHR/CRHA Canada welcomes the opportunity to be part of that dialogue.

Moreover, we strongly believe that through its actions, policies and examples, the federal government can influence and promote a widespread movement to address mental health in the workplace.