

Moving On From Mediocre: The New Business Case For Workplace Health

HEALTHCARE



BY: **Chris Bonnett**

Since 2003, I've had the privilege of participating on the Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey advisory board. The survey has increasingly focused on chronic disease as an upstream driver of health and disability plan costs. This has revealed an important problem: workplace health programs are not apparently growing in number, participation, or power. We do not know enough about process and even less about outcomes because these program stages are rarely measured and objectively reported. In short, workplace health promotion does not seem to be energizing and engaging Canadian workplaces.

Cause For Concern

Every employer must control cost and mitigate risk and that always means they need to manage health. While payroll costs are probably their largest expense, the many health-related costs are often small when isolated but significant when aggregated. The sum of health and disability benefits, employee assistance plans, workers' compensation, occupational health and safety compliance, and absence and presenteeism is likely well into the double-digits as a percent of payroll for most employers.

The Sanofi survey consistently reports that over 50 per cent of plan members report at least one diagnosed chronic disease. However, employers significantly underestimate the prevalence of chronic illness in their workforces. That finding probably explains why some haven't invested more in preventing health problems. They don't know there is a problem, they don't know their role, or they don't know where to begin.

Employers may also make assumptions about priorities. Research based on almost 29,000 participants in the '2010 Canadian Community Health Survey' reported that back problems were three times more prevalent than mood disorders and caused over twice as much productivity loss. About 30 per cent of those with cancer also have co-morbid depression, anxiety, and heart disease. Yet the main target of workplace health programs continues to be mental health – certainly necessary and admirable, but not at all sufficient.

Provider Solutions

This awareness deficit seems out of step with the plethora of increasingly sophisticated health management services and apps launched by insurers and other vendors that could help plan members and sponsors. The bet seems to be that most employers want more help, a finding also supported by the Sanofi survey. Consider 'what's new' in recent months:

- Internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (ICBT) has been launched by several providers.
- A comprehensive suite of 'digital' health services includes patient coaching and richer plan analytics is now available.
- An insurer-university research collaboration will study the link between health benefit claims and workplace health promotion practices.
- Telemedicine platforms that include online physician access and prescribing and virtual 'digital' health services may improve access, patient satisfaction, and reduced absence costs.
- Pharmacogenomics testing will better match patients with more effective depression medicines.
- A comprehensive incentive program may promote healthier behaviours.
- A cancer-centred initiative is now focusing on resolving industry-to-industry concerns between insurers and drug manufacturers.

Some of these offerings are expansive and long term while others are quite narrow in scope and reach. All are innovative and sophisticated and hold at least some objective value. At the very least, they are absolutely unique from anything governments are doing within our antiquated and globally sub-optimal public health care system.

But there is also cause for caution. In some cases, marketing hype has far outpaced the available evidence of greater or sustained efficacy or lower cost. Most of these programs will eventually succeed over time with some demographic cohorts and in some workplaces, but not in others. None of these programs directly support the two main determinants of success: supportive leadership nested in a progressive workplace culture.

A Brighter Future, Possibly

We know that ad hoc programs launched in poorly prepared workplaces will continue to fail. Employers that want better results will

need more sophisticated health and well-being programs that stem from robust analytics and predictive modelling. Much more than today, workplace health promotion will have to insert itself into business strategy by supporting success metrics that include corporate reputation. Done well, that will make it easier to recruit, retain, and engage employees. This is especially important where skills shortages are filled by young employees who are mobile, well-educated, and searching for meaningful work.

The good news is that research in many countries demonstrates the correlation between health risks, health costs, and a work environment that either supports or diminishes health. Prevention can pay, but it needs to be considered holistically. No employer needs just another health program. The next evolution of workplace health promotion must target:

- Employee and employer needs through robust health assessments and analytics
- Every stage of prevention through disease management, including co-morbidities
- Physical, mental, financial, and psychosocial health across generations and diverse cultures
- Education and behaviour change using both in-person and virtual delivery
- Regular evaluation of programs, services, and supply partners to ensure relevancy, co-ordination, and value for money.

Admittedly, this looks daunting. Both the Sanofi survey and my own workplace health experience reinforce the need for employers to get started – almost anywhere – and to understand that a sustained investment will be required, as will regular updates to identify emerging opportunities and threats.

Right now, the only answer to whether workplace health programs work is still 'it depends.' It will remain that way unless more Canadian employers publish high quality program evaluations of what success – and failure – look like.

The bottom line is a cogent health strategy will produce gradual, but consistent, improvements if a workforce is treated for what it is: a competitive advantage, complex but manageable, and deserving of employer support.

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