

## Future-Proofing Investments in Workplace Mental Health

Meeting Employees' Evolving Needs



**The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of mental health and wellness. While studies have cautioned that the mental health of many Canadians was already at risk before the pandemic, the uncertainty associated with the pandemic has created an unprecedented demand for mental health supports.**

Employers will play an important role in increasing efforts to meet Canadians' emerging mental health needs. This study explores how employers are currently supporting their employees' mental health and how their mental health and wellness strategies have shifted over the course of the pandemic.

### Highlights

- **Organizations are accelerating their efforts toward a more holistic and adaptive strategy for workplace mental health.**

Most organizations (72.5 per cent) have or are developing a formalized strategy (outside of their benefits plan) to support employee mental health. Many have expanded their suite of health and wellness initiatives for employees to better transition through the pandemic. One-third of organizations increased their coverage levels for psychological services, and another 16 per cent aims to do so in the coming months. Many organizations are adopting flexible work arrangements, but most are still in the process of developing and implementing mental health strategies designed specifically for hybrid or remote work environments.

- **Promoting increased usage of group health benefits remains a priority.**

Most organizations (89.7 per cent) reported that all of their permanent full-time employees have health benefits coverage. Many organizations noted that low usage of benefits is a key concern and are prioritizing communications initiatives (e.g., awareness campaigns) to increase benefits usage, specifically employee assistance programs. On average, organizations spend roughly \$18 million on their annual benefits plans, excluding costs for pensions, retirement plans, the Canada Pension Plan and the Quebec Pension Plan, and employment insurance.

- **The unique mental health and wellness needs of employees may not be met by a traditional one-size-fits-all approach.**

About one-third of organizations ask their employees what they would like included in mental health and wellness initiatives. Many organizations we interviewed were unclear on how their initiatives meet the needs of their employees and how these initiatives connect to their equity and inclusion efforts. Almost half of organizations (45 per cent) reported that they don't customize their mental health initiatives to meet the needs of Indigenous people, people with disabilities, and other equity-deserving groups.



## Recommendations

- **Re-evaluate your benefits plan by increasing communication and collaboration with employees.**

Assess the relevance and impact of your benefits for employees. Regularly communicate your benefits plan to employees through an easy-to-use format that clearly explains the benefits and how to access them. Seek input from employees on their preferred mental health and wellness benefits. Question your assumptions about their needs. Consider adopting a flexible or customizable plan that best meets employees' stated needs and increasing the maximum coverage for psychological services to the level recommended by the Canadian Psychological Association (\$3,500–\$4,000).

- **Strengthen and clarify policies. Make them actionable.**

Find inspiration in Canada's National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace and make incremental, intentional changes that could have an accumulative impact. Evaluate whether your return-to-work policies provide the mental health and social supports that employees need after a long-term absence. Identify and amend organizational practices that contribute to unhealthy work-related stress.

- **Practise measurement and evaluation. Collect the right data to understand your workforce profile.**

Collect and analyze the right data to evaluate whether investments are having the desired impact and adoption rate, and adapt initiatives based on results. Identify best practices used by organizations that are comparable in terms of size, workforce profile, capacity, and core values. Identify key performance indicators on benefits and programs and request them from insurance and services providers.

- **Identify your best mental health and wellness initiatives and build on them.**

Prioritize and strengthen existing mental health and wellness initiatives that offer the greatest impact for employees (e.g., leadership training and return-to-work programs). Ensure your decisions are based on evidence, not assumptions. Promote and protect positive mental health and treatment.

- **Build inclusion and equity into workplace health and wellness.**

Engage equity-deserving groups in the conversation about mental health. Learn from them. Create culturally appropriate mental health policies, initiatives, and communications practices that reflect who your employees are and what they say they need. Foster engagement and a sense of belonging. Evaluate your accommodation policies and programs to ensure that supports for individuals reflect their specific physical and/or cognitive abilities.

## About the Centre

The Conference Board of Canada's Workplace Mental Health Research Centre is committed to increasing awareness and understanding of workplace mental health through research and analysis. It tackles critical matters facing Canadian organizations and the wellbeing of their employees. This study is the Centre's inaugural report.

Read our full report, [Future-Proofing Investments in Workplace Mental Health: Meeting employees' evolving needs](#).



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