

# Sick and tired in the workplace

## Presenteeism can hurt productivity and cause serious illness

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Presenteeism is running rampant in the workplace. In an effort to stay on top of their workloads and not burden colleagues, eight in 10 Canadians have gone to work ill or exhausted, according to a new study.

The Desjardins Financial Security 2008 Health is Cool! survey of 1,594 working Canadians found 83 per cent of them have dragged themselves to work when they weren't at their best, usually because of looming deadlines, wanting to prevent a workload pileup, not wanting colleagues to be burdened or concern that missing work would be frowned upon.

The global economy is putting pressure on Canadian organizations to compete and that pressure is trickling down to employees who have to work harder and longer hours, said Michele Nowski, director of the disability, early assistance and rehabilitation departments for Desjardins Financial Services in Toronto.

"They're feeling this pressure to come in to work. They're sick, they should be staying at home but they're feeling too stressed to stay at home so they come in to work where they're stressed. So it turns into very much a vicious cycle," she said.

And if the cycle is allowed to continue, employees will begin to resent employers and end up getting more seriously ill, which will cost employers more in disability claims, said Nowski. And all of this is going to affect productivity because employees aren't at their best.

"If your employees are not productive, then your bottom line is going to suffer. If allowed to continue on a consistent basis, it could become a very significant problem. It could increase your absenteeism rates and have an impact on your long- and short-term disability," she said.

Exhaustion and illness in the workplace can lead to errors in judgement, difficulty in making decisions, increased social friction because of irritability and an increased risk of accidents due to decreased vigilance, said Rick Hackett, professor of HR management at the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Even more troubling is the potential for sick workers to spread illnesses, said Hackett.

"When you go in sick, you're spreading those viruses to others. You could be bringing down your entire workforce," he said. "That should really be discouraged by employers, not encouraged."

Since the SARS epidemic struck Toronto in 2003, employers have been paying more attention to the problems that arise when employees come to work sick, said Hackett, which has shifted the focus away from absenteeism.

The same pressures that are forcing employees to go to work when they're sick might also be contributing to higher stress levels.

Nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) of respondents said their stress level is the same or higher than it was the year before. The most common cause of stress was money problems, with 43 per cent of respondents citing this as their primary stressor, followed by health problems at 22 per cent and work problems at 18 per cent.

While work might not be the primary stressor for most Canadians, 85 per cent of respondents said employees work in a very stressful environment and 74 per cent said employees are overworked.

Prolonged stress and fatigue can lead to burnout, which is associated with depression and can eventually lead to other health concerns, said Hackett.

“Stress can really run down your immune system, which makes you much more vulnerable to more serious diseases,” he said.

To manage stress and presenteeism in the workplace, organizations need to get a clear picture of what's going on with employees. This can be done through employee surveys or audits of short- and long-term disability claims, said Nowski.

“Once you know what it is that you're dealing with, where the specific issues lie, where the stressors are, you can look at targeting your initiatives to address those specific issues,” she said.

With 60 per cent of respondents saying employees have difficult relationships with managers, organizations should focus on management training, said Nowski.

Organizations can also take better advantage of the resources already at their disposal, such as employee assistance programs and lunch-and-learn sessions, she said.

However, if work-life balance and good mental health aren't part of the organization's culture, if there isn't a daily focus on good mental health in the workplace, then no amount of lunch-and-learns will make a difference, said Nowski.

Employers should also be more flexible and cultivate an environment where it is acceptable for people to stay home when they aren't well or to work from home when possible, said Kathy Jurgens, Mental Health Works program co-ordinator at the Ontario branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

If organizations don't change, employees will take matters into their own hands. The survey found workers are more willing to make sacrifices for work-life balance, with 67 per cent of respondents saying they would turn down a promotion if it means working more hours and 53 per cent saying they are willing to earn less money to work fewer hours each week.

“This sends a very strong message that Canadian workers are very cognizant of the fact that good mental health is important,” said Nowski

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