

Opinion: Employers need to prioritize employee mental health if they want to attract new talent

May 29 2023, by Stephen Friedman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Canadian employers are currently facing [significant challenges in attracting and retaining talent in the workplace](#), putting the responsibility on employers to attract employees to their organizations.

One key way for employers to achieve this is by prioritizing the [mental health](#) of their employees. Workplaces [are increasingly recognizing](#) that productive employees actively seek out workplaces [that prioritize mental well-being and offer flexible working conditions](#).

This recognition is well-founded, as employees tend to be more productive when they are not burdened by [mental health challenges](#).

As a teacher of current and future leaders, my experience confirms that employees want workplaces that facilitate well-being. Many of my students have indicated that [mental health support at work](#) is a must-have.

Mental health stigma

Mental health is a pressing issue for many. In 2021, [a quarter of Canadians reported having symptoms of a mental health disorder](#). Five million reported needing professional help, and over one-third said they were burned out. Forty percent of workers aged 18 to 24 indicated they were at a "breaking point."

Although many employers are starting to recognize the importance of mental health support in the [workplace](#), [stigma still persists](#), resulting in negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors.

Leaders [play a crucial role in addressing mental health stigma](#) by modeling risk and vulnerability. By using [informal communication](#), like sharing stories about their personal struggles, leaders can support the mental health of their employees.

There is [growing evidence that shows](#) stigma decreases when leaders disclose their own mental health and substance use problems. This reduction in stigma, in turn, [encourages employees to share their own](#)

[stories](#) and seek out treatment.

Being mindful of language

Leaders need to be careful about how they go about addressing stigma. Even those with [good intentions](#) can unintentionally cause harm. For example, using [the word resilience to discuss mental health](#) can be problematic.

Framing resilience as a necessary skill for battling mental illness overlooks the fact that some mental health conditions are disabilities that cannot be toughed out. Assuming that mental toughness is an inextricable part of addressing disability [is a form of ableism](#).

Any [employee](#) who is suffering from [mental health issues](#) that cannot be fixed by resilience may avoid telling their story or seeking support for fear of being seen as weak.

It's important for leaders to be mindful of the language they use to foster mentally safe and supportive working environments.

Workplace flexibility

Evidence-based research about the outcomes of mental health awareness and wellness programs [is currently lacking](#). These programs are well-intended, and [experts are optimistic](#) that we will have a better idea of what really works once we have more data.

In the meantime, there is something employers can do immediately to prioritize the mental health of their employees: allowing them to choose when and where they work.

Flexibility has [been proven to work well](#) in many jobs over the past few years, including in larger organizations like [3M Canada](#) and [Desjardins Group](#), as well as small and medium employers like [Auvik Networks](#) and [GSoft](#).

Unfortunately, flexibility can sometimes lead to boardroom debates about how many days in the office employees should work. As a result, what was initially intended as flexibility can inadvertently lead to rigid remote work policies. Workplaces need to be aware of this.

True flexibility, without the need for employees to justify themselves, can help mitigate mental health challenges. By allowing for downtime and encouraging employees to do activities unrelated to their work, [stress and burnout can be minimized](#).

Challenges can also be minimized by recognizing when employees are most [energized and productive](#) and adjusting work schedules accordingly. The success of a flexible workplace hinges on the ability of leaders to trust their employees and refrain from micromanaging them.

A new way of thinking

According to a recent job insight survey, when employees are forced to choose between [flexibility and stability](#), most will choose stability.

But do we need to choose one over the other? Why can't we have both? As many know from the last few years, [employees](#) can be productive at different times and in [different places](#) when [leaders provide the necessary resources and support to make flexibility possible](#).

Leaders have the valuable opportunity to challenge the typical "either/or" way of thinking and instead using "both/and" thinking. A personal experience of mine exemplifies this.

Once, during a teaching session, a sales executive recounted a story about an employee of hers who asked to work remotely due to mental health challenges. This leader turned down the request, insisting the sales team could not successfully sell remotely.

A debate ensued among the other executives and a suggestion was put forth: Why not have the sales team try selling remotely and see how it goes?

Either/or thinking stops new solutions from emerging. It misses how creative tension—the gap between where a group is and where it wants to go—can help us [challenge conventional assumptions about work](#), like the belief that [flexibility](#) and stability are mutually exclusive.

In light of the prevalence of mental [health](#) issues, and the importance of fostering inclusive workplaces, leaders who act as agents of change can help reshape conventional notions of leadership and build better workplaces.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Opinion: Employers need to prioritize employee mental health if they want to attract new talent (2023, May 29) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-opinion-employers-prioritize-employee-mental.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.