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CEOs rank health issues as major concern: Survey

BY UYEN VU

THE COSTS related to employee health and wellness are emerging as one of the top business issues for Canadian chief executives, according to a recent Ipsos-Reid survey commissioned by FGIworld

For CEOs, health issues even outrank management practices, training and technology as the most important factor affecting the productivity of the workforce. Of 114 CEOs surveyed, 66

per cent put stress, burnout and other physical and mental health issues on top of the list.

Management practices came in second at 42 per cent, followed by a lack of effective training programs, at 39 per cent. Due to the number of CEOs interviewed, the results have a margin of error of plus or minus nine percentage points.

Asked if they are concerned about the impact of poor health on the productivity of the work-

force, half said somewhat, with nearly equal proportions answering very concerned (27 per cent) and not concerned (22 per cent).

Similar results were obtained when the CEOs were asked if mental health risks such as stress and burnout are greater now than five years ago, with 48 per cent agreeing somewhat, 27 per cent agreeing strongly and 24 per cent saying

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Burnout needs prevention, not treatment plans

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they are not greater.

Allon Bross, CEO of FGIworld, an employee assistance program provider based in Thornhill, Ont., said he regularly hears from FGIworld's clients that "they are concerned about health-care costs. They're concerned about increasing utilization rates on mental health. They're worried about the impact of depression and anxiety on disability costs, and the fact that things are still pressure-packed in the Canadian workforce.

"So what we wanted to do was to find out where these issues sit in the radar screen of the top CEOs of the country," Bross said.

Pointing to the 66 per cent of CEOs concerned about stress, burnout and other physical and mental health issues — and the 71 per cent of Canadians who share the concern — Bross said the source problem is still the workplace itself.

"Corporations today want to be more efficient, to do more with less. That's certain to have an impact on physical and mental health."

Bross added that the rise in dual-income families means that more people in the workforce also experience the stress of competing obligations. However, the CEOs surveyed don't seem to believe that programs addressing work-life balance

have much impact on productivity. Nearly four in 10 respondents said elder-care benefits programs have no impact on productivity; nearly three in 10 said the same of child-care benefits programs.

Bross acknowledged that it's difficult to tell what aspect of employee health concerns CEOs respondents the most — mental or physical, burnout or disability. One clue is found in a separate question asking the CEOs to identify the problem that they anticipate to loom even larger 10 years from now. Top of the list is the costs of health care and disability at 71 per cent; mental health issues such as stress and depression only rank sixth, at 52 per cent.

Michael Leiter, psychology professor at Acadia University and Canada Research Chair in Occupational Health and Well-Being, said he was encouraged to see the realization taking hold that mental and physical health issues can have a significant impact on productivity and the bottom line.

But what's not as heartening to see, added Leiter, were solutions that "are very much on the treatment end of the scale. It's developing EAP programs to treat people who are already burned out or back-to-work programs for people who've left work."

What he was hoping to see are the kinds of responses "on the prevention side of the equa-

tion. How do you develop and support workplaces that engage people in the first place?"

While EAPs are important, added Leiter, "they are an incomplete response to burnout, because it's all about treating the individual as if the work environment is just fine."

The general awareness of stress and burnout issues may be growing, he noted, but what he hasn't seen is a sense of confidence among managers, HR departments and business leaders that solutions are out there.

"Can you actually change a workplace into a place that engages people, that makes them less sick and feels less overwhelmed? The case that we know how to do that hasn't been thoroughly and convincingly made," said Leiter.

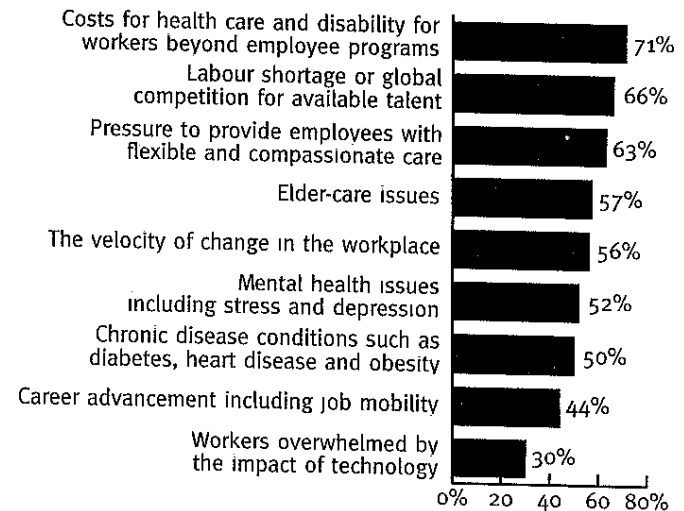
Part of the reason is that fixing the underlying causes of stress or burnout requires much more than cosmetic change. "It's a little disruptive to make the kinds of changes that would have an impact on somebody's sense of workload or control or fairness," Leiter added.

"It means managing things quite a bit differently and having a lot more insight into what employees require and setting up systems to make sure you meet those needs. That's a lot of work. And in a way it could have implications for who's in charge of what, and organizations often don't like upsetting who's in charge of what."

■ ON THE HORIZON

Health costs a growing concern

In telephone interviews, 114 Canadian CEOs were asked to name issues that will likely be more of a problem 10 years from now. Here is how they answered:



Source: FGIworld CEO Study on Health and Productivity in Canadian Industry