



Bonus Feature

# MENTAL HEALTH FOR ALL

## Investing in Well-Being Reaps Rewards

BY PAULA ALLEN

**W**orkers around the world were recently surveyed by Morneau Shepell comparing international workplace perspectives on mental health. Surprisingly, the survey indicated that workplace needs are similar, no matter the geography, based on the 8,000 responses received from individuals in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

The research found that well-being support is important to workers. And while many workplace issues and attitudes are largely consistent, there are some matters where location does play a factor.

With the instability that COVID-19 has put on workforces worldwide, the study has particular relevance, especially for American employees, which often don't have the same safety net structures in place as Canada and the U.K.

Effective well-being initiatives take a holistic view of well-being. Traditionally, some organizations have focused on investing in the physical health of their workers; however, progressive organizations understand that to take care of the individual, it's

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crucial to consider — and invest in — all aspects of well-being. This includes physical, mental, social and increasingly, financial support.

## Well-Being Above Pay

Interestingly, compensation is no longer the main factor for employers to consider when attracting and retaining employees. Where once employees only moved organizations if there was a significant pay increase, individuals are now willing to jump ship for less money — if the well-being package is attractive. This is consistent across all three countries, marking a seismic and universal change in what people value at work.

Among those surveyed, 76% said they would consider leaving their organization if the new role had the same pay but better well-being support. In addition, an astounding 60% would leave

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their current job to accept a 10% salary cut if the new workplace offered greater support for their personal well-being.

This is true even for those surveyed who defined themselves as under financial strain. In fact, more than half of those with financial worries would still prioritize effective well-being support above a larger pay package. This was consistent across all salary groups, indicating that financial planning support might be a valuable benefit for some employees.

These are significant findings but with context, they are not surprising. Mental health is a global issue. Research from the **Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)** indicates that depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15 to 44. In the U.K., **Mind** estimates that one in four people will experience a

mental health problem each year. According to the **Canadian Mental Health Association**, in any given year, one in five Canadians experiences a mental health issue.

Just as mental illness affects individuals and families, it also has a knock-on effect for workplaces. Absenteeism, presenteeism and “leavism” — where employees use allocated time off to work — is prevalent worldwide and this is affecting productivity, workplace dynamics and profitability.

## Stress Is at the Core

Stress is a reality for the majority of working people and for many, that stress is increasing. Morneau Shepell’s 2020 mental health study showed that in all three countries, 41% of employees believed that mental demands at work had increased over the last 18 to 24 months — only 4% indicated a decrease in the same period.

In fact, work or workplace stress is considered the primary source of extreme mental stress across all countries, with an average of 23% of individuals citing it as their greatest source of stress. This was similar across all geographies, with the U.S. (24%) slightly higher than the U.K. (23%) and Canada (22%).

Generally, Americans experience more mental stress than their U.K.

and Canadian counterparts. Almost a quarter of them (23%) were anxious about personal issues, compared to 20% for the U.K. and Canada. This was also reflected in financial concerns.

Americans were significantly more apprehensive about their finances than those surveyed in Canada and U.K.: Almost 30% said it was a primary concern, compared to 19% for the U.K. and 21% for Canadians.

In all countries, more than 40% of workers believe they struggle more with finances than others with the same income. The survey indicated that Americans felt the most pressure, with 50% of those surveyed noting that they felt they had larger money concerns than those with the same salary, compared to 42% in Canada and 41% in the U.K.

And, financial issues have a significant impact on attendance and productivity. Among those surveyed, 43% of Americans agreed that financial concerns negatively affect their productivity,

## CONTINUUM OF CARE

The key question to ask is: How can we continually support the full population of the workforce, rather than focusing on specific “at-risk” individuals and intervening early? A thoughtful continuum-of-care strategy supports the mental, physical, social and financial health of all employees. Key issues for organizations to focus on include:

- **Financial well-being;**
- **Co-worker interaction;**
- **Diversity and inclusion; and**
- **Coping skills to match increased demand.**

compared to 36% in Canada and the U.K. Similarly, 34% of the U.S. individuals surveyed indicate that money worries have a negative impact on attendance, compared to 24% in the U.K. and Canada.

While we can speculate if these national differences could be a reflection on the current economic climate, or due to the differing social safety net structures in each country, it is clear that financial aptitude is a critical factor in overall well-being, especially for Americans. Financial well-being support is lacking in most organizations, and there is clearly an opportunity here for companies to offer greater financial planning assistance that, if effective, should increase productivity and reduce absences across the workforce.

## Diversity and Inclusion: More Important Than Ever

Another area investigated in the study was diversity and inclusion. Among respondents, 82% indicated that diversity and inclusion had a positive impact on their personal well-being. Sadly, nearly a quarter of all respondents felt that they did not have a sense of belonging in their workforce, with those in the U.K. feeling the most isolated.

Isolation correlates strongly with mental health. Of those who believed they had excellent mental health, only 30% said they experienced any level

## A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

It’s not enough to rely on the best practices from five or 10 years ago. Organizations need to create new best practices that support the health of all your workers.

of feeling isolated, whereas almost 80% of those who believe they have poor mental health feel moderate or high levels of isolation.

The good news is that awareness of mental health issues, and the need for support, is increasing and stigma is decreasing. More people are willing to share and discuss their problems. Employee support systems are critical to a healthy workforce, but organizations must ensure they offer a broad spectrum of support, including digital options.

Based on the survey results, an average of 42% of global workers indicate a strong willingness to engage in digital support programs, while an average of 38% would be keen on digital skill-building programs. We know younger employees prefer digital, but it is important to note that even for older workers, the platform offers a level of anonymity that can be crucial in the decision to reach out for help. Additionally, digital programs offer a bite-size approach that busy workers can use when needed, and at their convenience.

## The Impact of Well-Being

The data is clear: Stress is an increasing pressure affecting workers today and investing in workplace well-being delivers significant returns. To employees, especially those under 35, a focus on well-being is an expectation rather than a perk. For many organizations, comprehensive employee support could be the key to having a competitive advantage in the market. But it’s vital to invest in the appropriate support. Key issues to focus on include financial well-being, co-worker interaction, diversity and inclusion, and coping skills to match increased demand. A recent **study by Deloitte** suggests that U.K. employers can expect a 5-to-1 return for every U.K. pound spent on employee well-being, in reduced presenteeism, absenteeism and staff turnover.

Whichever way you slice it, it just makes good business sense. **ws**

**Paula Allen** is the senior vice president of research, analytics and innovation at Morneau Shepell.