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Photo: Bill Wilkerson, Founder
Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health
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Workplaces still have a way to go for employee mental health

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We have come a long way in dealing with depression in the workplace. Employers are much more likely to acknowledge the business value in providing a mentally healthy workplace and their duty under human rights legislation to accommodate mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety-related disorders. But, says Bill Wilkerson, Founder of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, employers still have a long way to go.

“We must move beyond - way beyond - awareness-raising and mere acknowledgment of the business merits of supporting employees with mental health problems and use the tools and measures now available to employers to arrest the rates and disabling effects of depression among men and women in their prime working years.” Wilkerson’s comments are in response to a recent Ipsos Reid survey on Depression at Work commissioned by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace and made available at www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com.

Thirty per cent of respondents felt that their employers were somewhat unaccommodating or not at all accommodating when the disability was depression, but when it was a physical disability such as mobility, auditory or visual impairments only between 11 and 16 per cent felt this way. As well, the survey found that those with depression were more likely to receive support from coworkers or their immediate supervisor than from the union or Human Resources.

This seems to reflect recognition of the greater challenges employers face in dealing with mental health conditions. Eighty-three per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that it is easier for workplaces to deal with physical disabilities than with mental health conditions. Seventy-one per cent agreed there needs to be a way to verify that someone is actually suffering from depression before they are given any special consideration at work, and 83% agreed that mental health conditions are not as visible so workers have a responsibility to self-identify.

On a more encouraging note, the Ipsos Reid survey did find that employees with depression receiving support from their supervisors has increased to 52 per cent from 47 per cent (in 2007) when the Centre commissioned the first comprehensive Ipsos Reid mental health survey among employees in workplaces across Canada. Sixty-two per cent agreed that at their workplace, people can acknowledge that they have depression and still get ahead in their careers, compared to 57% in the 2007 survey.

“These findings suggest the tide has turned on the front lines of the workplace in terms of managerial support of employees who suffer this invasive condition, but HR practitioners must consider very seriously the message these findings send to them,” Wilkerson said. “With resources like those made available at no cost through the [Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace](#), [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) and [Global Roundtable](#) websites, there are many ways for HR professionals and other workplace stakeholders, such as case management personnel, to become more skilled in these areas.”

“The time is now for workplaces to do what is do-able: to promote and support the mental health of Canadian employees,” Wilkerson says.

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