

# Behaviour: The key to improving workplace health

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Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that environment and genetics both carry a 20% stake in a person's overall health. These numbers may seem high but compared to the 50% that accounts for lifestyle choices, it's obvious where employers need to be focusing their efforts.

Karen Seward, executive vice-president, business development and marketing, with Shepell•fgi, presented to a full room of delegates at the annual Health, Work and Wellness Conference, held in Vancouver from September 29 to October 1, on the emerging trends in workplace health and innovative ways for employers to improve it.

With four generations currently in the workforce, and the fifth one on the way, employers need to be tactical on their approach to workplace health. Yes, communicating to employees through a variety of mediums about the programs that are available to them to improve their health is important, but employers need to dig deeper. They need to understand what conditions are affecting their employees. Seward said a good place to start is with absenteeism.

“With casual absenteeism, the No. 1 reason is a ‘mental health day.’ The problem is, it has made it a time out for ourselves...and people don't always manage their absenteeism properly, which leads to increased disability claims,” she said, adding that the average number of days off work per employee due to casual absenteeism is 9.1.

Without knowing why the employee is off or tracking it properly to see if it is a reoccurring issue, employers are setting themselves up for a possible long-term disability claim.

“Think about casual absenteeism—do we know enough about employees to help them with their problems? Why are they away with a headache? What's causing it? Is it stress at work, at home, both?” asked Seward. “Do we understand things like what is causing the health issue? Do we all know what is available? What education are we doing around flu clinics, for example? Do [employees] know why they should get it? I don't think they do.”

Once employers can get a handle on why employees are falling ill, they can address absenteeism with focused programs and targeted communication and ensure that these are in line with corporate objectives.

“Rethink what you are doing,” she said. “We don't understand what is driving the cost. And while employers can only have so much influence over employee behaviour, doing what they can to ensure that employees are aware of what programs are available to them and what each is for is a critical step in changing it.”

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