The Missing Link:

Supervisors' Role in Employee Health Management

Insights from the Shepell·fgi Research Group

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Introduction

During difficult economic times, as employee stress rises, productivity can be negatively impacted and absenteeism and disability claims can increase. One indicator of this is employee access of EAPs (Employee Assistance Programs) in the Canadian workplace, which increased by 10% in the first quarter of 2009 over last year, in part due to increased financial-related stressors. The nature of absence and disability in the workplace is becoming more complex. In the last 5-10 years, disability claims have steadily increased and different types of issues such as soft-tissue injuries and mental illness have emerged.

Today organizations are paying close attention to increasing absence and disability claims, rising health care costs, and declining productivity of their workforce. Yet, they often overlook the most important piece of the employee health management puzzle – the frontline supervisor.

Supervisors' Role in Employee Health and Productivity

The quality of the relationship between supervisor and employee is perhaps the most important workplace determinant of health. There is growing research that indicates that workplace stressors (or 'psychosocial hazards'), such as work overload or time pressures, lack of influence or control of one's work, lack of recognition and rewards, lack of respect, or perceived lack of fairness can seriously threaten the mental and physical health of employees. Data show that people working in these conditions, which are largely within the control of supervisors, experience significantly higher rates of:

- Heart and cardiovascular disease
- Anxiety and depression
- Infectious disease
- Back pain and musculoskeletal disorders
- Alcohol abuse.

Not only does supervisory quality directly impact the health and wellbeing of workers, it can help or hinder access to all the other supports an organization puts into place. For example, an organization can have excellent work/life balance policies and programs, but if a supervisor is not supportive of employees' lives outside of work, this can become a significant stressor and may lead to physical or mental health problems for employees.

As reported in the groundbreaking research on work/life balance, Reducing Work-Life Conflict: What works? What doesn't? (Higgins, Duxbury, Lyons, 2007), employees with high levels of work/life conflict:

- Are not as committed and not as engaged
- Have higher levels of job stress and strain
- Have higher absenteeism
- Have higher levels of drug use, depression and burnout
- Report greater use of heath care resources.

However, in these same organizations, employees with supportive managers report:

- Higher job satisfaction, and greater trust of managers and commitment to the organization
- Lower levels of role overload and job stress
- Lower levels of fatigue, depression, poor health and work/family conflict
- Lower absenteeism
- Greater intent to remain with the organization.

In this study, supportive managers were defined as those who gave positive feedback, practiced two-way communication, showed respect for employees, were consistent and fair, and served as a coach or mentor for employees.

Supervisors' Role in Employee Absence and Disability

Supervisors and managers also have a critical role in the absence process. They are most likely the first ones to know when an employee will be absent, and their application of the organization's attendance policy and procedures can have a profound impact on employee morale. The immediate supervisor is usually responsible for identifying issues, initiating appropriate actions, monitoring attendance issues and applying corrective measures. These processes are ripe for miscommunication and a perceived lack of consistency and fairness. As such, the supervisor's ability to successfully manage them is critically important.

When supervisors and managers are provided with the information, tools and skills needed to consistently manage attendance issues well:

- Work and staff planning are more effective

- Direct and indirect costs of absenteeism are reduced

- Employee morale goes up

- Employees obtain the assistance they need when they need it

- Employees recognize consistency and fairness in their workplace

- Culpable absenteeism is reduced.

Research also indicates that supervisors have a critical role to play in disability prevention and management. The frontline supervisor and the everyday work team are critical to employees' ability to stay at or return to work successfully when they experience an illness or disability. It is critically important that all employees can rely on fair and equitable treatment when on leave. Any deviations in treatment will quickly circulate through the work environment and erode employee morale. Immediate response by supervisors to workers who report an injury or illness can significantly influence the length of a disability. As well, supervisor attitudes and practices can impede the return to work and rehabilitation.

In one study, supervisors who were trained to adequately respond, communicate and problem solve with employees reduced new disability claims by 47% and active lost time claims by 18% (Liberty Mutual, 2006). This supervisor training program was designed to help them respond better to employee injuries and included skill building for employee communication, and problem solving to help get injured employees back to work.
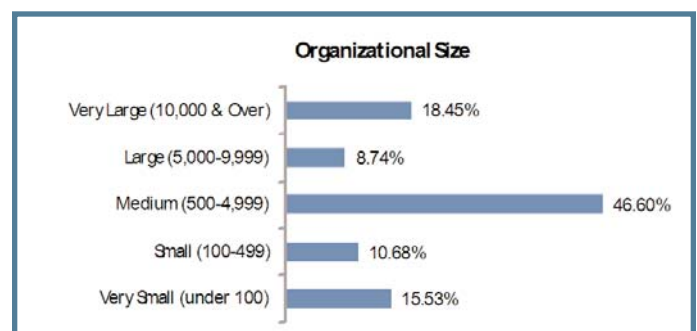
Other research further supports the importance of the supervisor role in the return-to-work process. For example, Akabus and Gates (1991) found that workers on disability report 'responsiveness of their supervisors' as a major factor in their decision to return to work. Gates (1993) also found that many supervisory behaviours were associated with successful adjustment to work after an injury or disability, including the extent to which supervisors treat workers fairly, allowed workers to participate in decisions affecting their jobs, and supported employees to continue to utilize their skills. Shaw (2003) also found that supervisors significantly impact employee absences and return-to-work outcomes, and Shrey (1999) reported that negative responses from supervisors can derail return-to-work outcomes— no matter what other measures have been put into place for physical accommodations.
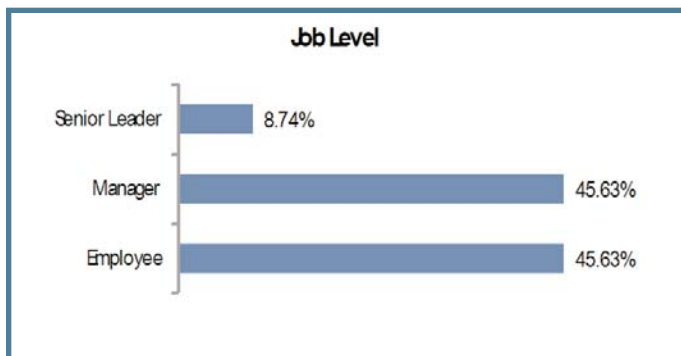
Clearly, it is more important than ever before that frontline supervisors have the information, tools and supports they need to effectively manage the full continuum of employee health. However, a recent survey of over 100 leading Canadian organizations reveals that in most organizations, supervisors and managers are poorly equipped to deal with issues related to employee productivity, absenteeism and disability.

Methods

Shepell·fgi recently conducted a brief online survey of human resource professionals from leading Canadian organizations attending a Workplace Health conference. One hundred and three (103) individuals from a wide variety of Canadian organizations participated:

- 56.3% from the private sector, 43.7% from the public sector

- 52.4% from Ontario, 16.50% from British Columbia,

- 15.53% from Alberta

- 73.8% from organizations with more than 500 employees

- More than half (54.4%) were either Managers or Senior Leaders

- About 60% worked in benefits and pensions, human sresources, and health and safety.

Organizational Status

Public Sector, 43.69%

Private Sector, 56.31%

Organizational Size

Very Large (10,000 & Over)	18.45%
Large (5,000-9,999)	8.74%
Medium (500-4,999)	46.60%
Small (100-499)	10.68%
Very Small (under 100)	15.53%

Job Level

Senior Leader	8.74%
Manager	45.63%
Employee	45.63%

Job Profile

Benefits and Pensions	26.21%
Human Resources	21.36%
Other	13.59%
Health and Safety	12.62%
Disability Management	7.77%
Business Operations Management	5.83%
Technology and Data Management	4.85%
Occupational Health	2.91%
Finance	2.91%
Payroll and Administration	1.94%

Key Findings

The key findings of the survey indicate that:

Supervisors do not have the information or tools they need to effectively manage employee absence:
- 84.47% of respondents report that supervisors in their organization do not receive 'real time' employee absence data.

- 80.58% of respondents report that their organization does not have a structured process in place that is consistently used by supervisors to address employee intermittent absence problems.

Supervisors are not provided with the tools they need to effectively manage a return to work process:
- 64.08% of respondents report that their organization does not have a structured process in place that supervisors use consistently to support employees returning to work from an illness or disability.

Supervisors are not provided with the tools they need to address problems in employee productivity or behaviour:
- 83.5% of respondents report that their organization does not have a structured process in place that supervisors consistently use to address significant changes or problems in employee productivity or behaviour..

% Without Structured, Consistently-Used Processes in Place

To support supervisors managing changes in employee behaviour/productivity	84%
To support supervisors in employee return to work cases	64%
To help supervisors address intermittent absence problems	81%
For real time access to absence information and trends	84%
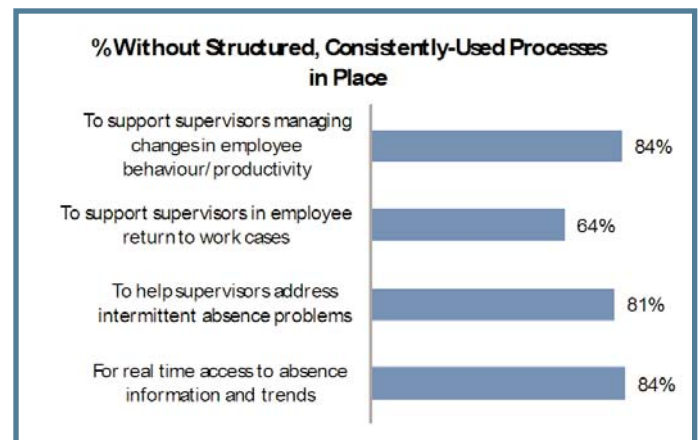
What Can Employers Do?

The importance of supervisory quality in managing employee health, absence and disability cannot be overstated, especially during stressful times. Fortunately, many supervisory factors that have been clearly linked to positive employee health and wellbeing outcomes are **learned behaviours**.

Employers seeking to better manage employee health, absence and disability must ensure that supervisors have adequate opportunities to develop supportive 'people leader' skills, and provide incentives to put them into practice. The challenge for organizations is to recruit, train and support supervisors to engage in these behaviours, to be high quality 'people leaders', and to provide the information, tools and supports needed to manage these issues most effectively.

Recruit, hire and train supervisors to be supportive 'people leaders'.
- Screen and hire supervisors with high levels of 'people management' skills.

- Provide training to supervisors about employee health and workplace stressors, and the impact they can have.

- Train supervisors on 'people leader' skills such as communications, team building and conflict resolution.
- Ensure managers have workloads which allow 'people management' to be an adequate part of their time.
- Conduct 360 degree feedback.
- Identify internal 'people management' best practices and set up coaching or mentoring programs whereby these skills can be transferred.

Give supervisors the information they need to better manage employee health and productivity.
- Measure employee stress and satisfaction by work group, and provide feedback and support to managers on findings.
- Reward and hold managers accountable for the stress and satisfaction scores of their work group.
- Ensure adequate, timely information is provided to supervisors about their employees' health, wellbeing and absence.

Give supervisors the tools and supports they need to better manage employee absence and disability.
- Ensure appropriate, timely access to absence and disability data, at the workgroup level.
- Regularly train supervisors on absence and disability management policies, procedures and practices.
- Regularly train supervisors on behaviours and skills needed to successfully manage employee absence and disability, particularly for complex situations.

- Provide regular, formal supervisor training to identify and respond to declining employee productivity or significant behaviour change.

Focus on Prevention and Early Intervention
Prevention-focused absence and disability management programs are progressive, well-structured and well-integrated, resulting in shortened employee absence, reduced costs, and sustained productivity. A proactive absence and disability management program also avoids short- and long- term costs by intervening early to support health conditions or working to prevent poor health entirely.

Establishing preventative measures to include proactive promotion of EAP, both at the broader organizational level and at the workgroup level, is a key strategy. When high-quality supervisors are provided with the information, tools and supports required, they can be pivotal in this process.

Be Consistent
Organizations with exceptional success in disability prevention and management are committed to the consistent application of best practice strategies in every case. One of the reasons well-designed programs fail is because they are inconsistently understood and applied.
Regularly and effectively communicating program activities, objectives, policies, and procedures will help ensure consistent application of the program. Supervisors, in particular, require orientation, training and continuous support to be able to identify issues and intervene as required.