THE CATALYST

Accommodations: The Bridge from Mental Health Disability to Employee Retention

Why the right adjustments can make the difference between losing a valued employee and helping them thrive.

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Mental health concerns and illnesses have a serious economic impact on the Canadian workforce. The annual cost of mental illness in Canada is estimated at $51 billion, including lost productivity. At least 500,000 Canadians miss work because of mental illness every week. One in five Canadians experience mental illness in any given year, and many more will experience mental health concerns and burnout. This in turn increases turnover and affects the ability of employers to retain good employees.

Burnout and mental illness

In fact, in 2025, 39% of Canadian employees reported feeling burnt out, a number that rose from 35% in 2023. Burnout costs employers up to $28,500 per employee annually in lost productivity and turnover. It is one of the strongest predictors of turnover, and organizations that invest in burnout prevention see burnout rates drop to 27%, compared with 47% in organizations that take no action.

Mental health concerns like burnout and mental illnesses like depression, anxiety and ADHD affect the workforce at high rates and create barriers to employee success. Mental illness can lead to disability that affects performance.

Mental health disabilities

The workplace is not made for persons with disabilities. Barriers abound. And yet employees with disabilities are among our most determined, resilient, and creative problem solvers, who have honed these skills over a lifetime of solving complex problems each day in their personal lives. In 2022, 10.4% of Canadians over the age of 15 reported having a mental health-related disability. In the same year, 35% of employed Canadians with disabilities needed at least one workplace accommodation and yet 35% of those who needed accommodations did not ask for them because of the associated stigma. Workplace training like Opening Minds' The Working Mind can help reduce mental health stigma among employees, and creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace by applying the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace can make the workplace a better environment for people with mental health disabilities.

When barriers present themselves in the workplace, how we respond is critical. Mental health is consistently one of the top issues in employee retention, and accommodations act as the “bridge” between an employee’s mental health needs and their ability to remain productive and committed to their employer. Kristin Bower, a consultant and co-founder of Leda HR, concurs. She needed a workplace accommodation because of a mental health disability early in her career and shares, “There’s the retention piece right there: when I personally wasn’t supported, I didn’t feel a sense of loyalty, rapport or belonging to my employer.”



Kristin Bower

Accommodations for mental illness

We tend to think of accommodation for persons with disabilities as building ramps for those using wheelchairs, but it is sometimes less clear how to accommodate a mental health disability. “People leaders don’t need to be the experts,” says Bower. “The accommodation process is one that should be a shared accountability between the person who needs the accommodation and the employer.”

I work in a typical office environment, and because of my mental health disability I have faced many barriers to success in my 15+-year career. For example, some medications that I have taken have caused me to be groggy and sleepy in the morning, making my typical 7 a.m. start time difficult to achieve. At other times, because of cognitive symptoms I have found it difficult to focus on reading long, complex documents from my computer screen. Sitting in an open-concept office space, surrounded by movement and noises, has often made concentrating particularly difficult when I have been experiencing symptoms. All of these issues have been barriers to reaching my full potential at work and have had the potential to cause my regular level of performance to decline.

However, a later start time allowed me to take my medications as prescribed but also be at my best when I am at work. A screen reader has turned reports and briefing documents into podcasts that I am able to focus on despite my cognitive limitations. Moving to a workstation in a lower traffic area has made concentration much more possible when symptoms are causing excessive distractibility.

These are some of the accommodations that have helped me continue to deliver my best work. Before these adjustments were made, I was becoming frustrated and performing poorly, leading to increases in both presenteeism (showing up to work but not working at capacity) and absenteeism (not showing up to work at all). I was starting to think that maybe my job wasn’t for me and that I should go on sick leave or long-term disability or maybe find another job. But as

soon as the barriers to success were removed, I was able to go back to being the high-performing employee that my employer had hired, and my job satisfaction returned.

Ideally, I would not have waited until I was thinking about leaving to seek accommodations. Accommodations work best when they are implemented proactively, not reactively.

Strategies and tools for retention

It can be difficult to know what strategies and tools are available to help accommodate employees with mental health disabilities. “There is a lack of knowledge around what is an accommodation,” Bower says. “Most accommodations are simple to enact and are under $500 or free if you have a disability.” The trick is for managers and employees to work together, often with the help of health-care professionals, to identify an individual’s functional limitations and then put into place adjustments that will help them to overcome those limitations. Sometimes it requires creativity or trial and error to hit on the correct solution. The Manager’s Guide to Workplace Accommodations is a starting point for both managers and employees in their journey into accommodating persons with disabilities.

It is important to note that the workplace is required to accommodate a person with a disability up to the point of undue hardship. But accommodation can also be a strategic retention tool, not just a compliance requirement. “People want to work for a culture that is supportive, and that helps retention overall” says Bower.

Flexible work

This story would not be complete without mentioning the elephant in the room — work from home. Flexibility to work from home has become a major accommodation request since the COVID-19 pandemic, while needs for other types of accommodations have remained stable or declined. A flexible work location, either through fully remote or hybrid work, is one of the most requested accommodations for employees with mental health challenges as it promotes work–life balance, autonomy and flexibility and can help an employee to manage the symptoms of a variety of mental illnesses and mental health concerns, often without having to brave the stigma associated with mental illness. Of course, working from home is not an option for workers in many fields, such as in the health-care and construction sectors. There are a variety of accommodations that can support on-site workers as well. Flexibility and creativity are key. Whether it is in place or time of work, or how the work gets done, exploring options to see what might address an employee’s specific needs is the first step. “Just because you’ve always worked in a particular way doesn’t mean you always have to work in that way,” Bower says. Both Bower and I can attest, through our own experiences, that when high-performing employees are accommodated, the employer benefits from retaining them.

Further Reading: Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace: Tools You Can Use

Resources:

- Psychological Health and Safety Toolkit for Primary Care Teams and Training Programs
- A Manager’s Guide to Workplace Accomodations

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