

Are workplace mental-health programs evolving beyond the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace?

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Exactly a decade ago this month, Canadian employers were introduced to the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace — a global first-of-its-kind framework designed to guide organizations looking to shift their workplace

culture towards one that promotes mental health and prevents psychological harm at work.

While the standard is still being used and implemented by employers across the country, the workplace environment — and the conversation around mental health — has changed significantly in the last few years. As employers and employees hoping to further their mental wellness journeys look for guidance, the standard also continues to evolve in order to support them.

The standard

Launched in early 2013, the standard — an initiative of the Canadian Standards Association and the Bureau de normalization du Québec, commissioned by the Mental Health Commission of Canada — is a voluntary framework based on occupational health and safety principles that provides organizations with “a systematic approach to develop and sustain a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.”

Read: [Head to head: Should Canada’s workplace mental-health standard be mandatory?](#)

The introduction of the standard shifted mental health from the hands of individual employees to a shared responsibility with their employers, giving organizations a business case and a compass guiding them to the why and how of creating a psychologically safe workplace, says Dr. Georgia Pomaki, director of mental-health best practices at Manulife Financial Corp.

By the numbers

- **39%** of Canadian employees feel their employer has prepared them for the psychological demands of their job, according to Mental Health Research Canada.
- **88%** of employers say their employees were more stressed than they were pre-pandemic, according to the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans.
- **27%** of organizations had a formalized mental-health strategy in place pre-pandemic, outside of their benefits plans, while a further **45%** put one in place in the last three years or are currently developing their strategies, according to the Conference Board of Canada.
- **86%** of benefits plan sponsors and **75%** of plan members say their workplace environment supports mental wellness, according to the 2022 Benefits Canada Healthcare Survey.

“As wonderful as it is to provide benefits to employees, such as employee assistance programs, there’s a recognition that those programs and benefits are so much more effective if organizations can reduce the exposure of workers to psychosocial hazards to begin with.”

Focusing on mental-health promotion and mental illness prevention, the standard outlines 13 key workplace factors that affect psychological health and safety and guides employers in developing and maintaining a psychological health and safety management system.

Once in place, the system helps organizations assess and control psychological hazards in the workplace, implement practices that support and promote psychological well-being and methods to measure and audit their approaches.

The standard has been instrumental in increasing awareness and presenting mental health as a legitimate work issue, says Arla Day, professor of occupational health psychology and director of the CN Centre for Occupational Health and Safety at Saint Mary’s University. “The standard was also really great at consolidating a lot of the information and evidence that we had, but it was hard to get out to organizations about what supports healthy workers and also what can be tracked.”

Read: [How 5 employers are helping staff battle mental-health challenges](#)

The standard’s success over the years is hard to quantify, says Pomaki, but organizations of all sizes have taken it on board, implementing it into collective agreements and downloading it from the CSA website tens of thousands of times in the last decade. “[The standard] really drove the conversation way before we went into the [coronavirus] pandemic and really was a paradigm shift in how we see health and safety in the workplace.”

The workplace pandemic shift

At the same time, the effects of the pandemic mean workplace culture has been undeniably transformed compared to 2013 or even three years ago, led by the rapid move to remote work, health and safety concerns, isolation, new workload requirements, job insecurity and the logistics over returning to physical worksites.

These factors have brought in a whole host of new workplace mental-health and safety issues that are impacting employees and employers, resulting in requests from some stakeholders to consider updating the standard as guidance.

The standard's 13 factors

- Organizational culture
- Psychological and social support
- Clear leadership and expectations
- Civility and respect
- Psychological demands
- Growth and development
- Recognition and reward
- Involvement and influence
- Workload management
- Engagement
- Balance
- Psychological protection
- Protection of physical safety

According to the 2022 Benefits Canada Healthcare Survey, 27 per cent of Canadians with a workplace health benefits plan said they experienced extreme or very high personal daily stress over the previous three months, citing factors like personal finances and workload. Although this is down from a pandemic high of 35 per cent, elevated stress levels are still impacting employees and their employers.

Read: [Mental-health supports, training on the rise as a fifth of benefits plan members report poor mental health: survey](#)

As the change and upheaval continues today, the pandemic has broadened employers' views of workplace mental health in addition to creating a very different employee population, says Paula Allen, senior vice-president and global leader of research and total well-being at LifeWorks Inc. "There are two aspects to workplace mental health. The standard, as it stands right now, highlights the workplace, so the processes [and

practices] within the workplace. The other part is really helping people on an individual level, so the services that [employers] provide and the relevance [and accessibility] of those services is a little bit underweighted in the standard.”

Employers are shifting their focus to the individual level when developing workplace mental-health supports, says Allen. For some, this involves extending coverage of psychological services and comprehensive offerings where physicians and mental-health support are wrapped within the same virtual service, as well as optimizing their EAPs.

Indeed, as the Conference Board of Canada found in a November 2022 report, employers accelerated their move towards a more holistic approach to employees' health and well-being during the pandemic to help them cope with their emerging mental-health needs. Many have also recently expanded their employee engagement surveys to better understand recognition, inclusiveness and mental health and well-being.

Read: [Employers continue to highlight mental-health supports, prioritize staff well-being](#)

With the pandemic representing the first time all employees in an organization went through a life-altering situation, leaders need to look at their workforces as a new team, says Mary Ann Baynton, director of collaboration and strategy for Canada Life's Workplace Strategies for Mental Health. She has been contacted by employers looking to support employees with innovative approaches to workplace mental health, while recognizing they need to check in with their workforces to ask how to best provide these services.

Employers aiming higher

Jeff Scott, global head of benefits and wellness at BMO Financial Group, says the pandemic redefined employees' expectations of the company in terms of healthier work-life balance and flexibility, but also opened up the dialogue around mental health and well-being, with more conversations around employees' specific needs.

The standard is an important measuring stick for workplace mental-health initiatives, but many large organizations have moved well beyond the minimum at this point, he says, noting it's important for the framework to evolve as companies continue on their journey to meet employee expectations.

“Employees are asking for more — well beyond the standard — and I think that’s probably fair and that’s reflective of the evolution of the topic of conversation.”

In 2022, BMO introduced an internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy solution, virtual tutoring support and a partnership with the Headspace app, which provides proactive support in the form of meditation and mindfulness tools for managing stress, sleep and focus.

Read: [BMO supporting employee mental health with mindfulness app, virtual tutoring](#)

These tools are designed to help the bank’s employees take control of their own mental health and wellness, while more traditional, core benefits-based mental-health support provides reactive solutions, says Scott.

Similarly, Hootsuite Inc.’s mental-health and wellness journey has evolved significantly since the beginning of the pandemic, from a focus on safety to burnout prevention and engagement. The company is also looking to shift its approach to benefits to consider an overall wellness perspective and has already ramped up its mental-health offering, says Paul Dhillon, the company’s director of total rewards.

Key takeaways

- Introduced in 2013, the standard provides Canadian employers with a framework to develop and implement policies and programs to promote mental health and prevent psychological harm at work.
- As the pandemic changes the workplace and views on workplace mental health, employers are looking for more psychological health and safety guidance around factors such as return to work, risk assessment and how to prepare for critical events.
- The standard is set to evolve to meet the needs of employers and employees with a technical committee meeting in 2023 to consider revisions, including factors like the remote workplace, clarifying how DEI integrates with mental health in the workplace, the effect of trauma and how to make the standard simpler for employers to implement.

This includes: introducing wellness weeks in 2021 and 2022, which give employees the chance to recharge and refocus; employee flexibility over daily start and end times; and access to tools and resources, such as the Headspace app. Hootsuite also considers its benefits offering through a diversity, equity and inclusion lens, offering global parental leave, gender affirmation benefits and trauma appropriate counselling.

“The pandemic exasperated [mental health and well-being], but . . . if we don’t continually evolve and grow standards, then some organizations, some individuals, may not be motivated to keep that top of mind,” says Dhillon.

Looking for guidance

The pandemic is contributing to employers’ understanding of the importance of having a holistic strategy around workplace mental health, says Julie Holden, principal at Holden and Associates Consulting.

Many organizations are moving away from a checked-box approach towards understanding what they should be doing to help their workforce be psychologically healthy and productive. “They want to know . . . What does all of this mean? What programs [and policies] should I put in place? And then they want to track and measure the results of that.”

Read: What factors are impacting Canadians’ mental health during pandemic?

At the same time, she adds, many employers benefit from guidance around the standard and may need more education and leadership training around implementing the framework in a way that works with their resources.

Indeed, although the standard is an amazing resource for many organizations, one barrier to its adoption — especially for companies with fewer resources — is its comprehensive nature, says Katharine Coons, the Canadian Mental Health Association’s national senior manager of workplace mental health. She’s in favour of providing a stepped approach to implementation for organizations lacking the time or the funds to initiate and maintain the standard, as well as evaluating adding in new factors that were brought on by the pandemic.

“I think everything can be reviewed and, especially when it comes to remote working and flexibility, that looks very different.”

The evolving standard

The CSA is considering these types of changes, according to a 2022 report, which noted employers may benefit from new guidance on supporting employee mental health “in the face of a rapid, global workplace upset” via a future version or revisions to the existing standard.

With remote working likely here to stay, the report said revisions that provide “understanding of the factors and hazards in a hybrid workforce” and consider inclusion as a critical factor for psychological health and safety in the workplace may be beneficial.

The CSA also noted the standard could serve an essential function in the future remote workplace by addressing issues of bias, bullying, harassment and isolation. Its report found employers may benefit from new guidance on data collection to help them evaluate the effectiveness of their programs.

Read: [Bell Let's Talk Day: More mental-health support needed in the workplace](#)

Indeed, a technical committee made up of employers, union representation, academia, regulators and general interest members is set to meet in 2023 to consider recent research and input from stakeholders. The review may lead to a new version of the standard.

“We’ve heard from several stakeholders that they want to see the standard strengthened in that area — of diversity, equity and inclusion — as well as preparation for critical events and how to do the risk assessment,” says Liz Horvath, the MHCC’s manager of workplace mental health. “We’ve also heard people would like more guidance around return to work. So there’s a few different things that the committee will be looking at.”

As a member of the technical committee, Pomaki says the review will also consider recent developments in other standards for psychological health and safety, including ISO 45003 and the World Health Organization’s guidelines for mental health at work, as well as the new reality for employers regarding current labour shortages.

Baynton, who’s also on the committee, adds the review is looking to do more to address the prevention, mitigation and effects of trauma in the workplace, as well as improving and tightening the psychosocial factors mentioned in the guidance.

The committee is also aiming to make the standard easier for employers to follow. “We’re not throwing the baby out with the bath water, so those who have been aligning with the standard, who have been using it, who have been striving towards it for over a decade will not feel like they have to start over,” she says. “They will have continuity and just a few tweaks. Our intention is to make it better and easier to use.”

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