



Employers' perceptions and attitudes toward the Canadian national standard on psychological health and safety in the workplace: A qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

The estimated societal and economic costs of mental illness and psychological injury in the workplace is staggering. Governments, employers and other stakeholders have been searching for policy solutions. This qualitative, exploratory study sought to uncover organizational receptivity to a voluntary comprehensive standard for dealing with psychological health and safety in the workplace. A series of five focus groups were conducted in a large Western Canadian city in November 2013. The seventeen participants were from the fields of healthcare, construction/utilities, manufacturing industries, business services, and finance. They worked in positions of management, consulting, human resources, health promotion, health and safety, mediation, and occupational health and represented organizations ranging in size from 20 to 100,000 employees. The findings confirm and illustrate the critical role that psychological health and safety plays across workplaces and occupations. This standard resonated across the represented organizations and fit with their values. This alignment posed challenges with articulating its added value. There appears to be a need for simplified engagement and implementation strategies of the standard that can be tailored to the nuanced differences between types and sizes of industries. It appears that organizations in the most need of improving psychological health and safety may be the least receptive.

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1. Introduction

Are employers receptive to implementing standards for psychological health and safety in their workplaces? Mental health problems are prevalent in the working population (Blackmore et al., 2007; Broadhead, Blazer, George, & Tse, 1990; Wang et al., 2012b; Wang, Patten, Currie, Sareen, & Schmitz, 2012a). According to the 2003 Canadian national mental health survey data, the annual prevalence of mood and anxiety disorders in the working population is 5.3% and 4.8% respectively (Statistics Canada, 2010). Due to the nature of mental disorders, they can have significant impacts on workers' health and productivity. It has been estimated that mental health problems may cost the Canadian economy \$15 billion to \$33 billion each year (by absenteeism and presenteeism) with the related potential of lowering the competitiveness of the Canadian workforce (Statistics Canada, 2010). Workers with mental disorders report more work loss and work cutbacks (Broadhead et al., 1990; Kessler & Frank, 1997; Kessler

et al., 2003; Kousiz & Eaton, 1994; Lerner et al., 2004; Lim, Sanderson, & Andrews, 2000) and a higher incidence of unemployment and significantly more job turnover (Lerner et al., 2004).

Maintaining a productive workforce while recruiting and retaining the most productive personnel are crucial endeavors for the corporate community yet this can be significantly affected by mental health problems (Wang et al., 2010). In Canada, employers have a duty to accommodate their employees with pre-existing mental illness to the point of undue hardship (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2013). Furthermore, the protection of mental health in the workplace is considered to be a corporate responsibility with legal implications, and the provision of a psychologically safe workplace has become a governance and stewardship issue similar to the provision of a physically safe workplace (Shain, 2009, p.8).

Governments, employers and other stakeholders are extremely concerned about providing psychologically safe and healthy workplaces, and various groups have been working in search of solutions. One optimal approach is through reducing workplace risk factors at organizational levels through policies and other practices (Bambra et al., 2009). The benefits for employers of implementing mental health promoting and prevention policies include increased productivity, recruitment,

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Table 1
Description of the Thirteen Psychosocial Risk Factors.

1. **Organizational culture**, a mix of norms, values, beliefs, meanings and expectations that group members hold in common and that they use as behavioural and problem-solving cues.
2. **Psychological support** comprises all supportive social interactions available at work, either with co-workers or supervisors.
3. **Clear leadership and expectations**, when leadership is effective and provides sufficient support that helps workers know what they need to do, explain how their work contributes to the organization, and discusses the nature and expected outcomes of impending changes.
4. **Civility and respect**, when workers are respectful and considerate with one another, as well as with customers, clients and the public.
5. **Psychological demands** are documented and assessed in conjunction with the psychological demands of the job.
6. **Growth and development**, when workers receive encouragement and support in the development of interpersonal, emotional, and job skills.
7. **Recognition and reward**, when there is appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation of workers' efforts in a fair and timely manner.
8. **Involvement and influence**, when workers are included in discussions about how work is done, how decisions are made.
9. **Workload management**, when assigned tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully with the time available.
10. **Engagement**, when workers enjoy and feel connected to their work and where they feel motivated to do their job well.
11. **Balance**, when there is acceptance of the need for a sense of harmony between the demands of work, family and personal life.
12. **Psychological protection**, when workers' psychological safety is ensured.
13. **Protection of physical safety**, when a worker's psychological, as well as physical safety, is protected from hazards and risks related to the worker's physical environment.

*Source: Standards Council of Canada (2013). *Psychological health and safety in the workplace—prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation*.

retention, and operational success along with decreased conflict and costs of disability and absenteeism (Standards Council of Canada, 2013). There are also promises of increased worker job satisfaction, self-esteem, and job fulfillment when these policies are implemented (Standards Council of Canada, 2013).

In Canada, a recent policy advance in this regard is the newly released National Workplace Psychological Health & Safety Standard (the Standard), commissioned by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and released in January 2013. With this approach, consideration is given to thirteen organizational factors including: organizational culture; psychological support; clear leadership and expectations; civility and respect; psychological job demands; growth and development; recognition and reward; involvement and influence; workload management; engagement; work/life balance; psychological protection from violence, bullying and harassment, and; protection from physical harm (Standards Council of Canada, 2013). This voluntary standard provides employers with a framework and also a guide to a documented and systematic approach for developing and sustaining a psychologically healthy and safety workplace. (See Table 1.)

The release of the Standard marks a significant forward from the policy intervention perspective. However, the level of awareness among Canadian employers is unknown. Furthermore, employers' reactions

Table 2
Interview Schedule.

1. After listening to a brief description of the Standard, what is your initial reaction to it?
2. What issues are you currently dealing with?
3. How do you track these issues / indicators?
4. How satisfied are you with your current processes for preventing / managing these issues?
5. Based on the factors included in the Standard, what do you think are your top priorities / areas of concern in regards to the psychological health and safety of your employees?
6. What are some potential barriers to implementation?
7. What are some specific challenges for your sector?
8. What are some of the potential 'wins' to implementing the Standard?
9. What are some potential 'wins' specific to your sector?
10. What would help to facilitate the process?

to the standard have not been captured in a meaningful or objective way, making it difficult if not impossible to determine its strengths, weaknesses and challenges. It is critical to uncover employer receptivity to the Standard for the purposes of informing and guiding meaningful approaches to support its implementation. Such information is also useful for implementing similar standards and policies in other regions. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study was to uncover Canadian employer's receptivity to the implementation of the Standard in their workplace.

2. Methods and design of the study

2.1. Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand employers' receptivity to implementing the Standard, and there were four main research questions. These included:

- (i) Are psychological health and safety issues a current concern in the workplace?
- (ii) Are employers and organizations receptive to implementing a national standard for a psychologically safe and healthy workplace?
- (iii) What are perceived barriers and benefits to implementing this Standard? And
- (iv) What would facilitate the process of implementing the Standard?

For the purposes of this study, a psychologically health workplace was defined as one where every reasonable effort is made to promote mental health through awareness, resources and education. A psychologically safe workplace was considered to be one where every reasonable effort is made to prevent harm to mental health through negligent, reckless or deliberate mentally injurious conduct (Standards Council of Canada, 2013).

2.2. Participants and Setting

A descriptive-exploratory design was selected for this study given the appropriateness of this approach for exploring meanings, complex situations and interpretations of experiences (Parse, 2001; Richards & Morse, 2006). The study was conducted in a large Western Canadian city as its vibrant economy and low unemployment rate suggested that recruitment and retention of employees would a priority for employers. In collaboration with the local Chamber of Commerce, recruitment of participants was accomplished through purposive sampling, a process that involves selecting participants with knowledge of issues of central importance to the research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This sampling approach allowed for selection of participants familiar with psychological health and safety issues in the workplace that were in diverse positions of management, consulting, human resources, health promotion, health and safety, mediation, and occupational health. Amongst the seventeen participants, six were in the field of healthcare, five identified the focus of their organizations were construction/utilities, three came from manufacturing industries, two were with business services, and one was in the field of finance. These five selected fields had been selected to give a good representation of office and operational settings and industries, as well as for providing heterogeneity of the sample. Half of the participants were aware of the Standard prior to study participation. There was a broad representation in terms of the range in size of the organizations: one had only twenty employees while the largest had about 100,000. Out of the twelve organizations that were represented, ten had an Employee Assistance Program and four had mental health programs in their workplace.

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