

Hiring the mentally ill

By John Stokdijk, CMA

Would you knowingly hire someone with a mental illness?

The Mental Health Commission of Canada, launched by the Government of Canada in 2007, faced this question in its early days of organizational life. The Commission is “a non-profit organization created to focus national attention on mental health issues and to work to improve the health and social outcomes of people living with mental illness.” My colleagues on the senior management team and I quickly agreed that it was important for the credibility of the Commission to “walk the talk.”

Of course all potential employees must demonstrate that they have the skills, knowledge and experience to successfully perform the tasks which will be assigned to them. Organizations cannot afford to accept employee performance that does not meet expectations. But is there any other valid reason why someone with a mental illness should be excluded from consideration?

The Commission believes the answer is an emphatic “no” and that all too often those with a mental illness are inappropriately discriminated against. To counter the myths and misconceptions that abound about the mentally ill, the Commission is embarking on a multi-year anti-stigmatization, anti-discrimination campaign.

When I hired my administrative assistant, I selected a candidate with bipolar disorder who had been out of the workforce for 12 years. However, people do recover from mental illness. Given an opportunity, skills can quickly return as they did in this case. Most of the time, my administrative assistant performs at a level that exceeds expectations. But this story is about more than my staff. It is also about me.

For the first time in my career, during my first interview with former Senator Michael Kirby, now chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, and his team, I felt comfortable disclosing that I have experienced significant mental health problems. During my teen years, I suffered from serious bouts of depression which continued throughout my adult life. Twice I have needed professional help because I was no longer able to function effectively in the workplace. Nevertheless, I was hired as the chief financial officer of the Commission and am greatly energized by our organization’s motto “Out of the Shadows Forever.”

Where is the leading edge of change in the workplace today? In recent decades, much improvement has been seen in how women are accepted and how motherhood is supported. Visible minorities are now part of the workforce everywhere. Employers have learned to make accommodations for the physically disabled. But people living with mental health problems or mental illnesses remain largely invisible.

A new dimension in occupational health and safety is

emerging in Canada — the idea that employers have a duty to provide a psychologically safe workplace. Earlier this year the Commission released a discussion paper, *Stress at Work, Mental Injury and the Law in Canada* by Martin Shain S.J.D., which will undoubtedly generate much discussion. The report describes a rapidly changing legal landscape and the implications for management. Organizations may be faced with an expanding duty to provide “a psychologically-safe workplace ... that permits no harm to employee mental health in negligent, reckless or intentional ways.”

Stress in the workplace can sometimes reach unbearable levels and can lead to depression. Yet it can be difficult to successfully assert a short-term or long-term disability claim in such circumstances. Too often, employers still expect employees to “suck it up and get on with it.” Is it really acceptable that employees have no option but to quit a job when they find themselves in these circumstances? Should the employer not bear some responsibility for mitigating workplace stress?

Interestingly, employees with mental health problems or mental illness may have some advantage over other employees when it comes to coping with stress. Many of these employees have learned the hard way the importance of maintaining work-life balance and maintaining good physical health through proper eating, sleeping and exercising. In addition, many, like my administrative assistant and myself, are not reluctant to reach out for professional help when necessary.

Employers may believe that they have fulfilled their obligations to employees by providing workplace wellness programs and employee assistance programs. Such programs have certainly made a significant contribution. However, the negative aspects of some organizational cultures too often still subtly overpower positive programs and policies. The need for organizational success and the need for containment of employee benefit costs are powerful forces which constrain the degree of employee support that is possible. But the direction of change must be to do more.

The concept of comprehensive support for employees with mental health problems or mental illness has the potential to contribute to organizational success while reducing the costs for society as a whole. Mental Illness Awareness Week runs Oct. 4-10, 2009. If done properly, hiring someone with a mental illness can be a win-win situation for the organization, the employee and the country.

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