

Stress at Work? An evidence-based roadmap to value-adding solutions

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Snapshot of stress-related workforce risks

The Buffett National Wellness Survey (2011) shows that for 56% of senior HR+ respondents stress tops the list of risks to workforce health, followed by mental health (35%), smoking (35%) and high blood pressure (35%). Stress is top ranked for good reason: Higher stress levels elevate absence costs by up to 19%, all disability costs by up to 30% and turnover costs by up to 40%. Also, according to Towers-Watson, stress-based mental health issues are also the drivers behind of 85 per cent of long-term disability claims.

Why HR rates “stress” as the #1 risk to workforce health

Underlying HR professionals’ concern is their top-to-bottom understanding of what rising “stress levels” are telling us about the abilities of staff to reliably deliver strategically critical results. And, HR’s concern is evidence-based. “Stress level” in individuals, teams or in a whole corporation provides a quick, revealing diagnostic, much as a pH litmus test does, of how In- or Out-of-Balance those staff are. Can they be counted on to deliver in the next quarter? Knowing that out-of-balance means missed targets plus risks to costs, quality and client satisfaction, 56% of HR and many operations managers now rate on-the-job stress as a top priority challenge. To briefly gauge balance in a work team, visit <http://www.vitalcorporation.com/diagnostic.asp>

Why many employers struggle to provide lasting, value-adding solutions

Success stories from HR professionals who have included stress control as part of their human capital strategy offer us valuable insights. Most importantly, they avoided the terminal pitfall of labeling the stress symptoms as the problem to be solved. Very wise because, as in medicine, the symptoms are not the disorder. In fact, as reported in Medisys 2008 Wellness white paper, C-suite executives’ diagnosis tells us that “**productive wellbeing**” is the problem to be solved (See https://www.medisys.ca/documents/success-stories/wellness_top_100.pdf). True, chronic stress contributes to declining health, fatiguing or too often disabling employees. But, as a corporate top priority problem, staff wellbeing under stress is only half the story.

Unfortunately, once stress symptoms are labeled as a wellbeing problem, a variety of off-the-shelf solutions are too often set in motion. The “*productive on-the-job*” focus of senior decision makers may evaporate in favour of just helping staff with their problems.

Yet Medisys’ 2008 white paper is very clear: What senior executives also want from investing in staff wellbeing ... which would also go a long way to solving the “stress” and “mental health” problems ... is a workforce having the healthy capacity (a) to do their job well, and (b) to enjoy doing that. In HCM terms, it’s also about supporting the strong “personal ROI from working life” that underpins an effective employee value proposition ... and staff mental health. See Figure 1 below.

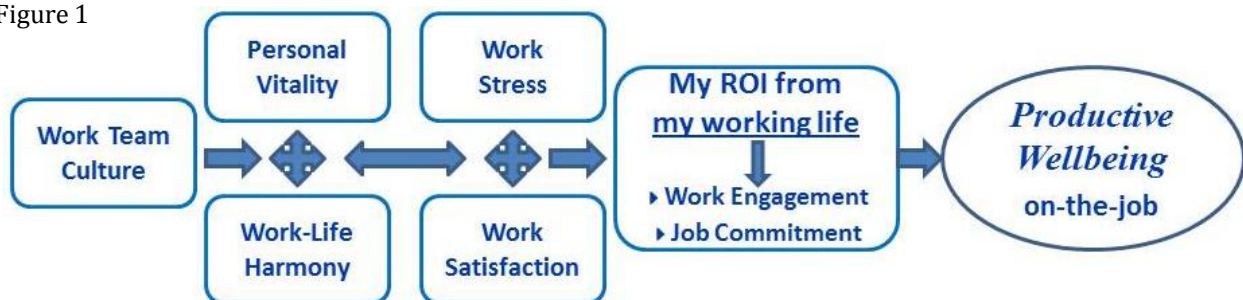
Roadmap to sustainable value-adding solutions

Corporate success stories highlight six choice-points in a stress control roadmap. These have guided 33 years’ applied research by the Canadian Institute of Stress with workplaces in Canada and internationally.

Checklist of six choice points in a roadmap to high-ROI workforce solutions

① *Is elevated stress really the problem?* Stress is usually the most visible symptom and the most powerful driver of the lose-lose problems draining both employee wellbeing and their work performance. However, to get lasting, value-adding results it is best targeted within an evidence-based model of how stress symptoms can actually become a chronic problem (Figure 1). And, a problem well defined is a problem half solved.

Figure 1



How employee stress impacts productive wellbeing Canadian Institute of Stress 2013

Proper frontend diagnostics, providing a fact-based perspective for corporate decision makers, will avoid the all too common mistake of mislabeling the stress symptoms as the problem to be solved.

② A pilot project intervention should focus on an agreed, specific agenda of ***What would a value-adding solution specifically look like?*** anchored in specific pre & post-pilot metrics to be tracked ... not simply in questionnaire measures of employee stress, etc. Solution indicators must be those most meaningful to the team's operations, For example: grievances, turnover, fatigue, average cycle time, and up-selling success in a customer contact call centre. Ideally, the project should also include a comparable work team not participating in the pilot ... as a benchmarking control group.

③ ***Will the solution achieved be corporately seen as strategically value-adding?*** For example: 19% better up-selling results by a Canadian call centre's staff; or saving 1.2 days/week meeting time in a Saudi refinery's engineering staff; or a 30% reduction in training time required for a U.S. airline's newly hired cargo agents. Such business case results are essential to credibly positioning wellbeing as supporting corporate performance.

④ ***Will the intervention produce win-win, sustainable results ... for company and staff alike?*** Will (1) improvements in staff stress, satisfaction and body-mind wellbeing directly show up in their on-the-job performance? And will (2) value-adding work process improvements directly benefit levels of work stress and satisfaction for most staff? Lasting gains from strengthening self-management and health can be tripled when supported by action on staff's win-win proposals for reducing unnecessary stressful drains on their KPI productivity. Each win-win solution cited in ③ above came from, and was deeply appreciated as stress-reducing by the team proposing it.

⑤ ***Will the results contribute to meeting future corporate challenges?*** Steps to improve productive wellbeing should be integrated to support, and be supported by related corporate priorities. For example, leadership training is widely recognized as creating a future-looking corporate resource. However, "leaders" who depend on fatigued, over-stressed, uncommitted staff cannot deliver as leaders. Leaders' success presupposes a base of Can Do – Will Do staff.

⑥ ***Can the intervention reach and be involving top to bottom in the organization?*** Too often junior staff compliment a stress-focused program saying "This is great, but are our bosses getting this message too?" An important contribution by a "productive wellbeing" program is that all staff, junior to senior, share the same practical understanding about how it's designed to contribute to win-win results for the company and employees alike. Successful solutions, above all else, are

creative in program delivery. Time and scheduling crunches lead innovators to rely on a mix of blended learning (classroom, e-learning, online coaching and follow-up, team involvement, etc.). The programs that seem to work best are not rocket science. They make motivating commonsense ... from the boardroom to the shop floor. And they are personalized to each participant, using online self-profiling to link each person to the specific action recommendations they most need for personally motivating benefits ... soon.

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