

## Are We Making a Difference? Work Absence Changes

By Dianne E. G. Dyck

Over the past 16 years, the Canadian annual work absence rates have been high, topping out in 2007 at 8.8% or 10.2 work absence days per full time employee). Since then, there has been a steady decrease in the annual work absence rates (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Work Absence Rates and Days (2000-2016)<sup>1</sup>**

Year	Employee Absence Rate	Lost Workdays	Absence: Personal Health	Absence: Family Reasons
2000	6.3%	8	6.7	1.3
2001	7.0%	8.5	7	1.5
2002	7.8%	9.1	7.4	1.7
2003	7.5%	9.2	7.5	1.7
2004	7.6%	9.2	7.5	1.7
2005	8.3%	9.6	7.8	1.8
2006	8.2%	9.7	7.6	2.1
2007	8.8%	10.2	8.1	2.1
2008	8.8%	10	7.9	2.1
2009	8.2%	9.8	7.8	2.1
2010	8.0%	9.1	7.4	1.7
2011	8.1%	9.3	7.7	1.6
2012	8.2%	9.3	7.6	1.6
2013	8.0%	9.1	7.4	1.6
2014	7.6%	8.8	7.3	1.5
2015	7.7%	8.9	7.4	1.5
2016	8.2%	9.5	7.8	1.7

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, **Work Absence Rates** 2000-2014. Data available online from Statistics Canada, [www.statscan.gc.ca](http://www.statscan.gc.ca), CANSIM tables 279-0029 to 279-0039.

Today, using the 2016 data, the annual work absence rate is 8.2% or 9.5 days per employee. The question is, “Why is this happening?”

## Background

Pre-2000, few organizations paid attention to employee absenteeism or disability management. As time went on, organizations began to gradually realize that employee absenteeism and disability situations can be effectively managed and the losses mitigated. Often this revelation was the result of Occupational Health Nurses (OHNs) advocating for the development of formalized Disability Management Programs and often, the related Attendance Control Programs, in the workplace.

In addition to these efforts, organizations offered employee support services such as Employee Assistance Programs<sup>2</sup> and Workplace Wellness Programs<sup>3</sup>. Government agencies, Ministries of Labour and Workers’ Compensation Boards, increased their focus on illness and injury prevention. This resulted in the development of more robust and effective Occupational Health & Safety Programs. In many provinces, financial incentives for having fewer workplace injury claims were provided.

All these programs were implemented to prevent as well as mitigate employee illness and injury. In combination, the outcome of these workplace initiatives has been a reduction in work absence rates and days. In an attempt to further reduce work absences, it is important to first understand the Canadian work absence data and what they indicate.

The purpose of this article is to present the current work absence data along with an historical perspective of what has occurred. Using this approach, OHNs can better position organizations to address work and societal challenges, and move towards even fewer work absence days.

## Canadian Work Absence Data

Each year Statistics Canada reports the Canadian Work Absence Data, and breaks it down by a number of salient variables. It is these data that can be used to better understand what is happening in Canadian workplaces, albeit, retroactively. They can also be used to measure change – change in terms of work absence rates, work absence days, and work absence reasons. As well, they indicate geographic, gender, age, industry-sector, occupational, and other similar differences. It is these variables that can be used to better understand how to make future and meaningful societal and workplace change.

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<sup>2</sup> In Canada, 75% of mid-sized and large organizations provide Employee Assistance Programs for employees and their dependents (Dyck, D. (2013) *Disability Management, Theory, Strategy & Industry Practice, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed.* Markham, ON: LexisNexis Canada Inc.).

<sup>3</sup> In Canada, 72% of Canadian organizations have a highly or moderately developed Workplace Wellness Program; while only 9 per cent of organizations report not having any workplace wellness initiatives in place. (Conference Board of Canada, *Healthy People, Healthy Performance, Healthy Profits: The Case for Business Action on the Socio-Economic Determinants of Health* (2008), available online at: <<http://www.conferenceboard.ca/documents.aspx?did=2818>> (date accessed: January 31, 2015)).

Statistics Canada defines:<sup>4</sup>

**Absence from work** ... denotes a period of not-working time preceded and followed by periods of paid employment or working in one's own business. This measure includes short-term and long-term work absences due to occupational and non-occupational illness and injury.

**Employed person** refers to those who, during the reference period, had a labour force status of "employed". That is, those who, during the reference period:

(a) Did any work at all at a job or business, that is, paid work in the context of an employer-employee relationship, or self-employment. This also includes persons who did unpaid family work, which is defined as unpaid work contributing directly to the operation of a farm, business or professional practice owned and operated by a related member of the same household; or

(b) Had a job but were not at work due to factors such as their own illness or disability, personal or family responsibilities, vacation or a labour dispute.

**Incidence of Absence** is the percentage of full-time employees reporting some absence in the reference week. In calculating incidence, the length of work absence - whether an hour, a day, or a full week - is irrelevant.

**Days Lost per Employee** are calculated by multiplying the inactivity rate by the estimated number of working days in the year. The estimated number of working days in the year is 52 weeks multiplied by 5, less 10 statutory holidays, or 250 days.

This data is collected annually and is since 2013, reported using the Statistics Canada CANSIM Tables (refer to the Statistics Canada website, [www.statscan.gc.ca](http://www.statscan.gc.ca) ).

## Work Absence Variables

Over the years, the Canadian Work Absence data highlighted a number of factors that influence regular work attendance by full-time employees. These influencers are important to recognize and understand, because they are the “keys” to making meaningful change in the workplace. They include:

- **Geography**

Geographic differences in work absence has been evident for years. Employees from Eastern Canada (primarily, Quebec, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia), had the highest rates of work absence rates and days for the past 6 years. In contrast, Alberta and Ontario reported the lowest rates (Figure 2).

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada (2015). *Absences From Work of Employed Persons*, available online at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/absences-absence-eng.html>

**Figure 2: Work Absence Days by Province: Historical View**

Area	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
CDN	8.0	8.5	9.0	9.1	9.2	9.6	9.7	10.2	10.0	9.8	9.1	9.3	9.3	9.1	8.8	8.9	9.5
NFL D	9.1	8.6	8.3	10.3	10.3	9.5	9.7	9.8	9.8	11.5	11.0	10.2	10.8	10.5	10.8	9.2	9.7
PEI	6.9	7.6	8.5	7.5	7.6	8.6	8.5	8.4	9.0	8.6	9.2	9.9	9.6	10.7	9.9	10.4	10.5
NS	9.4	9.6	10.3	9.7	11	10.8	10.7	12	11.4	11.4	9.8	10.8	11.4	10.5	10	10.8	10.6
NB	8.6	10.1	9.7	10.1	9.7	10.3	11.5	10.6	11.0	10.5	10.4	10.8	9.9	10.7	10.4	10.5	10.5
PQ	8.8	9.0	9.7	10.6	10.8	11.2	11.5	12	11.6	11.8	10.4	10.8	10.7	10.1	11	11.3	<b>11.9</b>
ON	7.1	7.6	8.3	8.2	8.6	8.6	8.8	9.4	9.5	8.9	8.2	8.3	8.2	8	7.7	7.7	8.5
MB	8.6	9.3	9.9	9.3	9.8	9.9	10.1	10.9	11.2	10.1	10.4	10.2	10.6	10.3	9.8	9.5	10.4
SK	9.4	10.0	10.2	10.5	10.2	11.1	11.0	10.5	10.5	10.7	9.6	11	10.4	10.3	9.4	10.1	10.6
AB	7.6	8.1	8.3	7.9	7.5	8.6	9.0	9.0	8.3	7.9	8.1	7.9	7.9	7.7	7.5	7.1	<b>7.5</b>
BC	8.7	9.6	9.4	9.6	8.8	10.3	9.4	10.1	9.8	10.0	9.3	9.9	9.9	10.4	8.9	9.0	9.5

The question is, “Why do these geographic difference exist? What is it about the societal conditions and the workplaces in these provinces that lead to these outcomes?” In essence, why the difference between these “best and worst” performers?

- **Industry Sector**

The public and private sector industries experience different work absence rates and days. For the past eight years, the public-sector industries work absence days were higher than they were in the private sector industries. In 2016, public sector employees missed 1.6 times more work absence days (13.5 days) than did employees in the private sector (8.3 days). Again, why? Is it due to more and better employee group benefit plans? Or, due to the presence of unionization? Or, due to the work culture and a belief of sick leave benefit entitlement? Or, is it the nature of the work?

- **Occupation**

Employee occupation is another interesting variable. The management occupations have traditionally experienced fewer work absence days, while the healthcare; production, manufacturing and utilities; and trades, transportation and equipment operator occupations experienced the highest number of work absence days. For example, in 2016, employees in management occupations missed less than half of the days (5.7 days) as compared to the employee in the healthcare occupations (14.6 days). This difference is certainly understandable given the nature of the work and the rated work hazards.

- **Organizational Size**

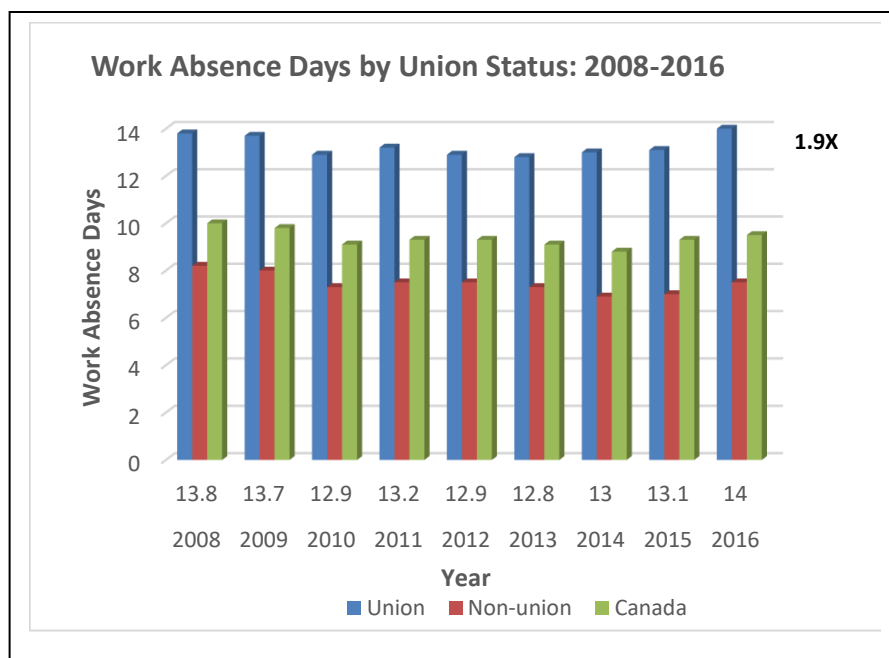
Large organizations (over 500 employees) sustain more work absences than the smaller organizations. For example, in 2016, employees in large organizations missed 11.7 days, as compared to the 7.7 days in organizations with less than 20 employees. Looking at the data set, as the number of employees increases, so do the number of lost workdays.

- **Employee Employment Status**

Permanently-employed employees miss approximately 1.3 times more work than non-permanent employees. In 2016, permanent employees missed 9.7 days as compared to 7.4 days missed by the non-permanent employee. This picture has existed for a number of years and is most likely related to the employee group benefits afforded to permanent employees, which non-permanent employees would not have.

Likewise, in 2016, unionized employees missed on average 1.9 times the number of workdays than did non-unionized employees. This phenomenon is not unique. Unionized employees have traditionally missed more work than their non-unionized counterparts. However, the degree of difference between these two groups increased in 2016 (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Work Absence Days by Union Status**



Clearly unionized employees miss much more time (1.9 times) than non-unionized employees, or even, more time (1.5 time more) than the general Canadian full-time employee population.

- **Employment Tenure**

Employment tenure is associated with more lost workdays. In 2016, employees who had been with the organization for more than 14 years missed 6.1 more days than employees who had just joined the organization (1-12 months employment).

- **Employee Educational Status**

Higher education is associated with fewer lost work absence days. In 2016, employees with a university degree missed 2.8 fewer days than employees with less than grade 9 education. This is understandable given that employees with higher education tend to be employed in management positions – positions that involve exposure to fewer work hazards.

- **Age**

As employees age, they miss more work absence days. This phenomenon is not surprising and has been evident for years. In 2016, employees 55 years of age and older averaged 11.2 lost workdays as compared to the 5.5 workdays lost by employees 15-24 years of age. This finding is consistent with many research findings that aging is accompanied by chronic illness and injury. In terms of general disability, the prevalence steadily increases with age:

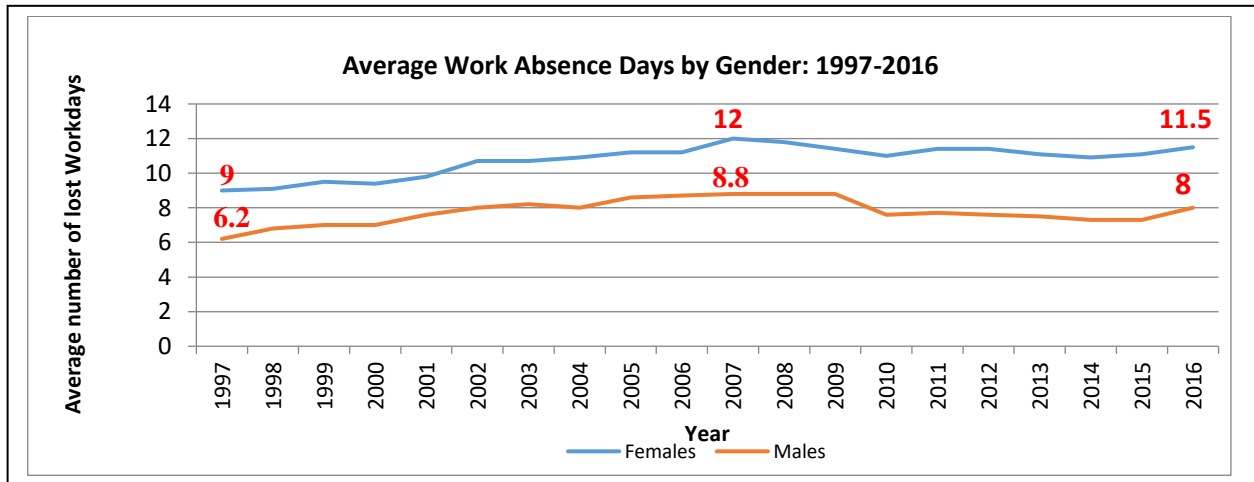
- Employees 15-24 years                      4.4% reported a disability;
- Employees 25-44 years                    6.5% reported a disability;
- Employees 45-64 years                    16.1% reported a disability;
- Employees 65-74 years                    26.3% reported a disability (the older employee).<sup>5</sup>

The Canadian Survey on Disability (2012) indicates that the prevalence of mental health-related disabilities increases with age. Mental health-related disabilities are known to resolve slower than do physical disability situations. As well, the study notes that people with mental health-related disabilities show a high rate of co-occurrence with other types of disabilities. The presence of co-occurrence of disabilities is also associated with a longer recovery period and delayed return to work.

- **Gender**

With work absence rates and days, gender differences do exist. Women miss more work absence days (11.5 days in 2016) than men (8 days in 2016). This is not a new occurrence; historically, women have missed more time than men (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Work Absence Days by Gender: Historical Perspective**



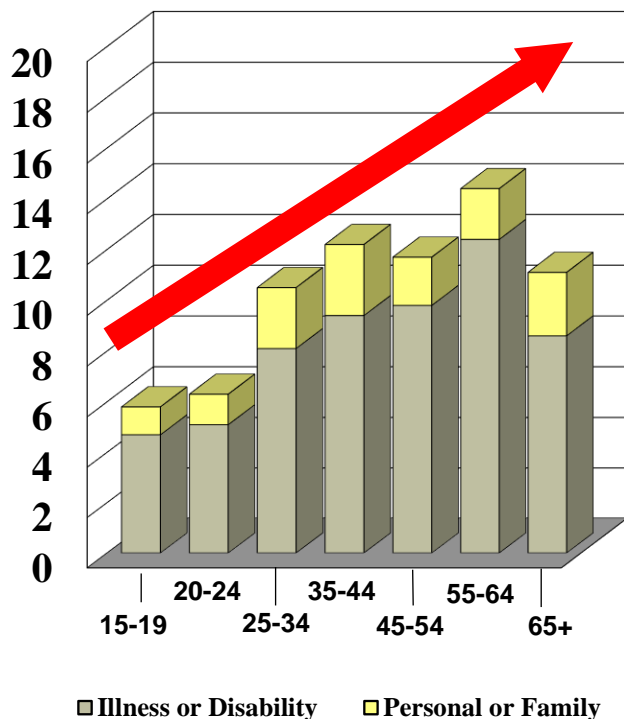
<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada (2013). *Disability in Canada: Initial Findings from the Canadian Survey on Disability, Cat. #89-654 – No. 002*, p. 4-5.

Part of this phenomenon is due to the caregiving responsibilities that women assume. At all ages, women experience more work absence days due to personal or family responsibilities (Figure 5).<sup>6</sup>

This finding is further supported by the 2013 study on family caregiving which points out that women are the major caregivers in our society, and that psychological and physical illness and even injury, are associated with this responsibility.

**Figure 5: Work Absence**

**Days Lost per Full-time Worker for Personal Reasons by Age and Sex, 2016**



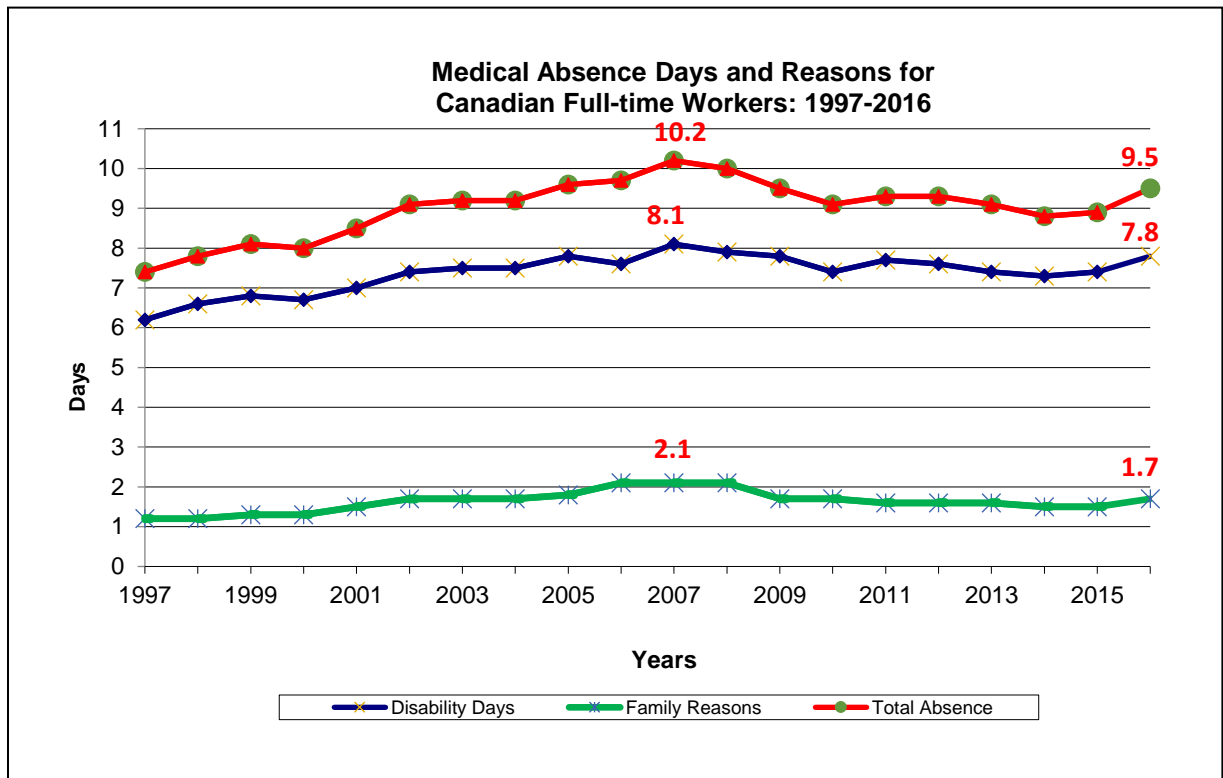
This finding is further supported by the 2013 study on family caregiving which points out that women are the major caregivers in our society, and that psychological and physical illness and even injury, are associated with this responsibility.

- **Reasons for Work Absence**

The reasons for full time employees missing time from work are broken down into *days lost due to illness or disability* and *days lost due to personal or family responsibilities*. From an historical perspective (Figure 6), the peak year was 2007 when full-time employees missed an average of 10.2 workdays in that year.

<sup>6</sup> Turcotte, M. (2013). "Family Caregiving: What are the Consequences?" *Insights on Canadian Society, Statistics Canada, Cat. No. 75-006-X*. Available online at: <<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2013001/article/11858-eng.htm>>.

**Figure 6: Reasons for Work Absence: Historical Perspective**



From that point onward, the rate and number of work absence days have slightly dropped, with the greatest reduction in the number of lost work days due to family reasons..

### Since 1997: Changes Witnessed

Back in 1997, the presence of preschool children in the home was a major variable impacting work absence days (refer to Stats Can 1997 data released in 1998). At that time, women’s work attendance was affected the most. For the past five years, the presence of preschool children is no longer a variable.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is due to the many societal and workplace responses to the needs of the working mother or working single parent. Daycares, preschools, kindergartens, and other childcare facilities like after-school programs exist. As well, employers have instituted a number of family-friendly policies enabling parents to better manage childcare needs.

As well, shiftwork was once identified as a variable for lost workdays. Today, this is no longer listed as a salient variable by Statistics Canada. Perhaps, this is due to the many employer efforts to effectively address the potentially negative effects of shiftwork.

The number of work absence days associated with personal and family reasons dropped, but this cannot be solely attributed to the presence of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) in the workplace. Those programs have been present for years. However, the effectiveness of those

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada (2015). *Table 279-0033: Work Absence Statistics of Full-time Employees by Sex and Presence of Children* (2014). Available on the Statistics Canada website.



programs may have improved. As well, the linking of the EAP services with absence control and disability management efforts in the workplace, may be a contributing factor. From a societal perspective, more efforts have been spent on addressing mental health issues and providing resources for workplaces to use to create a psychologically safe and healthy workplace.

## Implications

Now, knowing the details of the Canadian work absence data, the next question is what can be done to continue to reduce the number of lost workdays and reduce the related costs? Obviously, there are a number of societal and workplace factors involved. So, which ones would result in the greatest improvements if addressed?

The major variables that remain include the differences due to geographic location, industry sector, organizational size, employment status (permanent versus non-permanent, and unionized or not), employment tenure, educational level, age, and gender.

- ***Geographic Location***

In the provinces that have a high number of work absence days, some contributing factors may include higher unemployment rates, a higher ratio of female to male full-time employees, and a higher percentage of older workers. Not being able to get work or having a job to return to, can contribute to more work absence days. Women have traditionally missed more time from work than men. Older employees miss more time than do younger employees. Another variable may be the presence and accessibility to more and better healthcare services.

- ***Industry Sector***

Public sector industries are comprised of “employees in the public administration at the federal, provincial, territorial, municipal, First Nations, and other Aboriginal levels as well as in Crown corporations, liquor control boards, and other government institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, and public libraries.”<sup>8</sup> These industries tend to be heavily unionized and offer employees more and better employee group benefit plans. The result is often a work culture that embraces a belief of sick leave benefit entitlement.

According to Uppal, S. and LaRochelle-Cote, S. (2013), union coverage and the higher proportion of older and female employees in the public sector industries, explains about 80% of the gap in work absences between public and private sector employees.<sup>9</sup> They also mentioned that occupational exposures also differ between the two sectors.

Occupational exposures are a genuine factor that tends to contribute to work absence days. Healthcare workers are exposed to many work hazards such as biological, chemical, physical, psychological, radiation, violence, and sleep deprivation hazards. The control of these hazards is

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<sup>8</sup> Uppal, S. & LaRochelle-Cote, S. (2013). Understanding public–private sector differences in work absences, Statistics Canada, Cat. No. 75-006-X, p. 5, available online at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2013001/article/11862-eng.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Uppal, S. & LaRochelle-Cote, S. (2013). Understanding public–private sector differences in work absences, Statistics Canada, Cat. No. 75-006-X, available online at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2013001/article/11862-eng.htm>

the mandate of an organization's Occupational Health & Safety Management System (OHSMS). It means understanding and effectively controlling these workplace risks.

- **Organizational Size**

The rationale for larger organizations having higher work absence rates and days may center on the strength of the occupational bond between the organization (employer) and employee. In larger organizations, the employee is one of many employees and hence, that occupational bond may be weaker than it is in smaller organizations. Likewise, larger organizations may be less aware of an employee's absence; whereas smaller organizations, certainly know when an employee is missing and can initiate mitigation actions. Add to this, the fact that large organizations tend to be unionized and employ more women – both factors for increase work absence days.

- **Employment status**

Permanent employment and unionization are associated with an increased number of employee work absence days. The potential explanation for this phenomenon is that these employees are able to take paid time from work to address illness/injury events, personal issues, and family problems. However, often the belief that these sick leave benefits are part of the employee's compensation package and hence, the employee believes he/she is entitled to use them when deemed necessary. In essence, it becomes a cultural mindset – a mindset that leads to increased work absence. Likewise, the job security provided through unionization, tends to lead to unionized employees taking more liberties with their sick leave. To counter this effect, organizations through their:

- 1) Labour Relations function work with their union(s) to understand the absence reasons and how to address them; and
- 2) Human Resources function should counter the entitlement mentality by explaining the importance and value of regular work attendance as well as the use of sick leave benefits for illness/injury only.

Likewise, permanent employees have a job to return to post illness-injury, a factor that is associated with a timely return to work post-disability.

- **Employment Tenure**

Employment tenure is challenging – the data indicates that the longer the employee is on the job, the more work absence days are incurred. This is a phenomenon that many employers report; and which they associate with employee compliancy with safe work practices which leads to increased work-injury risk. Although a strong and robust OHSMS can help to counter this phenomenon, the corporate culture and the resulting corporate climate, are the greatest influencers when it comes to work behaviour.

- **Employee Educational Status**

The relationship between educational levels and work absence days is interesting. Although employees with university degrees demonstrate fewer work absence days, it may be a somewhat misleading variable in that many highly-educated employees tend to work in less hazardous occupations. Despite that, awareness and knowing how to control work hazards can prevent

employee injuries. Outside of the workplace, higher levels of education are associated with healthier lifestyles and better knowledge of, and access to, healthcare.

- **Age and Gender**

Employee personal factors like age and gender, are certainly challenging to address. Women miss more time than men; they are the major caregivers in our society. Between children, aging parents, and ailing spouses and friends, women are sandwiched between work and home life demands. The ensuing pressures and stress levels tend to result in work-life interference and conflict, illness/injury, and work absence. To counter this phenomenon, society and organizations are encouraged to develop effective support systems and services.

Aging, and the onset and prevalence of disease conditions, are directly associated. With 18.7% of the Canadian workforce being over the age of 55 years,<sup>10</sup> the high number of work absence days in 2016 (9 days) is understandable. However, it is interesting that employees, 55-64 years missed 12.7 workdays (11.2 days for own disability and 1.6 days for family responsibilities). Post-sixty-five years of age, employees missed only 9.7 days (7.8 for their own disability reasons and 1.9 days for family responsibilities). The latter group (3% of the labour force in 2016) tend to not receive employee group benefits or long term disability insurance coverage – the same situation as non-permanent employees.

These personal factors are like gravity, “*They exist, and cannot be eradicated; rather they need to be managed.*” The importance of doing so is that age and gender impact many of the other work absence factors, such as industry sector. It is always best to deal with the root cause of a situation instead of focusing on the resulting symptoms.

### **What OHNs Can Do to Promote Change?**

Occupational Health Nurses provide value to an organization by assisting with operational efficiency, loss control, injury/illness management, and disability management. The scope of Occupational Health Nursing can positively impact the organization, workplace environment, employees, and the community at large.

In terms of managing employee work attendance, OHNs can promote change by encouraging management, unions and employees to:

- Appreciate the impact that corporate culture and corporate climate exert on employee behaviours, and to understand how best to use these critical management tools. Effective leadership is needed.
- Explore the impact of union collective agreements, employment contracts, and the terms of employee group benefit plans on employee work absence rates and days. Challenge the belief of “entitlement to use sick leave benefits”.
- Embrace and support a robust and comprehensive Occupational Health & Safety Management System. Help them understand the connection between occupational

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<sup>10</sup> Statistics Canada (2017). *Labour Force Characteristics, December 2016*. Available online at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/71-001-x/2014012/t003-eng.htm>

exposures and work absence days, and the related costs – human and financial. Include in that effort, the need to address complacency in the workplace.<sup>11</sup>

- Understand the challenges that female employees face and continue to support them and provide the needed services to manage their work and home demands.
- Appreciate that the older worker, although valuable in today's workplaces, experiences a number of aging challenges; but also, that those challenges can be addressed through a number of preventative measures. Ergonomic modifications, health education on aging well, fitness programs, manual handling and lifting aids, attention to walking surfaces, and enhanced area lighting are but a few approaches that have been shown to prevent injuries in the aging worker.
- Provide employee health and safety education and training so that workplace injuries and off-the-job injuries/illness can be avoided.
- Track and analyze employee absence days and reasons. Use that information to help identify effective ways to mitigate and ultimately, prevent future similar absences in specific organizations.
- Integrate employee absentee and disability data so that not only can employee work absence days be identified, but they can be quantified and their relationship recognized. That approach provides the needed leverage for obtaining adequate resources to make organizational improvements.

## Conclusion

Work medical absenteeism is a complex entity and its resolution, equally complex. The best approach is to address absenteeism through the use of “upstream” tactics<sup>12</sup> as opposed to dealing with individual employee absentee situations. The OHN is in an excellent position to assist organizations to understand the phenomenon, its contributory factors, as well as how to overcome the challenges of frequent work absence.

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- Dyck, D. (2017) *Disability Management, Theory, Strategy & Industry Practice, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed.* Markham, ON: LexisNexis Canada Inc.
- Statistics Canada (2017). *Labour Force Survey Estimates by Sex and Age, 2016, Table 282-0002*, available online at: <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca>

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<sup>11</sup> **Complacency in the workplace** is defined as self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies. It is associated with workers taking short-cuts to get things done, or practicing risky behaviours.

<sup>12</sup> **“Upstream”** - in business, the term “upstream” refers to the product/service research, development, production, and refinement activities. In terms of attendance control and disability management, it refers to all the activities that occur to prevent employee illness/injury, and the subsequent work absence days. The tactics include a system and organizational approach to preventing and mitigating workplace medical absence.

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