

WORKPLACE



DERRICK PENNER/VANCOUVER SUN

Certified massage practitioner Erin Fergusson offers Jessi Guerico, a recent Thompson Rivers University grad, a massage as part of a workplace-wellness demonstration.

Mental illness challenges human resources

But companies becoming more adept at providing support, services to those affected

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VANCOUVER SUN

Mental illness in the workplace is becoming more recognized and less stigmatized, but it still deals employers one of their biggest human resources challenges, a conference panel in Vancouver heard Tuesday.

"Not every addicted employee, or employee dealing with a mental illness, is going to rush in and say 'I have an addiction and you need to help me,'" said panelist Julie Nichols. Human rights legislation deems that an employer has a duty to try to accommodate helping the worker under disability-related protections.

It is an example of the topical issues the Human Resources Management Association's annual conference attempted to tackle, and the session was well attended, attracting more than 100 of the conference's 1,000 attendees.

"An employer has to try," said

Nichols, a lawyer and mediator. That includes situations where an employee hasn't said anything about problems they are having, but there is a possibility deteriorating work performance might be due to mental health issues.

It is no small concern either, said Fred Smith, a representative of the insurer Great West Life. About a quarter of the 20,000 disability cheques per month Great West Life issues in B.C. goes to clients with mental-illness claims.

Nichols, along with workplace-law expert Melanie Samuels and psychiatrist Dr. Deryck Smith, led a sometimes clinical hour-and-a-half discussion outlining the legal framework established by precedents in human-rights-tribunal decisions and court rulings and discussing the layers of accommodation employers can consider, such as adjusting schedules or reducing hours.

And while the obligations might sound onerous, Samuels

said the best practice is "trying to build in accommodation as a standard as opposed to an exception."

In the end, Samuels said, the legal framework and the practices of accommodating employees struggling with mental health issues is about "having a compassionate and respectful work environment," which is something she finds is less of a challenge for employers.

"There seems to be a little more compassion out there," said Samuels, a partner at the firm Singleton Urquhart. "I think it's because maybe people know of someone now, where 20 years ago you may have never known they had a mental health issue, or even 10 years ago."

Samuels said the process is always a balancing act between the rights of employees and employers, but most employers take a sophisticated approach and then see the results, "because employees return

to work quicker after disability leaves without feeling like they're completely dismissed out of hand because they have this label."

Mental health wasn't the only serious topic taken on at the HRMA conference, said organizer Christian Codrington.

"It speaks to the complexity of workplace challenges," said Codrington, the HRMA's director of regulatory affairs.

Tuesday sessions at the conference, held at the Vancouver Convention Centre West, included typical HR topics such as recruitment, talent management and contracts.

There was also a session on the evolving nature of privacy in the workplace, which Codrington noted was brought to the fore recently in Saanich on Vancouver Island, in a dispute over the installation of spy software on municipal computers.

"Human resources continues to be challenged with a number of different things happening

in the workplace," Codrington said. "There are legislative changes and just what social media is doing to privacy in the workplace and what that means for careers."

However, the event was far from sombre. At its associated trade fair, the booth of Soulful Indulgence, a mobile spa company, proved a popular destination by offering free massages as an example of the kind of wellness perks it can offer employers.

Owner Michelle Wilson said workplace wellness is one of her firm's larger business segments, and "a good hiring perk."

Codrington said wellness is an area where employers can see a payoff in terms of building a more engaged workforce.

"They recognize a healthy workforce is one that's contributing, or can contribute (to success)," Codrington said.

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