

Executive Health in the Federal Public Service: Individual and Organizational Implications

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) has been monitoring the health of federal Public Service executives for over a decade, conducting two major studies, first in 1997 and again in 2002.

The latest analysis of the 2002 data confirms the relationship between individual health and organizational effectiveness. It provides insights into how executives can improve both the health of individuals and the effectiveness of their organizations.

Individual Health Outcomes

Work is the most important determinant of health status for executives in mid-life. Long-term studies show that cumulative exposure to *stress* results in serious health conditions.

APEX's studies reveal a high incidence of cardiovascular disease in the federal executive cadre – one in five. Another growing workplace health concern is *depression* and the negative effects it has on performance. There again, researchers noted a significant risk – 15.2% of executives suffer from depression compared to 2.6% of Canadians as a whole. When we isolated the executive population and compared private sector executives with Public Service executives, we found that executives in the Public Service – both male and female – had higher incidence rates for most diseases.

The 1997 and 2002 health data show that the levels of distress experienced by executives in the federal Public Service are not only high, but of long duration; two conditions recognized as increasing the risk of *long-term distress* and *serious health conditions*. The main

contributing factors for federal executives are *heavy workloads* and *workplace conflicts*.

These same factors also contribute to minor health complaints that negatively affect performance and organizational outcomes. However, APEX's latest analysis shows that levels of distress can be offset by increasing *flexibility*, *fairness* and *control*.

Organizational Outcomes

The results of the APEX study clearly show that *health* and *organizational outcomes* are closely interwoven. The factors having the greatest impact on individual health had similar effects on organizational effectiveness. For example, *lack of control* is a potent risk factor for heart disease. There is also a strong link between *control* over day-to-day routines and *work satisfaction*. APEX found that higher control increased the likelihood of higher work satisfaction by 375%. Work satisfaction, in addition to *employee engagement* and *commitment*, is a key indicator of *productivity* and effective *service delivery*.

Another important factor for both health and organizational effectiveness is the level of *supervisory support*. It is most critical in its ability to counter aggressive behaviour in the workplace. Strong *interpersonal support*, particularly from supervisors, has a noticeably positive effect in reducing the likelihood of harassment and interpersonal conflict within the executive community.

Conclusions

There are a large number of potential stressors in the workplace that APEX's research has reduced to a manageable number of five key determinants: *control*, *support*, *demand*, *effort*,

and rewards/recognition. This has considerable practical value as the basis for change interventions and policies.

It's about making smart choices.

Lack of knowledge is no longer a barrier. Now that we know what the problems are, we can identify the right solutions for individual organizations. These solutions will lie in the balance achieved between the five key determinates, a balance that is critical for good health, as well as for productivity and client service.

Notwithstanding their heavy workloads and complex challenges, executives can thrive if they have control over the day-to-day decisions required to manage their workload, support from their supervisors and recognition for their efforts.

Executives have a responsibility, both collectively and individually, to work towards achieving the balance required for healthy and effective organizations. Based on its research, APEX recommends that organizations pay careful attention to levels of:

- **control** over day-to-day decisions;
- **support**, particularly in the form of access to immediate supervisors;
- workload **demands**;
- mental and emotional **effort**; and
- **recognition** for good performance, combined with disincentives for undesirable behaviours.

There are no magic solutions or silver bullets. The key to leading healthy employees and effective organizations is making informed choices, on a daily basis. It is up to all of us to make this happen!