



What To Consider In A Covid-19 World

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As Canadians return to work, employers have a long list of concerns. How will they manage physical distancing in the workplace? How can they support the mental health of their employees? How long will it take for their business to recover financially from the shutdown?

In some cases, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated change that was in its infancy as firms took decisive action to respond to an unprecedented challenge and ensure business continuity. More people than ever before have adopted digital communication platforms and images of these virtual meetings have become a staple of social media output.

No doubt other routine measures will take a back seat to these more pressing concerns. Even in so-called 'normal' times, roughly one-quarter of Canadian employers do little more than file the paperwork to renew their health benefits plan as is. In these uncertain times, this would be a grave mistake. In fact, there isn't a more critical time for employers to seriously consider their options for greater employee support or to emphasize budget considerations.

Supporting Employees

Mental health has become an even more pressing topic now, thanks to several months of near lockdown. From singles struggling without in-person social interaction to parents struggling to balance work and childcare, many employees will return to work struggling with mental health in some way.

An easy option to consider that many employers have adopted is to increase existing coverage for mental health services. This may mean increasing psychology coverage (the current benchmark of \$500 per year is not sufficient for adequate coverage), adding/upgrading employee assistance plans (EAPs); or taking a more innovative on-demand approach by offering internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (ICBT).

At the same time, management teams can only support their returning employees

if they are given the tools and training to do so. The most common themes of this type of training include mental health first aid, emotional intelligence training, and resilience training – mhfa.ca and workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com are great starts for free resources. The key for success in these types of programs is senior leadership buy-in, adoption, promotion, and support.

For employers aiming to address the biggest challenges and stressors of a diverse group of employees, a simple lifestyle spending account may be the best way to go. The money in a lifestyle spending account can be used for a variety of purposes, from childcare to elder care and from virtual fitness classes to sporting equipment. When coupled with an EAP (employee assistance program) to help research available options, this can go a long way toward providing support.

Virtual Services

Virtual health and pharmacy services have been available to Canadian employers for quite some time with limited adoption due to a resistance to change. But now, after several months of avoiding doctor's offices and waiting rooms, Canadians are seeking out these services. Don't miss the opportunity to add virtual health and pharmacy to the roster of benefits options – along with virtual mental health services and other online training courses, such as financial literacy, stress management, and even mindfulness training.

Benefits Budgeting

As always, reviewing the benefits plan should include a review and analysis of past claims. In addition, this review needs to include an awareness of other realities in your business, including layoffs and financial stability.

Although dental and paramedical services were basically nil between mid-March and June, these claims should start returning to normal. If your plan is fully insured, you received some of this break already through premium credits provided by your insurer. If your plan is self-insured/administrative ser-

vices only (ASO), it is critical to review your monthly statement to ensure you have a surplus in your account amounting to at least six weeks of claims to account for upcoming volatility.

Plan Design

Plan design, at its heart, involves offering a strategic balance between employee needs versus wants. Employee needs include options such as life insurance and long-term disability. It's likely that only a small number of your employees make use of these options. Yet if an employee needed them when they were not in place, it could be financially devastating.

Employee wants, on the other hand, include options like vision care or massage therapy. These elements are likely used by most of your employees. They score highly on surveys, but they wouldn't ruin anyone financially if they weren't available.

In order to make changes to your plan, you'll need to evaluate your benefits strategy first and then align your choices with that strategy. Some cost-saving measures may include temporarily limiting dental coverage (e.g., major and orthodontic coverage) and paramedical coverage (with the exception of psychology) for a period of time based on your budget constraints. You can opt to re-introduce coverage in stages, as your budget allows.

As well, you can reduce your drug costs and encourage continued physical distancing by partnering with a virtual pharmacy. You may have to champion a change in the way employees fill their prescriptions, but you will be able to keep the same level of coverage at a lower cost which can easily be justified. **BPM**



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