

BENEFITS AND PENSIONS  
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MEETINGS & EVENTS**WEBINAR**

# EMPLOYERS MUST FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH FOR RETURN-TO-WORK



**I**t has never been more important than it is today to have a solid, informed, and strategic focus on the mental health of our employee base,” says Lori Casselman, president and chief revenue officer of Wello, a national telemedicine and virtual care business. Speaking at the *Benefits and Pensions Monitor Meeting & Events* webinar, ‘Return to work plan: focus on employees’ mental health,’ she said businesses are focused on planning the return-to-work of employees after shutdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic. She acknowledged that different types of employers have been working with different types of environments over the last few months as some employers have workers that will be returning to the workplace, others have employees that were working from home and will continue to do so, and yet others have employees that remained on the job because they were considered frontline essential workers.

“This is one of the most unusual and unprecedented times that we have had to manage employee populations through,” she said. No matter which group an employer is in, their employees are likely dealing with some level of stress and anxiety due to the isolation and stress caused by the coronavirus crisis.

In particular, employers that need to re-integrate their workers back into a modified workplace need to understand how this crisis has potentially affected the mental health of various employees since March/April.

## Restoring Productivity

Casselman says even when employees are back at the office, their lives have changed compared to before the pandemic. They’ve

had their kids at home with them and may not have daycare available once they’re expected to go back to work. “This creates a whole other layer of stress when they’re called back to the workplace” and make restoring productivity back into a day-to-day office routine a challenge.

At the same time, many organizations had to transition to remote and digital work environments. “Every organization that has gone remote over the last few months has had to learn, adopt, and adapt to a new environment. So, there was a whole change management process that would typically occur when transitioning to new tools and ways of working with various employee populations. However, due to the sense of urgency during that transition period, many organizations didn’t really go through a comfortable or proper training and change management process and are now playing a bit of catch-up.” These technological changes may have also added to employee stress and anxiety around performance expectations.

When planning for employee return-to-work, “communication will be very important and leaders will need to receive feedback from employees about how things are going,” says Casselman. They’ll need to know how they are adapting, challenges they are having, and how the organization can support productivity.”

As the various phases of re-integration continue, “we may see an increased number of employees who are uncomfortable to return to work and may want to continue to work remotely, even if the physical workplace is prepared from a health and safety perspective to re-integrate them.

“HR leaders and employers need to think

about how they will provide flexibility and potentially respond to those increased requests.”

## Anxieties And Stressors

Casselman says employers will need to manage around their employees’ anxieties and stressors as they gear up for the next wave and the return to the workplace. It is important for organizations to look at the resources they have in place and what they do not have in place. What do they need to adapt or source to meet the particular needs that are apparent now as a result of these changes? “Employers should be proactive, speak up, and call attention to the fact that these issues are present and look for resources that can help manage symptoms. It is more important than ever to have a very strong consistent and direct and frequent communication plan in place.”

Resources they can offer workers include EAP/EAFP programs, mindfulness/meditation and resilience building apps, health and fitness coaching, behaviour therapies, and virtual healthcare. Most importantly, employers need to acknowledge that the situation is not ‘normal.’ They should increase and enhance communications and show empathy for unique personal scenarios. The key is to focus on early intervention and prevention, says Casselman.

“The workplace provides a tremendous vehicle to be a resource for employees. It all begins with regular communication and acknowledging that individuals do have risk and there are struggles. This will reduce stigma, increase engagement, create a positive work environment, and allow employees to create a better work-life balance.” **BPM**