

# Chronic Illness: Making it Work

Companies with more flexible working arrangements can have lower turnover and higher productivity » BY JASON REID

## THERE IS A GROWING NUMBER

of people on disability benefits who suffer from various types of chronic illness — everything from multiple sclerosis and colitis, to diabetes and heart disease. Some people have disabilities so severe that they are unable to work.

The nature of chronic illness means the symptoms are unpredictable. In addition, signs of these illnesses are often not visible, which leads to the incorrect perception that people with a chronic illness are not really as sick as they say they are.

These negative perceptions are so dominant that governments in Great Britain and the Netherlands have drastically tightened the eligibility criteria for disability benefits. What an atrocious blunder that hopefully will never happen in Canada.

Recently I had a conversation with a businessperson who was complaining about how his tax money was being spent on people receiving benefits who “claimed” to be disabled.

I proposed this question to him: “Should a person be on long-term disability if they can work?”

“Of course not.”

“What if they can only work three or four days a week. Should they be working?”

“Yes,” he responded.

“Say I’m an engineer who applies for a job at your company. I am sick, but I can still work an average of three days a week. However, I never know in advance which three days of the week I can work, as my illness is unpredictable and uncontrollable. Would you offer me a job and accommodate my irregular schedule?”

He gave me a blank look. He was genuinely thinking about how he could make this situation work. He took the easy route and stated the



*Flexibility is necessary in both the recovery of the disabled and in the workplaces which adapt to them.*

need to remain competitive without placing undue burden on the company.

Remaining competitive in an increasingly aggressive marketplace is important. However, we also know that innovation can be just as important to the equation as cutting costs.

The innovations we need to make come not just from improving products, but improving the way our organizations work. In an economy hungry for highly skilled and creative workers, it makes little sense to discard those who can’t work a typical nine-to-five schedule.

The good news is that many companies are realizing the advantages of workplace flexibility. Companies such as Best Buy and Netflix in the U.S. have created work environments that de-emphasize traditional working hours. Flexible work arrangements were originally designed as a way for workers to balance family obligations and career, but progressive leaders see an even larger picture.

“We know that companies with flexible work arrangements can actually have lower turnover and

absenteeism and higher productivity,” said U.S. President Obama, at Fortune magazine’s Most Powerful Women conference in October, 2010. “This is not just a women’s issue, or just a work-family balance issue. It’s an economic competitiveness issue.”

To stay competitive, Canadian organizations need to rethink old ideas about work and find ways to keep people with health issues not only employed, but productive and engaged.

According to the Canadian Coalition for Public Health, more than half of Canadians live with at least one chronic disease. While some of these people are retired, about one third are working-aged. We need to start accommodating talented people who also deal with the unpredictable challenges of chronic illness. Simply cutting benefits is not a solution. **W**

**JASON REID CONSULTS WITH ORGANIZATIONS ON HOW TO INTEGRATE THE CHRONICALLY ILL WORKFORCE. HE ALSO COACHES MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES WITH UNDERLYING HEALTH CONDITIONS. HE WRITES ABOUT CHRONIC ILLNESS ISSUES ON HIS WEBSITE SICKWITHSUCCESS.COM**