

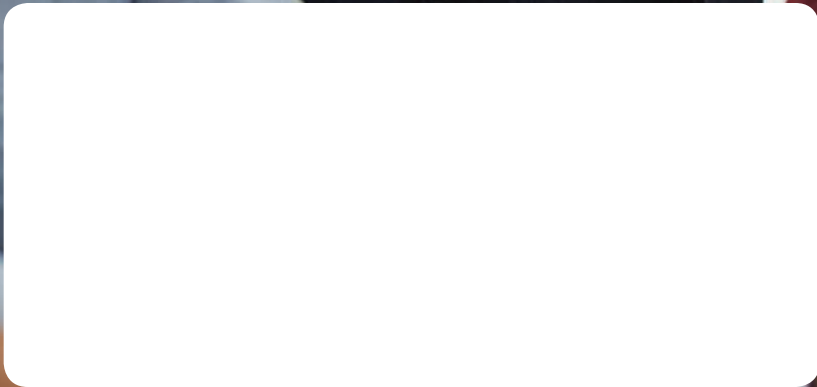
HR NEWS



Training for Performance Management

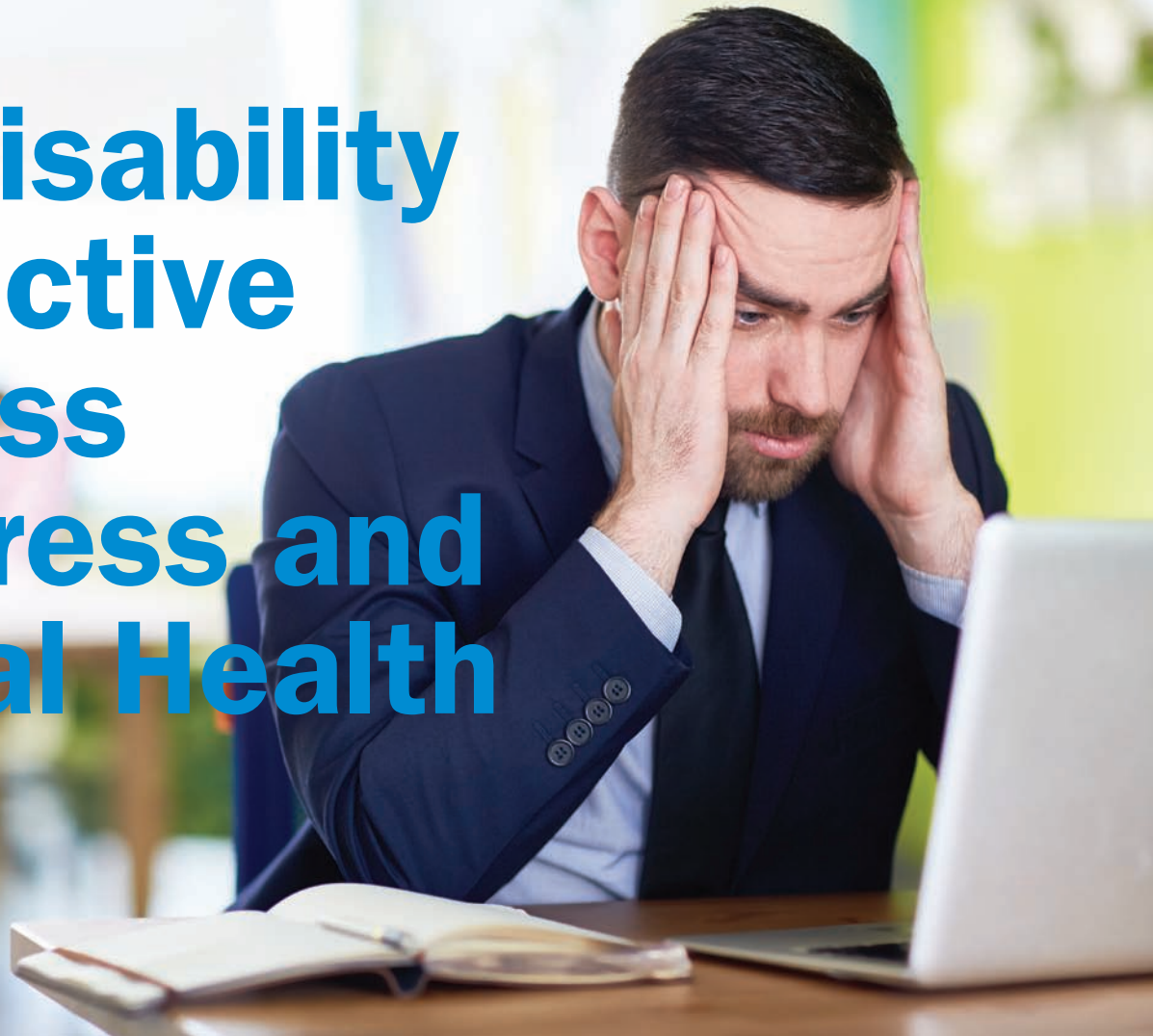
Designing an Effective Analytics Training Program

Tackling the Law Enforcement Personnel Shortage



The Disability Interactive Process for Stress and Mental Health

By Rachel Shaw



A World Health Organization fact sheet notes that more than 300 million people worldwide suffer from depression and names depression as the leading cause of disability around the globe. In the United States alone, nearly 16 million adults experience a major depressive event each year.

This mental health problem produces serious economic impacts. Employees who suffer from depression miss around 27 days of work per year, and experts put the cumulative economic output loss at \$2.5 trillion worldwide, a number higher than cancer or diabetes.

U.S. employers see the effects, as absenteeism and requests for accommodations related to stress and mental health rise. This equates to lost productivity and less innovation as too much leave goes unmanaged, unaddressed and not budgeted for, which costs organizations too much.

Since taking the attitude that improving mental health is not an employer's job is not working, what can organizations do to reduce the negative impacts of mental health-related disability? The first step involves investing in the whole employee. If you aim to tackle the real killers of productivity, innovation and retention, you must

build a workforce that has the ability to successfully deal with personal and professional issues and which believes that you care about their well-being.

Giving employees time off to celebrate happy life events and to address the terrible things that occur goes a long way. But granting leave can create problems. An employee's absence can make meeting workload demands difficult, especially when one or more employee misuses or abuses the leave policy. The people who report to work and take on extra duties can start to resent absent co-workers, which adds to stress in the organization.

Here are three ways every employer can reduce the negative impact of stress and mental illness in the workplace.

Have Early Conversations

Using leave is often the first sign that an employee is having a depressive episode. Despite this, managers regularly wait too long to have honest conversations with employees when one day off becomes a recurrent or extended absence.

Choose an amount of leave that triggers you to have a face-to-face

conversation with an employee. Pay attention to leave, track it and talk about it early and often. Do not shy away from these difficult conversations even while leave use is occurring.

This is not a disciplinary conversation. This is a caring, but strategic, conversation about how to build a win-win relationship with employees. Ask them how you can help them to be at work more. Brainstorm with employees about reducing unnecessary leave. Let them know you want to support them so they can miss less work.

Use Your EAP

Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are not the only mental illnesses that merit accommodations. Anxiety and stress impact the workplace to much greater degrees, and each can be triggered by normal life events such as going through a difficult breakup, experiencing issues with a child, caring for an ill or aging family member, or managing financial issues. While personal in nature, each situation affects an employee's professional life.

To tackle the real killers of productivity, innovation and retention, you must build a workforce that has the ability to successfully deal with personal and professional issues.

An employee assistance program, or EAP, provides emotional support, which can be key to getting an employee back on track at work. While referrals to employee assistance programs (EAP) are known to reduce leave by 54 percent, fewer than 6 percent of employees take advantage of these resources.

When you see the workplace being impacted by personal matters, refer employees to your organization's EAP. Understand that you can suggest this resource or require attendance if an employee is not showing improvements in attendance and performance or does not seem to be able to manage issues that continue to impact them at work. Realize, too, that due to a variety of reasons—some cultural, some social—employees may not be comfortable accepting help through an EAP. To address this, let employees attend EAP sessions during work hours so their family and friends do not have to know and so childcare or afterwork activities do not create scheduling conflicts.

Enter the Disability Interactive Process Hallway

If conversations about leave usage and EAP services do not lead to improved attendance or if the organization or employee believes there are medical issues, you will need to start going down the Disability Interactive Process Hallway. Initiating this process is also warranted if you have concerns about misuse of leave or if leave is unreasonable.

The hallway I describe has four doors, or process steps:

1. Medical documentation,
2. Exploration of accommodation ideas,
3. Scheduling and holding a reasonable accommodations meeting, and
4. Closing the process properly.

At each step, you gather the data you need to support sound decision-making and build understanding between the employee, their representative and their manager and supervisor.

Medical documentation can be collected by a requesting a second opinion on Family and Medical Leave Act leave, administering a supplemental medical questionnaire or requiring a fitness for duty exam. The aim must be to determine if a disability is impacting the employee and, if so, what functional limitations and work restrictions that disability imposes. Completing this step is especially vital when addressing mental or psychological disabilities, which place unique restrictions on work.

Be aware that the Americans with Disabilities Act does not protect certain psychological disabilities that limit a person's ability to act lawfully and safely. This list includes kleptomania, pyromania, compulsive gambling, sexually disordered behavior and abuse of controlled substances or use of illegal drugs.

Handling psychological disabilities can seem overwhelming for employers and employees, but when issues are addressed quickly while utilizing a uniform process, organizations can be confident that a sound decision can be made.

Rachel Shaw is the author of The Disabled Workforce: What the ADA Never Anticipated and the president of Shaw HR Consulting, Inc., which provides disability compliance consulting, training and program development for organizations in the public and private sectors. She can be reached at rachel@shawhrconsulting.com. —