



2021 APEX EXECUTIVE WORK AND HEALTH STUDY

SYNOPSIS

APEX has been studying the health and wellbeing of executives since 1997. The Executive Work and Health Study (the Study) is based on looking at the underlying determinants of workplace health and the pathways of causality. It looks not just at the direct linkages between health and work but also the causes of causes.

The emphasis is on the interaction between factors that combine to increase risk of individual and organizational outcomes along with those factors that diminish those risks. This type of modeling shows how the work environment has a greater impact on health outcomes than do the individual lifestyle factors that are usually associated with specific illnesses.

This is a population health approach which does not focus on individuals or disease but on health outcomes.

1.1 Context

The Study was conducted in 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when case loads were relatively low, new vaccines were becoming available, and there was a sense of optimism. Increasing pride for having delivered services to Canadians has come at a significant cost to executives' physical health (excellent/very good down 10% to 47%) and mental well-being (excellent/very good mental health down 16% to 38%). They are fatigued and struggling to recover mindful of the new challenges facing the Federal Government such as emerging fiscal pressures, climate shifts and reconciliation. Virtual work has exacerbated key drivers of organizational outcomes.

In 2017, the Study revealed a major increase in executives' stress levels due in large part to the Phoenix pay situation. This spike in reported stress was pervasive enough to reverse positive trends from 2007 to 2012. In 2021 we saw a return to 2012 levels in areas but key health outcomes such as burnout continued to worsen.

questioned—women who self-identified within racialized groups suffer them at a higher rate. These experiences can take a heavy toll: women who regularly experience microaggressions are twice as likely as those who don't to be burned out, more than twice as likely to report feeling negatively about their job, and almost three times as likely to say they've struggled to concentrate at work in the past few months due to stress.

1.2.3 The continued prevalence and toxicity of harassment and incivility

Even with a low likelihood (12%), the toxicity of harassment is too significant to ignore.

The evidence of harassment combined with incivility and disrespect underscore its insidious nature. Both are about omission – being excluded or ignored, snide comments, being humiliated in meetings, interference with work or withholding resources. The APEX Advisory Services for Executives (ASE) annual report shares insights and offers questions for reflection as individuals and organizations address harassment in the workplace and the shift from overt bullying to microaggressions in the online environment.

1.2.4 The positive buffering effects of job level on individual and organizational outcomes

Above all, the determinants of health have been tied to level. The most senior levels report more workload and demands which are often offset by access to more resources, greater span of individual control and more recognition. The positive impact of resources, recognition and control at higher levels also holds true for women and equity seeking groups as executives in those groups do better as they go up in level. However, the most senior levels suffer from the lowest levels of support from superiors (19%) and lowest rate of recovery (42%).

1.2.5 Gaps and disconnects

There was a lack of awareness of the other's experience, particularly between lower and higher levels and equity seeking groups. This kind of disconnect can make it hard for those in positions of authority to even see that there is a problem, leading to inaction that perpetuates inequities and continues to hold back women and the equity seeking groups in the workplace.

However, this effect was not limited to diversity and inclusion. For example, there is a disconnect between those with experiencing mental health issues, and those who are not affected. Those with mental health issues report far less confidence in the system (52%) or benefits (49%).

1.2.6 Role of work culture

The research shows that most healthy cultures are marked by common understanding, psychological safety, and empathetic leadership. Few organizations build thriving cultures without teams that understand and collaborate well toward the purpose of helping others.

Consider culture as a set of concentric circles. Organizational culture is the outer ring and depending on the size of the organization different areas and functions serve as middle rings—with an individual team the innermost ring of the culture. Senior leaders not only shape the overall culture but must also train leaders at all levels to pay attention to how their actions align with or misalign with that culture. Culture is shaped by the worst behaviour tolerated.

1.3 Conclusion

One may describe executives as having weathered the storm of the pandemic. It is also evident that some have come through better than others. Overall, executives are bruised, weary, looking for relief and needing time to recovery and refresh. The call to action is with their superiors and organizations.

Supervisor support is a key driver of both individual and organizational health outcomes. What is just as clear is that supervisors also need support, recognition, and appropriate leadership competences particularly to achieve meaningful inclusion. The ASE reports a 52% increase in the demand for its confidential counselling services since 2017. A staggering 38% were related to supervisors. As the ASE's 2020-2021 Annual Report noted, "we have few clients who have people-centric superiors" (p.15).

In looking for best practices and models of success, there are interesting insights within non-core organizations worth further study. In most instances non-core organizations were doing better than the Core Public Administration. This is attributable to the structural and systemic differences that result in different organizational environment and cultures.