



APEX Executive Work and Health Study (EWHs): **Are 2021 Findings Just a Blip?**
(Response to June 07, 2022 Deputy Circle Queries)

Dr. Wayne Corneil (June 10, 2022)

During the June 7, 2022 Deputy Circle discussion, the question was raised as to what extent the pandemic influenced the outcomes of the 2021 EWHs. It should be noted that the data were collected in the spring of 2021 when there was a lull between waves and a certain optimism was evident among the population as vaccines were being rolled out across the country.

It is evident that for some individuals, the pandemic brought significant personal impacts with either their own or loved ones' illnesses and the tragic as well as often traumatic loss of loved ones. For some public servants, the necessity to both move to virtual work and to deliver services in a highly pressurized environment no doubt contributed to their personal and family stress.

One of the advantages of the EWHs is its longevity, with data having been collected over a 25-year period. This provides a perspective not available through other research. For the purposes of this response, I looked at the data for the past decade from 2012, 2017 and 2021 iterations of the EWHs. What is evident is that trends for the key factors were already in place. What the pandemic contributed was the exacerbation of some, interestingly in both positive and negative directions. For example, there was a decrease in the frequency of harassment which can be attributed to the reduction of in person interactions in the office. The type of harassment morphed into microaggression, more subtle and difficult to identify, yet still very toxic for those exposed to it.

The level of commitment and dedication also rose, primarily due to the sense of purpose which public servants felt in supporting Canadians through the pandemic. Resilience at the individual level was also slightly higher, while remaining at the low levels we have seen over a decade of tracking it. Certainly, exhaustion reached its highest levels. That was coupled with lack of recovery time and negative work/home interference, mostly due to the move to the virtual workplace.

These key outcomes and the drivers that create them, are not as a result of the pandemic. They were already trending in the wrong directions over the past 10 years. In 2017, the context that affected the outcomes was associated with the Phoenix pay debacle, which as was noted in your conversation, continues to this day. The issue of

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Effort/Reward Imbalance which is mostly related to a lack of recognition has been trending upwards since 2012. The disconnects across levels are widening.

To use the analogy of the highways and bridges, one can discuss the impact of the pandemic in the EWHS. The cause in the failure of the highways could be attributed to the effects of climate change which were manifest in the heavy rains and winds. However, that was not the key factor in the collapse of bridges and roads being washed away. The issue is with the lack of ongoing maintenance over an extended period of time such that key infrastructures were weakened and susceptible to failure once placed under stress. Some of that was also due to inadequate design which did not take into account the potential for such severe stress. Even the mudslides had been predicted from modeling identifying the loss of forest cover along key highways. Moreover, one cannot place the onus on the truck drivers for not being able to deliver on time, when the roads were impassible. It was not individual resilience that comes into question but rather the resilience of the system and its associated infrastructures.

We see the same patterns in the EWHS data. The fault lines were already present prior to the pandemic. It simply expanded them and made some more evident than others. Inclusion or the lack thereof, was not a factor created by the pandemic, it was however widened by organizational and structural choices made during the pandemic. The increase over the past years in the demographics of the executive community to be more diverse has not created the culture change necessary for inclusion. That is a systems wide fault line, not a pandemic one. Like the highways, the systems and infrastructure that are weak in the public service will not repair themselves. It necessitates a concerted effort to redesign, change the procedures and processes such that they can withstand not only the “routine” demands placed on the public service but also anticipate more severe situations such as the move to hybrid work. The issues that were on the agenda at the time of the pandemic have not disappeared. Reconciliation, climate change and economic concerns will continue to be priorities along with new ones such as the war in Ukraine. One must not forget the pandemic is not over.