
CAOT Position Statement: Occupational therapy and workplace health (2015)

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) believes that occupational therapists can support workplaces to foster the personal health and well-being of workers and develop environments that support productivity and a positive workplace culture. Occupational therapists have the skills, knowledge and expertise to propose strategies ranging from those relating to return-to-work to those centred on the prevention of disability and promotion of health in workplaces.

Recommendations for occupational therapists

1. Promote physical and mental health, while preventing injury and disability by considering both the worker and the workplace. A strengths-based approach is used to identify the existing strengths, capabilities and resources of the worker and workplace. A holistic perspective that integrates the bio-psycho-social-cultural aspects is used to promote health, well-being and a just and inclusive work environment.
2. Support and contribute to primary prevention of physical injuries in the workplace by identifying potential risks, recommending preventative measures to control for workplace hazards and providing education about body mechanics and work strategies.
3. Promote workplace health and well-being through an assessment of cognitive demands and psychological risks. In collaboration with employers and employees, occupational therapists design intervention plans to address psychosocial issues and foster a positive and inclusive environment. Occupational therapists support individuals with cognitive, mental health and/or addiction issues to maintain employment or return to work.
4. Provide interventions such as job analysis, ergonomic assessment, workplace readiness training, resources planning and work modification. These interventions aim to support clients with early symptoms of illness, chronic condition or disability to improve stay at work, enhance productivity, manage symptoms and fatigue, and improve skills in stress management.
5. Support individuals who want to enter the workplace or seek re-employment. Occupational therapists use their skills to perform job assessment, task analysis and job

matching to make recommendations and improve the potential of successful and safe re-engagement in the workforce.

6. Assist employers to develop policies, procedures and processes that support stay at work, return to work and compliance with ethical, legislative and normative requirements.
7. Maximise the impact of occupational therapy interventions by proposing and implementing multiple preventive measures and rehabilitation approaches simultaneously. As the process associated with return to work and workplace well-being is complex, these interventions are more effective when used together, rather than in isolation.

CAOT Initiatives

To prepare occupational therapists to deliver services to address workplace health and well-being, CAOT will:

1. Inform occupational therapists about their potential involvement in the workplace to promote and maintain workers' health and well-being. This includes education about primary prevention, rehabilitation interventions and preparing persons with chronic conditions and disabilities for employment or re-employment.
2. Expand evidence-informed practice by promoting effectiveness studies of occupational therapy interventions in the workplace and supporting the development of clinical practice guidelines for occupational therapy involvement in workplace interventions.
3. Encourage occupational therapists to facilitate workplaces' understanding of disability, work performance evaluation, work accommodation and how to increase worker retention.
4. Promote collaboration within the profession and with all stakeholders, including employers, employees, unions, employment counsellors, relevant agencies, policy-makers, educators and human resource departments, to advance services and profile the added value occupational therapy contributes to workplace health and well-being.

To promote the role of occupational therapists in workplace health, CAOT will:

1. Work in collaboration with federal and provincial governments, health-related and non-health related associations, and health research organizations to inform and develop key workplace health policies, research activities and innovative strategies.
2. Develop consumer information resources that promote the understanding of the relationship between the individual, the occupation and the environment to improve health, well-being and a just and inclusive society.

Background information

In Canada, the nature of work and the workforce are constantly evolving. Statistics Canada projects that by 2031, the workforce will rise to between 20.5 and 22.5 million people, an increase from 18.5 million reported in 2010 (Martel et al., 2011). It is projected that the proportion of workers aged 55 or older will grow to represent approximately one quarter of the labour force by 2021 (Martel et al., 2011). The nature of work is also changing as a result of “global shifts in the economy, mandatory retirement changes, the growing number of immigrant or older or migrant workers, the offshoring of work from one country to another, and the discourses about future work possibilities” (Shaw, 2013, p. 3). Employment is becoming less predictable with the rise of unstable international economies, and therefore workers are experiencing disruptions in regular employment (Shaw, 2013).

In the most recent statistics on the economic burden of illness, Uppal (2009) reports that \$159.4 billion was lost in Canada as a result of physical and mental health conditions. In addition, 46% of males and 54% of females between the ages of 15-64 have a chronic health condition, and 15% of males and 18% of females have mental health issues (Uppal, 2009). These health problems affect the Canadian economy in many areas, including “reduced productivity, reduced labour force participation, increased sickness and EI (employment insurance) benefits, and costs associated with assistive devices and structural modifications” (Uppal, 2009, p. 6). In their investigation into the impact of workplaces on employee health, Shamian and El-Jardali (2007) predict that these considerable burdens can be alleviated, and even prevented.

Current literature suggests that occupational therapists typically focus on the management of existing conditions and return-to-work strategies after an injury (Kollee et al., 2013). Kollee et al. (2013) noted that the focus of therapy provided is primarily based on outcomes associated with secondary and tertiary prevention rather than primary prevention.

The uniquely holistic role of occupational therapy can help to refocus workplace strategies from secondary prevention to those centred on the promotion of health in workplaces, meaning primary prevention or before workers’ symptoms arise. Occupational therapists are missing out on an enormous job opportunity and an obligation to the profession, described by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists as “a professional and ethical responsibility... to consider work-related issues for all individuals, including those in disadvantaged and marginalized groups and those with a short or long term impairment” (2012, p. 1). In their discussion of work performance and productivity, the World Health Organization (n.d.) explains that in providing a supportive workplace context that enables workers to feel a sense of contribution and belonging, the overall satisfaction and well-being of both employees and employers can be greatly enhanced. Such an environment can have major implications for the well-being and self-esteem of workers, which can extend beyond the workplace. For instance, in enabling employers to provide more supportive work environments, job interruptions due to stress can be lessened (Park, 2007).

To keep up with current health-care trends, it is necessary to make a conceptual shift to emphasize preventative approaches that facilitate better outcomes for workers before conditions arise. This shift has the potential to benefit multiple stakeholders, who will continue to preserve healthy workplace values upon seeing the mutual benefits such an atmosphere can bring.

Glossary of Terms

Workplace health and well-being. An environment or culture that is created by workers and employers where all workers are enabled to achieve the demands of their work in a safe and supportive context. Workers are enabled to optimize their potential, including their skills, capacities and resources, to maximize productivity. Physical, social and psychological health is promoted and supported through an environment that encourages respect, a sense of belonging and autonomy. Workers and employers will collaborate to meet both individual and workplace goals.

Primary prevention. Intervention to prevent the occurrence of an injury or disease. For example, recommending preventative measures to control for workplace hazards, or providing education about body mechanics to minimize risks associated with workplace injury (Bell et al., 1995).

Secondary prevention. Adaptation of work or environment for workers when returning to work post injury to prevent further decline or re-injury (Bell et al., 1995)

Tertiary prevention. Managing chronic and complex medical conditions (e.g., traumatic brain injury, chronic pain) to prevent further deterioration, which may result in an individual's premature exit from the workforce (Bell et al., 1995).

References

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