

Psychosocial Risk Assessment as a Corporate Governance Issue

The assessment and abatement of risks to mental health in the workplace represents a new horizon for corporate risk management. These risks – known as psychosocial risks – are a class of hazards in the work environment known to represent threats to the psychological safety and mental health of employees. Psychosocial risks are now recognized both scientifically and legally, and their abatement is seen in the context of the emerging legal duty to provide a psychologically safe workplace.

A psychologically safe workplace is one that allows no significant harm to employee mental health arising from negligent, reckless or intentional acts or omissions by employers or employees at any level of responsibility.

When this critical field is further evolved and articulated, the assessment and abatement of psychosocial risks will be a key part of corporate governance. These processes will be essential elements of corporate risk registers and, accordingly, integral components of corporate accountability and stewardship. The requirement to protect mental health will parallel in all key respects the requirement to protect physical health.

As part of the Internal Responsibility System mandate within Occupational Health and Safety (OHS; see www.ccohs.ca), the protection of mental health will require the same regulatory systems as the protection of physical health. This means, at a minimum, the adoption of the mental health protection mandate by Joint OHS committees and representatives where they exist (and by owner/managers where they do not). In turn, this will involve routine surveillance of psychosocial risks and the development and implementation of plans for their abatement, up to a reasonable standard.

While we can say that there is a powerful consensus regarding the existence of the duty, it cannot be said that methods for discharging it are currently well developed.

Guarding Minds @ Work (GM@W) is the first Canadian, fully comprehensive framework for the identification and abatement of psychosocial risks, serving the needs of corporate governance, accountability and stewardship.