

Fostering the Mental Health of Accountants: Recent Initiatives and Research

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Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in the topic of mental health was increasing among accountants, the accounting profession, accounting firms and accounting academics. COVID-19 accelerated this interest in issues of mental health and work and individual accountants' willingness to speak about their mental health challenges. We are a team of accounting professors actively researching mental health among Canadian accounting professionals. This article reviews recent work on mental health and the accounting profession, what the accounting profession has been doing in this area, recent initiatives by accounting firms, and describes our ongoing study – all with a goal of supporting the mental health of accountants and identifying effective initiatives for fostering mental health and resilience.

Benefits of Good Mental Health

According to the World Health Organization, mental health “is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”¹ Thus, fostering mental health is important not only for individuals, but also for productive organizations and healthy communities. And, yet, the Mental Health Commission of Canada reports that, in any given year, one in five people will personally experience a mental health problem or illness,² one in three workplace disability claims are linked to mental health problems or illnesses,³ and the mental health related costs to the Canadian economy exceed \$50 billion per year.⁴ Note that these numbers are prior to COVID-19, so the effects are likely greater in our current times.

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Statistics Canada backs this up with some recent related numbers. They report that the percentage of Canadians over the age of 15 reporting “good or very good” mental health dropped from 68% in 2018 to 54% in 2020.⁵ In the same study, women were more likely to report poorer mental health than men (60% of Canadian men reported excellent or very good

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.

² <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/csrp-news-release#:~:text=In%20Canada%20alone%2C%20mental%20health,and%20safety%20of%20Canadian%20workplaces>.

³ <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/csrp-news-release#:~:text=In%20Canada%20alone%2C%20mental%20health,and%20safety%20of%20Canadian%20workplaces>.

⁴ https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2020-12/case_for_investment_eng.pdf.

⁵ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00003-eng.htm>.

mental health compared to 49% of Canadian women) and the gap between women’s mental health and men’s had widened since 2018.⁶

Recently employers and associations have been paying greater attention to the benefits of mentally healthy workplaces. According to Employment and Social Development Canada, these benefits include improved employee performance, enhanced safety and employee well-being, improved recruitment and retention, reduced absenteeism and employee turnover and reduced costs for employee benefits and disability claims.⁷

Fostering Mental Health

Canadian Initiatives

The accounting profession offers some support to Chartered Professional Accountants (CPAs) in Canada, although the support available varies somewhat across the country. At a national level, CPA Canada has been a partner in the Healthy Professional Work research project (described below) since the project’s inception in 2017. Since at least 2019, CPA Canada has also been profiling mental health matters in online articles in its @Work column, in recent podcasts, interviews, webinars on mental health and articles in its own national magazine, *Pivot*. A notable article in this regard is the cover story in *Pivot*’s March/April 2020 issue, which profiled KPMG’s Chief Mental Health Officer, FCPA Denis Trottier.⁸



Additional attention to this topic was evident at CPA Canada’s virtual The ONE conference in November 2020, when CPA Canada president and CEO Charles-Antoine St-Jean and Denis Trottier sat down for a candid conversation on mental health.⁹ Early this year, CPA Canada issued a “Mental Health Policy Framework for Small to Medium-Sized Practitioners”¹⁰ to profile sample policies and initiatives firms can incorporate into their own mental health policy framework. Also included in the document are links to a variety of member assistance programs offered to CPAs through their provincial CPA associations.

Provincial Initiatives

At the time of writing, we are aware of the following Member Assistance Programs offered, or supported by, provincial CPA associations:

⁶ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00003-eng.htm>.

⁷ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/health-safety/mental-health.html>.

⁸ https://www.cpacanada.ca/-/media/site/pivot-magazine/pdfs/2020/mar-apr/pivot_march_digital_en.pdf?la=en&hash=0CEDD1D941BDD86E33E414486F217BC0B3B8D13D.

⁹ <https://www.cpacanada.ca/en/members-area/profession-news/2020/october/candid-discussion-about-mental-health>.

¹⁰ <https://www.cpacanada.ca/-/media/site/operational/ep-education-pld/docs/smp-mental-health-policy-framework-en-final.pdf?la=en&hash=AA3DC96153694A5CCB34D05609E7BB2133E2C1EB>.

1. CPAs, candidates and their immediate families in Alberta and Saskatchewan can reach out to third-party professionals through CPA Assist¹¹ for support addressing mental health related matters such as addiction, burnout, depression, anxiety, stress management, grief and family or parenting concerns.
2. CPAs, candidates, students and immediate family members in British Columbia and Yukon have access to counselling services and the LifeWorks member assistance program offered by LifeWorks (formerly Morneau Shepell).¹² BC Chartered Professional Accountants also have hosted a series of recent mental health resources that includes articles, infographics and podcasts on mental health.
3. CPA Ontario began offering the same LifeWorks program to its members¹³ in December 2020 and has offered online Professional Developments seminars (both paid and complimentary) on mental health at work, including a well attended virtual conversation with Canadian comedian and television host Howie Mandel.
4. CPA Québec offers its own CPA Assistance Program on a user-pay basis, as well as access to the LifeWorks program.¹⁴

Fostering Mental Health – The Big 4 Accounting Firms

In-House Initiatives – Benefits

More than ever, public accounting firms are promoting mental health in the workplace and raising awareness of well-being. Each of the Big Four accounting firms in Canada has established policies to provide greater support for their employees and family members. Among other things, firms have increased amounts that employees and family dependents can spend on mental health benefits (with 100% coverage), as well as expanded the roster of mental health professionals that can be accessed using these benefits (e.g., psychologists, social workers, psychoanalysts, marriage or family therapists, digital Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, etc.).

For example, in Canada, EY announced in December 2018 that it was increasing its annual mental health benefits to \$5,000 (from \$900) for employees and their dependents,¹⁵ while Deloitte increased the amount from \$300 to \$4,000 in 2019.¹⁶ Similarly, KPMG, through its Total Rewards program, provides support for mental health that includes a firm-funded annual reimbursement of up to \$2,000.¹⁷ As part of its Be Well, Work Well¹⁸ approach, PwC also offers enhanced mental health benefits, as well as a well-being and lifestyle benefit, although a specific dollar amount does not seem to be publicly available. In addition, Deloitte created

¹¹ <https://www.cpaalberta.ca/Members/CPA-Assist>.

¹² <https://www.bccpa.ca/member-services/benefits-and-savings/counselling/>.

¹³ <https://www.cpaontario.ca/cpa-members/benefits-services/map>.

¹⁴ <https://cpaquebec.ca/en/cpa-members/cpa-assistance-program/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/ey-canada-increases-mental-health-benefit-to-5000-701976431.html>.

¹⁶ <https://www.menumag.ca/2021/03/15/from-the-ashes-of-a-pandemic-opportunity-for-a-mental-health-revolution/>.

¹⁷ <https://home.kpmg/ca/en/home/careers/life-at-kpmg/benefits.html>.

¹⁸ <https://www.pwc.com/ca/en/careers/experienced-candidates/why-pwc.html>.

“Recharge” wellness centres, offering fitness, relaxation, massage treatment, mediation and prayer spaces.¹⁹ While pre-COVID-19, these benefits were made available only in person in Montreal and Toronto, a variety of wellness programs are now offered virtually to all employees.

In-House Initiatives – Changing the Conversation

Accounting firms have recognized that creating a mentally healthy workplace requires more



than financial investments for support and treatment. Challenging the stigma associated with mental health, raising awareness and shifting workplace culture are also important in addressing mental health issues. Recent in-house accounting firm initiatives include the creation of employee inclusion networks and affinity groups such as EY’s Mindfulness Network and PwC’s Differently Abled Wellness Network (DAWN), both aimed at encouraging discussion and sharing of mental health experiences by staff and partners in an

environment where people can talk safely and openly about mental health. Furthermore, EY hosts a Yammer group – a social intranet whereby the firm has developed a scorecard used by their community managers to encourage healthy group use, increase engagement and collaboration at a global level.²⁰

Other resources include helplines with 24/7 access to Employee Family Assistance Programs, as well as videos and podcasts. For example, as part of its Live Well program, EY gives employees and their families access to Lifespeak,²¹ a mental health and well-being platform that features videos and podcasts on subjects such as preventative health, mental health, stress management and resilience, parenting and caregiving. KPMG’s blog provides extensive information about how to build a “mental health toolbox,” a collection of knowledge, positive habits and resources.²² In addition, both Deloitte and KPMG are corporate partners of WellCan,²³ an app-based service that offers free well-being resources for Canadians during the pandemic.

In-House Initiatives – Appointing Mental Health Champions

¹⁹ <http://info.deloitte.ca/en-toronto-workplace-of-the-future?elqTrackId=3cbe776a98814bce92187fea549c15c1&elq=00000000000000000000000000000000&elqaid=396&elqat=2&elqCampaignId=>

²⁰ <https://digitalworkplacegroup.com/how-ey-measures-yammer-use-webinar-sept-2nd/>.

²¹ <https://ey.lifespeak.com/learn?&share=true#/Categories/landing>.

²² <https://home.kpmg/ca/en/blogs/home/posts/2021/01/invest-in-your-mental-health-toolbox.html>.

²³ <https://wellcan.ca/>.

While a variety of resources are now available, an important question remains: do accounting firms walk the walk? Do employees feel safe in talking about their personal mental health experiences? In creating the role of Chief Mental Health Officer in October 2017, KPMG set the tone from the top. As noted above, former partner Denis Trottier is the firm's first Chief Mental Health Officer. In sharing his own experience with mental illness, Trottier has been instrumental in attempting to break down the stigma associated with mental health. According to Trottier (also a partner to our ongoing research project), "The bottom line is this: mental health is health."²⁴ Other firms have also appointed partners to lead roles such as Chief Inclusion Officer (PwC), Managing Partner, Talent (EY) and National Mental Health Leader (Deloitte).

Client Consulting Initiatives

Consistent with prior evidence that suggests "there is a return on investment (ROI) for some mental health promotion or illness prevention interventions,"²⁵ accounting firms are also helping their clients prioritize mental health programs and measure the economic, as well as non-financial, benefits of such programs. For example, Deloitte reports in a recent study that "the median yearly ROI on mental health programs was \$1.62 among the seven companies that provided at least three years' worth of data."²⁶ Furthermore, this study suggests that the median annual ROI was \$2.18 for companies whose programs had been in place for three years or more.

Mental Health among Professional Accountants – A Review of Academic Research

It is perhaps not surprising that occupational stress, no matter what the occupation, is linked to increases in symptoms of burnout, as well as decreases in overall life satisfaction.²⁷ But the accounting profession – and how accountants practice their vocation in different settings – has some particular traits that contribute to these experiences.²⁸

For example, accounting's seasonality and cyclicity (the "busy season") are particularly stressful, and contribute to burnout, and the high volume of work hours accountants face seem to have a different impact on stress levels depending on whether they occur during busy- or off-seasons.²⁹ Not only do accountants face a seasonal work cycle, but overall, the escalated workload of public accounting (including unwanted overtime) is a major contributor to employee burnout. Workload affects people in various ways. For instance, it creates tensions between the demands of work and the demands of the home. These tensions are felt as

²⁴ <https://home.kpmg/ca/en/blogs/home/posts/2021/01/invest-in-your-mental-health-toolbox.html>.

²⁵ https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Practice/roi_mental_health_report_en.pdf.

²⁶ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ca/Documents/about-deloitte/ca-en-about-blueprint-for-workplace-mental-health-final-aoda.pdf> (p.2).

²⁷ Ozkan, A., & Ozdevecioğlu, M. (2013). "The effects of occupational stress on burnout and life satisfaction: A study in accountants." *Quality & Quantity*, 47(5), 2785-2798.

²⁸ Law, D. W., Sweeney, J. T., & Summers, S. L. (2008). "An examination of the influence of contextual and individual variables on public accountants' exhaustion." In *Advances in accounting behavioral research*. (Bingley, West Yorkshire, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited).

²⁹ Sweeney, J. T., & Summers, S. L. (2002). The effect of the busy season workload on public accountants' job burnout. *Behavioral Research in Accounting*, 14(1), 223-245.

conflicts in the roles (or identities) that a person takes on, trying to be many things to many people.³⁰

Another specific feature of accounting is its status as a profession. Professions are noted for their traditions of apprenticeship and training, which create hierarchical and structured paths.³¹ Accounting is no exception and, as a profession, it has a relatively hierarchical training and promotion structure. Thus, some research tries to understand the stresses at different levels along accounting's career progression. Junior accountants working in public accounting firms, for instance, report that ambiguity and conflicts related to their role increase their job-related tension, which in turn creates feelings of burnout. Once they feel burned out, these accountants not only experience lower levels of job satisfaction, but also lower levels of commitment to the organization. This is a notable finding given the efforts put in to recruiting and "keeping" junior colleagues – it is exactly those dissatisfied and uncommitted employees who are more likely to leave.³²

Another notable feature of the accounting profession is that accountants face a rapidly changing regulatory environment. Each year, tax codes are amended, new accounting standards are developed and new guidance on existing standards are released. The global push for increased corporate disclosures in a multitude of areas (e.g., new disclosures for environmental, social and governance factors), as well as the traditional demand from the capital markets for more – and more detailed – information, mean ongoing, and sometimes rapid, changes in the information that accountants must collect within the firm, and continual rethinking of how to disclose and report such information.

As well, accountants are tasked with implementing a range of regulatory and related changes that affect different functional areas of the organization. Indeed, it was generally the accountants who were involved in applying for and implementing COVID-related government benefits, and who provided the data needed on requests for payroll subsidies, learning "on-the-fly" how these quickly changing policies functioned. These kinds of changes can lead to burnout,³³ which contributes to accountants' intentions to change their jobs and, indeed, to leave the profession entirely. As just one example, Australian accountants reacted to the introduction of the GST with frustration and intention to leave the profession.³⁴

It perhaps comes as no surprise to those who practice accounting, but it is work of great detail with high potential for error without care and attention, which introduces significant financial,

³⁰ Collins, K. M., & Killough, L. N. (1989). "Managing stress in public accounting." *Journal of Accountancy*, 167(5), 92.

³¹ Abbott, A. (2014). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

³² Chong, V. K., & Monroe, G. S. (2015). "The impact of the antecedents and consequences of job burnout on junior accountants' turnover intentions: a structural equation modelling approach." *Accounting & Finance*, 55(1), 105-132.

³³ Mete, M., Ünal, Ö. F., & Bilen, A. (2014). "Impact of work-family conflict and burnout on performance of accounting professionals." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 131, 264-270.

³⁴ Phillips, J., & De Lange, P. (2006). "The Effect of the Introduction of GST on Accountants' Job Satisfaction and Burnout." *Australian Accounting Review*, 16(40), 52-59.

legal and occupational risks for accountants.³⁵ This heightened need for concentration, accuracy and attention is physically and mentally tiring – and, when combined with long hours and large workloads, create an environment of pressure that can lead to the main characteristics of feeling burned out: exhaustion, a lack of personal accomplishment and depersonalization.³⁶



How accountants perceive their treatment by their firms plays a significant role in both burnout and intention to leave. If they believe that their firms treat them fairly, that may result in reduced levels of burnout and turnover intention; it also increases a commitment to the firms, a point already noted as playing a role in how likely the accountant is to stay.³⁷ This view – of the firm as a fair (or unfair) employer – continues to play a role even after an accountant leaves a firm, i.e., as an alumni, an accountant who viewed the former firm as fair is more likely to

³⁵ Ozkan, A., & Ozdevecioğlu, M. (2013). "The effects of occupational stress on burnout and life satisfaction: A study in accountants." *Quality & Quantity*, 47(5), 2785-2798.

³⁶ Dinc, M. S., Kuzey, C., Gungormus, A. H., & Atalay, B. (2020). "Burnout among accountants: the role of organisational commitment components." *European Journal of International Management*, 14(3), 443-460; Ozkan, A., & Ozdevecioğlu, M. (2013). "The effects of occupational stress on burnout and life satisfaction: A study in accountants". *Quality & Quantity*, 47(5), 2785-2798.

³⁷ Herda, D. N., & Lavelle, J. J. (2012). "The auditor-audit firm relationship and its effect on burnout and turnover intention." *Accounting Horizons*, 26(4), 707-723.

provide ongoing, voluntary benefits to the firm.³⁸ So, organizational policies (e.g., mentoring) have a role to play in creating a workplace to which employees feel committed, and this can in turn reduce burnout and their intention to leave.³⁹

We note that most of the research on accountants' burnout has been conducted on accountants who work in public practice in accounting firms. These firms exemplify some of the above-noted specifics: professionalized training with hierarchical structures, client demands that are seasonal yet unpredictable, and continually having to learn new regulations and standards that are increasingly complex and for which accountants are hired and viewed as experts.

Research has been focusing for a long while on burnout and on turnover intention, yet these are not the only aspects related to mental health in the workplace (and at home). We still have much to learn to create a deeper understanding of mental health and how accountants experience mental health challenges. Complementing a nuanced understanding of mental health experiences, along with expanding research to consider the experiences of accountants in a variety of settings (e.g., working in industry or government) will strengthen our understanding of approaches that employers, employees and support networks can take in furthering the goal of mental wellness. We are aiming to do just that with our ongoing research project, Healthy Professional Work.

Ongoing Research: Healthy Professional Work

The Healthy Professional Work research partnership⁴⁰ is a multi-year research project, funded jointly by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSRHC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to examine the nature of mental health issues, leaves of absence and return to work experiences of professional workers in Canada. The project is focused on comparing the mental health experiences of workers of all genders in the following professions: academia, accounting, dentistry, medicine, midwifery, nursing and teaching. This pan-Canadian project, begun in 2017, includes 27 researchers from 16 Canadian universities. As noted in the review of academic research above, there has been relatively little research focus on the mental health experiences of professional accountants to date, other than on burnout and intention to leave the public accounting profession. More than 300 professional accountants responded to our recent survey, and we are in the process of interviewing accountants about their mental health experiences, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to reporting specific results and recommendations based on our research in the near future. In addition, we are currently identifying promising interventions to support mental health and hope to test the effectiveness of a number of interventions in the remaining two years of the project.

³⁸ Herda, D. N., & Lavelle, J. J. (2011). "The effects of organizational fairness and commitment on the extent of benefits big four alumni provide their former firm." *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 36(3), 156-166.

³⁹ Stallworth, H. L. (2003). "Mentoring, organizational commitment and intentions to leave public accounting." *Managerial auditing journal*.

⁴⁰ <https://www.healthyprofwork.com/>.

Playing a More Proactive Role

Mental health has been an area of increasing focus in recent years, and this has accelerated during the pandemic. Accounting associations, firms and researchers have identified a number of initiatives to support the mental health of accounting professionals. Most of these initiatives are predicated on individual accountants identifying what resources or accommodations they need, and then seeking them out on their own. For individuals experiencing significant mental health challenges, however, the emphasis on undertaking help-seeking behaviours may add to, rather than mitigate, their stresses. It may be that mental health knowledge and strategies are needed well in advance of a mental health crisis, so individuals know where to go for support when needed. Accounting firms and associations may also have to play a more pro-active role in rethinking the culture and hours of work that contribute to many work-related mental health concerns.



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