

Bridging the Gaps

Gender Equity & Economic Security

A Series of Tools for Employers in Restigouche (New Brunswick) and Avignon (Quebec)

March 2024

This project was created to help advance the economic recovery of women and gender minorities in our communities as we rebuild from the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tool #4:

Inclusive and Equitable Retention Strategies

20 Minute read



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Women and Gender
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About this tool

This tool is informed by local research conducted by CBDC Restigouche as well as broader Canadian research on the emerging trends and best practices related to inclusive and equitable hiring. It includes the following information:

- Statistics on employee retention and pandemic-related context
- How to foster employees' well-being and mental health in the workplace
- How to use various types of accommodations to make your workplace more flexible.

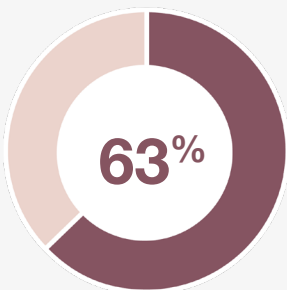


Background

To ensure that employees feel motivated by their work, certain issues must be addressed. The pandemic gave rise to new realities for many people; it is important to take that into account when evaluating your company's employment criteria. Mental well-being and flexibility are indispensable if you want your employees to develop professionally in a healthy way.

As mentioned in the other tools, domestic tasks have become more important since the pandemic and they are often carried out by women. Juggling work, housework and caregiving can be very difficult for some people.¹ The individuals involved often tend to manage stress by cutting their productivity or taking on too much work until they become exhausted. This explains the burnout factor among employees who may need adjustments at work, particularly in terms of flexibility. This problem is also known as "second shift" or "third shift". It is defined by the double burden of paid and unpaid work performed by women.²

The pandemic also exacerbated the gap between various socioeconomic levels. Women, by and large, were the victims of these repercussions.



- According to the Regroupement féministe du Nouveau-Brunswick, in 2021, **63% of the individuals who lost their jobs during the pandemic were women.** For employers, this is a critical factor to consider when attempting to improve working conditions and minimize the repercussions in crisis situations such as a pandemic.³

- **Women who lost their jobs during the pandemic in Canada are three times more likely to develop generalized anxiety disorder.**⁴ For employers, it is important to factor in these variables and to offer the necessary support to employees in similar situations.

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Aside from the pandemic, it is important to note that certain fields of work may present increased barriers to women. For instance, women-identifying employees in a minority setting are more likely to face discrimination in the form of fewer opportunities and a lack of respect from clients or co-workers. Whether reduced opportunities involve promotions or jobs in general, they may lead to situations of financial insecurity that employers may not be aware of. These factors affect women's quality of life, increasing the likelihood that they will suffer from severe work-related depression and/or will quit.⁵

Why is this important for employers?



Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, employee well-being has been a key topic of discussion **as mental health-related absences and disability claims continue to rise across Canada.**⁶

Currently, more than 50% of Canadians report **working while feeling mentally or physically unwell at least one day of the week.**⁷



Workplaces were found to be directly contributing to the decline in workers' mental and physical health in Canada. This issue has far-reaching economic implications, with **Canadian employers losing \$17 billion annually in lost productivity.**⁸

A 2021 study on the pandemic's impacts found that poorer health outcomes are correlated with lower employee satisfaction and suggested that **economic recovery must go beyond lifting lockdown measures. We also need to address the poor health conditions of those Canadians** hardest hit by the pandemic.⁹



Nearly 33% of women have **considered downshifting their careers or leaving the workplace altogether since the pandemic began.**¹⁰ This trend, coupled with reported levels of burnout, serves as a reminder for employers regarding the impact of employee stress levels on employee wellbeing and overall workplace wellbeing.¹¹

By having inclusive and equitable retention strategies, employees may be more satisfied in the workplace. It might make the recruitment of the right employees easier and employees may be more productive, innovative, and effective in their tasks at work. **Inclusive and equitable retention can promote employee's well-being and can reduce the need for them to request extended time off.**¹²



This tool might not offer all potential solutions, but it puts forward various strategies and resources to help you start. While reading, it might help you think outside the box and come up with your own ideas.



Communication

Communication is key to a good retention. It is suggested for employees and management to be clear about their role, responsibilities, and expectations in the business. You can do so by making sure that they know the “what, how and why” of their role and responsibilities and to make sure that they understand other employee’s and management roles and responsibilities. This will help bring purpose to their daily job, recognize their contributions, foster a positive workplace culture, and acknowledge what each team member brings to the business. With good communication, employees will feel seen, respected, and valued. Expressing that they matter can make a significant difference in someone’s day and life.¹³

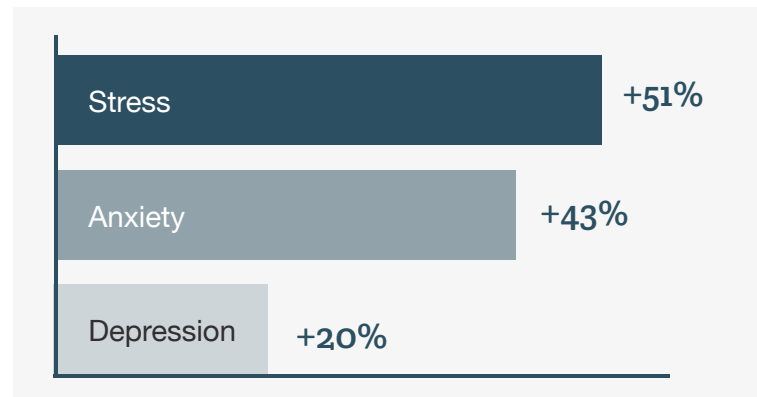
We have learned a lot with the pandemic when everything was disrupted, workplaces were forced to change, everyone was wondering what will happen next and businesses were forced to adapt and innovate. In a post-pandemic phase, it’s important to recognize everything your employees have been through and/or contributed to your business and express your sincere gratitude toward them.¹⁴

Employers and employees will always have to adapt to changes, especially during unexpected events. Communication is a crucial part of accepting and positively implementing changes, while trying to accommodate everyone’s needs. See tool 5 for more information on how to prepare for unexpected events.¹⁵

Employee well-being and mental health

According to a CBDC Restigouche survey conducted in the aftermath of the pandemic, there has been an increase in mental health symptoms, including stress (+51%), anxiety (+43%) and depression (+20%) in the Restigouche, NB and Avignon, QC regions.

Another survey of over 500 Canadians by the Future Skills Centre showed how **pre-existing mental health issues have worsened and how new mental health issues have emerged in Canadian workplaces since COVID-19 emerged.**¹⁶



The World Health Organization describes work as a critical social determinant of mental health:

“Meaningful work is protective for mental health; it contributes to a person’s sense of accomplishment and confidence, it secures their earnings, and it contributes to the recovery and inclusion for people living with psychosocial disabilities. However, harmful or poor working conditions, hazardous work environments and work organization, poor working relationships or unemployment – and the prolonged exposure to these, rather than to positive working conditions – can significantly contribute to worsening mental health or exacerbate existing mental health conditions.”¹⁷

Investing in employee well-being and mental health may include workplace initiatives and adaptations such as:

- **Ensuring that employees have an adequate number of sick days.** If workers don't have adequate sick days or other benefits, they may need to keep on working when they feel unwell. This in turn affects others in the workplace and brings down overall productivity and well-being. This may also increase the likelihood that workers will face longer-term barriers such as disability or burnout.¹⁸
- **Putting together a good action plan to accommodate someone who must take a planned or unplanned leave** (short, medium, and long-term leave) and having the necessary resources in place to support them. The sooner employees receive the resources they need, the less damaging this phase of life will be.¹⁹
- **Offering enough support to individuals needing time off so they don't feel stressed or overwhelmed about their workload** when they actually take the time off.²⁰
- **Being considerate when it comes to requests for extended leave, whether for health or other reasons** (this often means women with children under age 14). According to the Canadian Association for Supported Employment, staying in touch with employees who are on leave may help you to anticipate their needs or future accommodations. It is important to show that you care about their well-being, rather than pressuring them to come back to work.²¹
- **Assessing your workplace for mental health-related or other psychosocial** (e.g. negative work culture) **or contextual risk factors** (e.g. pandemic impacts, rising cost of living) that may be affecting your employees and **addressing aspects of your work culture that may be having a negative impact on your employees' mental health.**²²
- **Promoting work-life balance and making room for personal days or flexible time off**, in addition to traditional paid vacation and sick time. This allows employees to prioritize appointments and other wellness activities.²³
- Ensuring that employees are well taken care of via programs such as **comprehensive and flexible health benefits packages.** Taking care of your employees and offering good benefits are a first step in this direction.²⁴
- Engage in **wellness activities and create positive work environments.** Some example of wellness activities could include meditation sessions, friendly competitions, exercising together and other team building activities.²⁵ Moreover, an example of providing a positive work environment can include providing healthy snacks, creating a lounge area, publishing a staff newsletter, etc.²⁶

Free resources for employers and employees, including organizational strategies, effective approaches for leaders, resources to support well-being, assessments, tools and workshops, etc. are available on the [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health Website](#).

Other reports and resources are available on the [Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Website \(CCOHS\)](#) (Healthy Workplaces).









8 Tips for employers: [Mental Health in the Workplace](#) (CCOHS)



Safe Spaces

To retain employees, you might consider their sense of security and inclusion. Safe spaces require leaders and a team dedicated to harming no one under any circumstances, whether accidentally or not. **A psychologically healthy and safe workplace is one in which employees can express themselves, feel in control and believe that their opinions are considered and listened to.**²⁷

The following suggestions may be useful when creating a safe space:

	Be open-minded.		Don't be afraid to show vulnerability.
	Make good use of your employees' constructive criticism.		Offer your employees opportunities to get to know one another (e.g. team building activities).
	Create a code of conduct together with your employees.		Show zero tolerance for gossip.
	Communicate your expectations clearly (e.g. punctuality).		Adopt an "open door" policy to ensure that employees have unrestricted access to supervisors and bosses at all times. ²⁸

Safe spaces also mean culturally safe workplaces.

A culturally safe workplace acknowledges, respects, and fosters an individual's distinct cultural identity while addressing their needs, expectations and rights as employees. This means embracing and offering understanding to the cultural standpoint of someone else, rather than solely your own point of view and lived experience.²⁹

Culturally safe workplaces are characterized by:

- Communication that is clear, unbiased, open, and respectful.
- A sense of trust among employees, with all input being appreciated.
- Recognition and avoidance of stereotypes.
- Active engagement of everyone in a dialogue in which knowledge is exchanged.³⁰

Please refer to Tool #2 for information on how to facilitate equitable and inclusive workplace accommodations that can help improve employee retention.



Professional development opportunities

In today's dynamic work environment, change is constant. Employees must adapt to evolving expectations and acquire new skills. To navigate change successfully, employees rely on the assurance that their employer supports their career growth. Great workplaces recognize this need and prioritize professional development.³¹

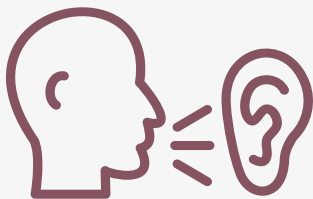
Accommodations and flexibility

One of the most critical adaptations employers can make is increasing flexibility for employees.³² Research demonstrates that an increase in **flexible working arrangement can have positive impacts on employees' overall health.**³³ Increased flexibility **improves employee job satisfaction, work/life balance and helps to narrow the gap for those who are caretakers or parents or have diverse health or cultural needs.**³⁴



It is important to note that flexibility does not involve a “one-size-fits-all” approach and that a foundation of trust and respect between employees and employers is critical.³⁵ **Work/life balance means something different for everyone.** For example, some employees may need more time for health-related appointments or for childcare or may simply have different routines that work better for them.³⁶ Feminuity, a Canadian equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) firm, echoes this idea: “The need to be creative and innovative and to connect with employees on a personal level to help maintain colleagues’ health and safety has become much more critical.”³⁷

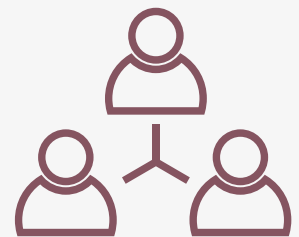
Before proposing accommodations, employers are encouraged take the time to:



Listen to their employees



Analyze workforce-related trends



Review the current work model and work closely with employees to find solutions.³⁸

The above steps will shed light on whether employees are seeking to spend more time away from work due to problems within your company or organization (e.g. disorganized workplace, excessive workloads, toxic work environment, etc.) and whether addressing these problems will mean that you no longer need to offer certain accommodations.³⁹

Flexibility may look different depending on your company or organization's type and size, but might include considerations such as:

- **Adapting work hours** based on caregiving, health or other employee needs (e.g., adjusted start or end times).
- Exploring **part-time work, job sharing or split-shift opportunities**.
- Allowing the use of **flex time for employees wishing to go to appointments, etc.** during the workday.
- Providing **remote/hybrid/work-from-home options** if appropriate for your workplace.⁴⁰

Don't forget to engage in open and regular communication with your employees. At times, job flexibility may mean that individuals who take advantage of certain types of accommodation have less of a feeling of belonging because they are less present in the physical workspace. For employers, it is important to guide employees, so they continue to feel like they are part of their work team, whether their tasks are carried out in person or virtually, or even if they choose a less traditional work system for a particular reason.⁴¹

Remote and hybrid workplaces

As some companies gradually reintroduce employees to physical office spaces, others are embracing hybrid work arrangements that extend beyond the pandemic. This shift in work culture marks a significant change in how businesses operate.⁴²

While we recognize that many businesses in Restigouche and Avignon cannot offer remote or hybrid options due to the nature of certain key industries, we felt it was important to include some relevant information on remote work since it has been one of the key changes in many Canadian workplaces since the onset of the pandemic. To ensure the productivity and well-being of employees working from home, here are some **points to consider**:

- While social isolation remains a key concern for employees working remotely, **adequate at-home work conditions** (e.g. quiet space, ergonomic equipment) **and appropriate support from employers** (e.g. regular check-ins) can help to set up employees for success.⁴³
- Managers need **to ensure that remote workers are not marginalized by being "out of sight and out of mind"**. Relevant data indicates that workers who spend more time in the office tend to get more rewards, more opportunities (such as promotions) and higher pay.⁴⁴
- Consider **investing in digital skills training for employees** to help bridge any gaps in this area.⁴⁵
- Invest in employees' **soft skills like time-management, healthy work habits and emotional management**.⁴⁶
- **Ensure effective day-to-day communication**, encourage social interactions between colleagues and listen to your employees so you are aware of their needs and concerns.⁴⁷
- **Develop comprehensive and inclusive remote work policies and procedures** addressing various remote work situations. To help you create a remote work policy, Restigouche Family Services has developed a [template](#) that includes a domestic violence component.⁴⁸



Did you know?



Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, **data shows that violence against women, especially domestic and intimate partner violence (DIPV), has intensified.**⁴⁹ Many people had to work from home during lockdowns, which in some cases resulted in greater tensions in family relationships and more violence. This merits special attention, especially for people experiencing DIPV who may have limited or no access to an out-of-home work environment. You can familiarize yourself with the [Signal for help](#) and how you can help someone who might be experiencing domestic/intimate partner violence.

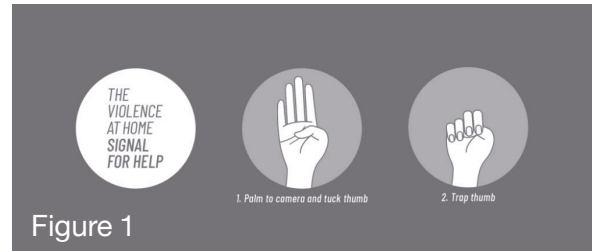


Figure 1

Are four-day workweeks possible?

Research shows that there is a new way to make your workplace more flexible: **the four-day workweek.** The benefits of this system might include:

- Improved health and personal/professional well-being
- Less stress, lower burnout risk and less absenteeism
- Higher productivity and greater profitability
- Better employee retention.⁵⁰



Under this system, employees work one day a week less but with the same pay and productivity expectations that they would have if they worked five days a week. Other accommodations are possible, for example, working the same number of hours over a period of four days instead of five. However, it is important to note that this last example isn't always logistically possible for employers and isn't always a good accommodation for many people, such as employees with disabilities (e.g., employee who can't work such long days at once) or for employees who are parents (e.g., longer days may not work for daycare or school drop off.) With limitations and benefits in mind, more flexible or compressed work weeks may be something to consider for your workplace as an option. Moreover, before you adopt a four-day workweek, it is important to evaluate various needs and to ensure that service delivery, work organization and task distribution are redistributed to accommodate the new system.⁵¹

Floating holidays

Floating holidays are provided as an extra benefit, over and above other forms of paid leave like vacation time or sick days. They are paid days off that can be used by employees when they see fit. They are frequently used by employees who practice different religions or come from diverse cultures that celebrate special occasions that fall outside of Canada's paid statutory holidays. Floating holidays can also be used for personal reasons e.g., time off for a child's event or a wellness appointment that isn't considered 'sick time'.⁵²

Accommodations Implementation

Before you put in place one or more of these accommodations, you are invited to consider the following questions:

What are my goals and how will this course of action help me to reach them? For example, will my employees' quality of life be improved?

What indicators will enable me to determine whether my employees' productivity has increased?

What is my timeline for implementing these changes and for identifying whether the indicators have been met or not?

Will the employees concerned by this new initiative need any specific resources or support?

What are the legal considerations?⁵³

If you were able to answer those questions with clear and precise answers and if you believe that the initiatives that you have identified are realistic and relevant to your organization, you can start the planning process. An initial trial could be conducted with a group of employees to determine whether the rest of your work team and your company in general might benefit.

Employee evaluations and feedback

If employees think that their work environment or organizational system is unfair or biased, they may feel dissatisfied and frustrated at work, this is why **performing a regular routine for evaluating employees is important. It can encourage employees to perform at their full potential.**⁵⁴

Employee performance varies from individual to individual and productivity may be defined differently. Asking your employees how they define good performance and combining their understanding of this concept with your own may make a difference as regards to their sense of belonging and the healthiness of your work environment.⁵⁵



Another suggestion would be to conduct interviews with long-term employees. This interview can be conducted once a year and will help you determine why employees stay, what might make them want to leave. This could also serve as a check-in with each employee to understand if their needs have changed and to better understand what is important to them in the workplace.⁵⁶ This could also be done via anonymous questionnaires to allow employees to share their thoughts freely without fear of repercussions.

Regular input from employees not only makes them feel valued and heard but is also important for bringing changes to your workplace policies and procedures. Sometimes policies and procedures are put in place a long time ago and require being reviewed and revised to make them more inclusive and adaptable to the new workplace realities. To be more effective in making positive changes, make sure to have a plan. Tool #5 might help you rethink some of your policies and procedures.

Conclusion

We recognize that a healthy workplace directly impacts employee satisfaction, motivation, and overall productivity. Beyond fulfilling job roles, **businesses now prioritize employee well-being, creating an environment where employees feel valued, supported, and empowered. This shift in focus contributes significantly to an organization's ability to attract and retain top talent.**

As we continue to recover from the pandemic, we can also remember the importance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in our workplaces. We're at the beginning of another transformative shift. This "unprecedented" change will redefine our workplaces and how we collaborate, and communicate, which means **it is more important than ever to maintain employee connectivity and to keep them informed and educated.**⁵⁷

Other resources for the Retention of employees:

Service d'aide à l'emploi d'Avignon (QC) : [Maintien en emploi](#) (French Website) an individual service for people currently or soon to be employed who wish to work on certain challenges.

Working NB: Consultants assist employers of all sizes with recruitment supports, [retention supports](#), recruitment events, human resources tools, etc.

Endnotes

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Figures

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