

Mental health illness' negative impact on the Japanese youth employment: Importance of workplace mental health support

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Mental Health Illness' Negative Impact on the Japanese Youth Employment: Importance of Workplace Mental Health Support

Hanna Chen

ABSTRACT

Mental health related issues and disorders have always been a sensitive and hindered topic that create tension in our society. During the past few years, the public has gradually shown concern and attention to how mental health illness could strongly affect our daily activities. Inherited from the Confucius mindset, in most Asian countries, including Japan, it is important to act collectively and avoid showing one's opinions to avoid standing out. This phenomenon, therefore, took away people's courage to seek help when it comes to their personal feelings. This paper discusses the correlation between workplace stress to mental health illness (especially from the young millennial perspective), the reason behind why culture and history aggravates and lengthens the process of resolving mental health issues in the Japanese workplace, and further suggests possible amendments companies, government, or third party could take. To gain an overview of the current work environment, survey is conducted with Canadian and Japanese new graduates and students to obtain qualitative information. Further discussion with Professor Robert Glenda from Waseda University, who has the research focus on the Japanese labour situation, was conducted to further elaborate the research outcome. By analyzing government regulations, company employee benefit policies, and appeal system, this research intends to reveal liabilities within each party. This paper recommends recovery, advocacy, and support actions that each party could take in the short-run and long-run to alleviate the issue.

Keywords: mental health, youth employment, Japan, workplace environment

SURVEY: COMPARE JAPANESE AND CANADIAN WORKPLACES

To have an overall understanding of what the Japanese workplace as well as how it's different from the Canadian workplace, a survey was conducted based on 3 hypotheses on the issue of mental health = and how it relates to youth employment. Retrieved from the 62 valid responses from millennials living in Japan or Canada (29 of them are residing in Japan and the rest are residing in Canada). The target respondents are grouped into students who filled the questionnaire based on work or personal experiences. The outcomes of this survey are 1) the perceived current working environment by the millennials in Japan is more challenging than that of Canada 2) the mental awareness among the millennials is lower in Japan than in Canada.

Support 1: The result showed that in Japan out of those whom have work experiences and have been treated unfairly, 90% of them have only 1-2 years of working experience; while in Canada the age has less impact on whether they get unfair treatment at work.

Support 2: Considering an overall perception, both sample groups are asked, regardless of their position, what they think about the current working environment. Out of a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest), Japanese working environment was rated 2.58 while Canadian working environment was rated 3.6.

Support 3: Respondents are asked if they are familiar with the company's mental health policy based on five degrees (0-20%, 20-40%,...,80%-100%) and if they have received any education on the mental health program. Statistics showed that only 14% of the Japanese employees received education related to mental health program and their total knowledge on the program is rated around 20%. On the other side, nearly half of the Canadian employees (48%) have been educated and the average rate of their familiarity is 28%.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG MILLENIALS: CURRENT WORKING ENVIRONMENT

As shown on the survey, Japanese working environment is relatively more challenging compared to the Canadian workplace. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has recently conducted a research evaluating the job quality and labor market inclusiveness of 35-member countries, including Japan (Fig 1). Japanese workplace environment has been seen as a low performer (below OECD member average) in all six measures except job security. The research reflects Japan's relatively high share of job strain. ("OECD Employment Outlook 2018 (Summary in English)", 2018).

In the Japanese workplace, there are numerous barriers preventing young millennials to from utilizing employment rights, potentially leading to concurrent mental health issues. The Japanese traditional employment system constitutes two major characteristics: lifetime employment and seniority-based wages profile (OECD Employment Outlook 2018 (Summary in English), 2018). Both characteristics come hand-in-hand, the slope of age-wage profile in Japan is relatively steep compared to that of most developed countries. New hires are often underpaid in the beginning of their career and forced to hold onto the fact that they will be compensated throughout the years of experiences. This has given the new hires in Japan a strong incentive to stay with their first employer, therefore, creating an implicit rule that absolute obedience to the upper management is inevitable for career development.

One of the evidences of the intertwined senior and junior relationship is the work-related drinking culture; this scenario is often called 'nominication' (to drink and to communicate). There are specific business etiquettes a young employee should follow in order to maintain a good relationship with his/her superior such as keeping the senior members' cup full during the 'kanpai' (equivalent to cheers in the western culture), never hold your cup higher than the senior members, etc. There is also an implicit rule that, as a new hire, these kinds of gatherings require mandatory attendance to avoid alienation, creating an invisible pressure on the young workers. Various researchers have been debating employee problem drinking issue, both personally and socially deleterious, and how it could lead to employee stress (particularly for new hires). Even though it's hard to identify the direct influence of drinking to stress, research has shown a degree of significance that workplace stress level would increase as the employee drinking problem amplifies (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Sonnenstuhl, 2002). The sensitivity of the Japanese superior-inferior relationships is also well presented in the language. Japanese people pay a large amount of respect and obsequiousness to their superior by using the politest form of language at work. The language itself being indirect and agreement interjected also allows Japanese to systematically agree with their superiors (Lafayette & Botting, 2015). Both shows the importance of young workers having courtesy and lowering themselves in the working environment.

Japan has one of the longest working hours in the world. Discretionary labor system, allowing companies to pay employees at a fixed rate in advance as opposed to the actual hours they work, is identified as the main cause of the long work hours without overtime pay. Multiple downfalls and reasons of working long hours are discussed by Mr. Hiroshi. One of the reasons that he associates with the overworking young employees is the overly dominant and hierarchical relationship between the seniors and the young workers (Hiroshi, February-March 2018). The relationship is so rigid that young workers feel obligated to work until their superiors finish their work; young workers also believe in the over-working 'virtue' that demonstrates their loyalty to the company (which would lead to the approval of their superiors).

WHY DO SENIORS PLAY SUCH A HUGE ROLE IN THE JAPANESE CULTURE?

The root cause of the above scenario can be traced back to the seniority system that exist in every corner of the Japanese society. Even though it is extremely difficult to find a true reason behind this complicated social phenomenon, one of the key origins discussed by the scholars is the Confucius influence among most East Asian societies. The core value of Confucius theory can be concluded as “relational hierarchy” that emphasizes the status-oriented relationship, loyalty to superiors, and obedience to the social hierarchy. (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005). Another reason behind the strong seniority system is the historical trace to “clan”, which is latent in Japanese people’s daily life. “Clan” is defined as an intimate hierarchical (leaders and followers) relationship that appeared as early in the feudal period and remained until contemporary world. Researchers note that the “Japanese obligation and their reciprocals” mentality emerged from the hierarchical relationship (Kizaemon & Roberson, 1949).

Continued to remain in existence after the WW2, the hierarchical relationship mentality has been formed in every Japanese people’s minds under the education system. The relational hierarchy can be observed among junior high school students but is most salient among college students. Insufficient knowledge of other class standings would create challenges for a Japanese student to smoothly communicate with his/her peers (Enyo, 2013). Maintaining a good inferior-superior relationship is especially important for young graduates (kohai) because they have to rely on their seniors (senpai) for their future career. To further elaborate, it seems to be a mutual consent that the ‘Senpai’ would support the “Kohai’ with multiple tasks and, in return, ‘Kohai’ would have to return the favor with loyalty and respect (YOSHINAGA, 2017). It seems to be a perfect formula to maintain harmony in a society; however, this underlying phenomenon has caused various issues in the Japanese workplace.

The correlation of workplace environment and youth employees’ mental health

According to the National Police Agency of Japan, 21,321 people suicided in Japan in 2017. 1991 people (9.3%) out of the 21,321 people (0.7% increase compared to the previous year), committed suicide due to “work-related issues”. In other words, over 5 people committed suicide every day because of work related reasons. (“平成29年中における自殺の状況 (2017 Japanese Suicidal Report)”, 2017, pp. 23-28). There are various reasons behind work-related mental illness that could potentially lead to the high suicidal rate: job related strain (i.e. long work hours with insufficient wage, poor-quality job, unclear job description) and poor psychosocial work environment (i.e. bad leadership) (OECD, 2018). Kuroda Sachiko and Yamamoto Isamu’s findings also backed up the statement that mental health has strong correlation with work environment, including long work hours with insufficient compensation, which is the most common situation for young workers. The qualitative survey proved that since the employee expectations are not met, there is a negative impact on the employees’ mental health (Kuroda & Yamamoto, 2015).

Recently, research proved that long working hours and heavy workloads related stress have increased among young millennials; evidence also showed that occupational mental disorders have been compensated more frequently among young workers in Japan (Yamauchi, et al., 2017). According to Mr. Ota Toshika, the Director-General for Policy Planning and Evaluation, Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan, the dramatic increase of young millennials (30% for college students) leaving their position after 3 years of employment has been a major concern for the government. These phenomena exacerbate the situation of various social issues such as, NEET, young people who are neither working nor studying, and Hikikomori, young people who refuse to get out of the house. With insufficient support from the society, young workers are left stressed and lost leading the labor market ground to halt.

Both scientific and humanistic rationale support the fact that focusing on improving the working environment from the mental health perspective could eliminate the current issue of young millennials feeling unmotivated and stressed at work.

1) Government

From the government regulation perspective, Japanese government has been trying to improve the working environment by enforcing regulations on the pay system. The Japanese Abe government recently (2016) reformed the bill to prohibit long work hours, and to realize equal-pay (the cap of the working hours still remains 20 hours over the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare's guidelines of 80 hours of overtime a month). The goal of the act is to increase productivity and create a friendlier working environment. However, workers have been protesting due to the controversy of the bill: people are paid based on the hours they are "presumed" to work and some specialists can be exempt from the case (Adelstein, 2018). This could potentially let large corporations get away with paying their employees unfairly since there is still no clear guideline when it comes to working hours. Whether this bill is bringing a positive impact on the work environment is still unclear.

At the end of 2015, Japanese government made its first step to improve employee mental health by launching a Stress Check Programme. Instituted by an amendment of the Industrial Safety and Health Law in 2014, the Stress Check Programme has been implemented at least once a year at all workplaces by 50 or more employees (Tomoyuki, 2016). Unfortunately, no research has proven the effectiveness of the program.

2) Company

Slowly but steadily, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare developed Guidelines for the Maintenance and Promotion of Workers' Mental Health (herein "Guideline") that promotes checkups and workplace improvements at a primary prevention level, mental health checkups and counseling for secondary prevention, and disease management and rehabilitation support at a tertiary prevention level. According to a survey among 11 major Japanese companies, the overall implementation of the program is 59%, even though the program implementation has a positive influence on lowering the employment cost (Iijima, Yokoyama, Kitamura, Fukuda, & Inaba, 2013). Statistics have shown the necessity of improving the implementation rate of the three level Guideline. Taking a closer look at the Guideline, in Article 71(1), companies are encouraged to examine the working environment by having specific measures, promote medical examination, and educate the workers on health-related topics by having sufficient instructors. In Article 19-3, the guideline emphasized on the importance to provide consultation and information in regards of health care. Covering the compensation of the state, Article 1 included the Work Accident Insurance Act. Other than the lack of implementation among Japanese companies, most articles focused on physical health; there is also no clear information on how companies should focus on mental health ("Industrial Safety and Health Act", 1972)

3) Third Party

According to the 2017 databook from The Japan Association of Charitable Organizations, labor organizations consist the smallest size of expense and employee's salary compared to 9 other legal entities. Furthermore, based on the portal site operated by Public Interest Commission, 2,213 public interest activities existed in December 2011 (total number of public interest activities in the figure 3 is 3,932 due to some organizations have dual/multiple interest). Out of the 3932 activities, activities that aim for enhancing welfare of workers only takes less than 2% (JACO, 2017). From the union's perspective, there is also a reduction of negotiation acts. It could mean that the relationship between the employers and employees has improved but it could also mean that the economy is static (Hiroyuki, 2012). Overall, there is a lack of active labor related organizations and activities in Japan.

There are also other challenges that the labor organizations are facing. After the harsh labor disputes that took place in the 1950-60s, the union had significantly increased its efficiency to become more impactful in companies. However, the union participation ratio has now descended due to the current company boundaries that prevent

union to gain its own right and power. Trust between the management and unions is weak since it took the management quite a bit of time to discover the benefits unions are bringing. An example of the weak relationship: when the management still pressures through the request of overwork, employees still comply, and unions do not take initiative to resolve, even if employees appeal for amendments. The rapid replacement and the insufficient union officials also created a decrease in the organizational strength of the labor unions. Union officials are usually selected among the senior employees in the company so that they have sufficient knowledge to handle labor related issues. After the economic crisis, companies no longer recruit as many official crew members; the turnover rate has inclined drastically. The lack of senior employees therefore creates the scarcity of the qualified union officials. The lack of motivation from the union members follows when the Japanese economy stance collapsed; union members are either reluctant or unable to devote their time to the union due to the large amount of workload (Hiroyuki, 2012). In sum, the effectiveness of the union became questionable and situation became a vicious cycle which led to the increase of disengagement of the labor unions.

Unfortunately, no evidence or sufficient data could prove that the mental health related labor issues are discussed in the non-profit organizations or labor unions.

4) Individual

The public awareness of one's own mental health as well as how they handle and how they perceive mental illness also impacts the effectiveness of mental health programs in workplaces. According to the World's Mental Health Japan survey, the major reason why Japanese people are reluctant to seek for or to drop out of mental health support is the lack of perceived need (63.9%); they often delay the treatment due to the belief that they can handle their own issues by themselves (Kanehara, et al., 2015). In a recent research related to the public perception of mental illness, statistics showed that there is a misconception among the general Japanese (over 80%) that depressive disorders can be treated and cured overtime. An example of the depressive disorder, Schizophrenia, is not well-addressed and understood among the public (Kasahara-Kiritani, et al., 2018). These two researches argue the fact that there is not enough education among individuals in regards of 1) the necessity to be aware of one's mental state and 2) the right to seek for professional advice.

It could be concluded that without improvement of the individual mental wellness awareness, the implementation process of the mental health program could encounter more barriers; therefore, be costlier and more time-consuming.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS THAT WOULD ALLEVIATE THE CURRENT SITUATION

1) Government

As discussed, the government's stance on the issue is still ambiguous and hard to follow through from the company's stand point. Due to the complicated social norm and the rapid change of employment system, Japanese government is still at the stage of solving existing labor issues. It is understandable that since the Japanese employment system has become more diversified (companies are hiring full-time, part-time, contractors, etc.), it is hard to enact a bill that satisfies all parties (Mitsuru, 2005). Mentioned by Professor Taniuchi, another aspect that creates additional barriers to reform the policy is that the Japanese education, economic and legislative system are closely linked to each other (Taniuchi, 2014). The process of changing the current employment system would require the government to coordinate the three pillars (education, economic, and legislative) and generate short-term and long terms goals.

First, the lack of mental health literacy in the Japanese education has created a major concern to scholars. It is striking that current school health related curriculum textbooks contain nothing about mental illnesses (Ojio et al., 2013). Mr. Hiroshi also mentioned in his research about the importance of educating the college students related to mental health issues. However, mental health education should start as early as K-12. Even though the Canadian

mental health education curricula are yet to be perfect, reviews and analysis have been conducted to examine the proper ways to engage youth into the mental health topic since elementary (Rodger, et al., "Mental Health Education in Canada: Curricula Literature Review", 2014). By incorporating the definition of mental wellness and the information for support sources into the course content, students would obtain a basic knowledge on how to self-check his/her mental health state and further learn how to seek help. Second, the government would need to set up funding options to support companies and third-party organizations that strive for better workplace mental health benefits. For example, providing professional license and certificate scholarships, monetary incentives for companies to hire specialists and professionals, and sponsorship application for third party organizations to run campaigns. Last but not the least, the legislative system should be re-enforced. Programs including 'Stress Check Programs' and 'Guidelines' for companies to provide a safe workplace should be mandatory among all companies. Sanctions and recovery procedures should be in place when violation occurs. Furthermore, age restriction should be abolished so that mid-career workers are free to switch companies; then the obligation for employees to stick with one company could be lifted (Hiroshi, 2002).

2) Companies

The 'Guidelines', created by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, includes three levels that gives companies a very basic foundation to strengthen their employee benefit plan by adding mental wellness aspects. There is no clear evidence that the Guideline is thoroughly carried out by the Japanese companies even though it has been proven to improve the company's financial performance. Other than the government enforcing the acts, there should be a third party that gives company's the guidance for implementing the three levels and educating the human resource department on the how to incorporate the 'Guidelines' into their company. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the 'Guidelines' should be regularly reviewed and adjusted to ensure employees are really benefiting from implementation.

According to the Gallup Research, inadequate benefit is one of the top five voluntary turnover reason. Even though Japanese employees still have the mindset of staying in the company, the production rate and overall performance becomes low when employees have a bad mental health state. Both Kanto and Kao's research and the Total Reward Scorecard by WorldatWork have detailed employee benefit packages that could give companies a clearer structure to form their employee benefit package; they equally stated the importance of 'Health and Wellness' when it comes to retaining talents. Action items and strategic plans should be reviewed by the third party and the human resource team to customize the company's working culture and need; employees should have an anonymous platform to be able provide constructive feedback on the created employee package.

A possible action item a Japanese company could take is to leverage the usage of the mental health benefit by adopting e-mental health toolkit created by Mental Health Commission of Canada. This gives the Japanese employees an option to seek mental health support in private through electronic communication technologies. Few non-profit organizations such as TELL Japan does provide hotline services to provide counselling advice; however, the overall experience could be improved by adding more features such as support groups and more information and forums in regards of mental wellness.

3) Third Party

It is inevitable that issues created by the diversified workers would continue to exist as long as the union remains under the company (Mitsuru, 2005). As it is the most important part for the labor unions to gain authority and act the rights on behalf of the employees instead of being directed by the management, the most straight forward way is to become independent and form the union based on industry categories. By doing so, companies would also have the chance to clearly indicate the union representatives' tasks and need not worry about the lack of talent. Mentioned by Hiroyuki, having touch points with the management to better cater to the company situation is still important (Hiroyuki, 2012). Like how unions are pursuing their rights in Canada, regular conference is held, and

each parties' representatives are voicing out to create win-win situations. Most importantly, unions should align and guard the social interest by examining management behaviors.

The lack of participation and number of labor's rights' oriented non-profit organizations may reduce the social pressure applied on companies when they fail to meet expectations. The causes of these situations are the lack of trust from the public and insufficient support from the government. Raising public awareness could be the first step existing NPO could take; i.e. recruiting a strong public relations team that is responsible for hosting campaigns, educational seminars, etc. The final goal is having enough power to bring justice to the employees such as the sanction against Pacific Blue Cross in Canada. Potential partnership with companies with a more mature organizational structure could also be a choice for the Japanese NPOs to consider.

CONCLUSION

The causal relationship between mental health and youth employment is multidirectional, therefore, to improve the situation would require the cooperation between government, companies, third parties and the general public. Due to the limited time and resource, the survey doesn't have enough validation since the sample size and qualitative data are insufficient. Mental health issue is also a sensitive discussion topic that often targets vulnerable group; it is hard to justify the accuracy of the research result as people may still choose to hide their true thoughts. At this current stage, scholars should focus on a very specific aspect of the issue since there are not enough research bases to link all the issues together. During the consultation process with Professor Robert Glenda, she suggested that in order to gain a wholesome few of the topic, qualitative data should be collected from conducting interviews. This will help inform us about the gap between social context and employee needs. Future research interest should try to understand the employees' mindset and barriers thoroughly, analyze company case by case, and break down each solution proposal then come up with a tangible plan that each party can put into practice.

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APPENDIX

Survey questionnaire:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1CK9-PjAT11h-DSLvH6vMaFoy_jAZky2BsXwGMz_v-sY/edit

Survey Result:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1CK9-PjAT11h-DSLvH6vMaFoy_jAZky2BsXwGMz_v-sY/edit?usp=sharing

Figure 1. OECD Job quality and labour market inclusiveness: key indicators for Japan 2016-2017

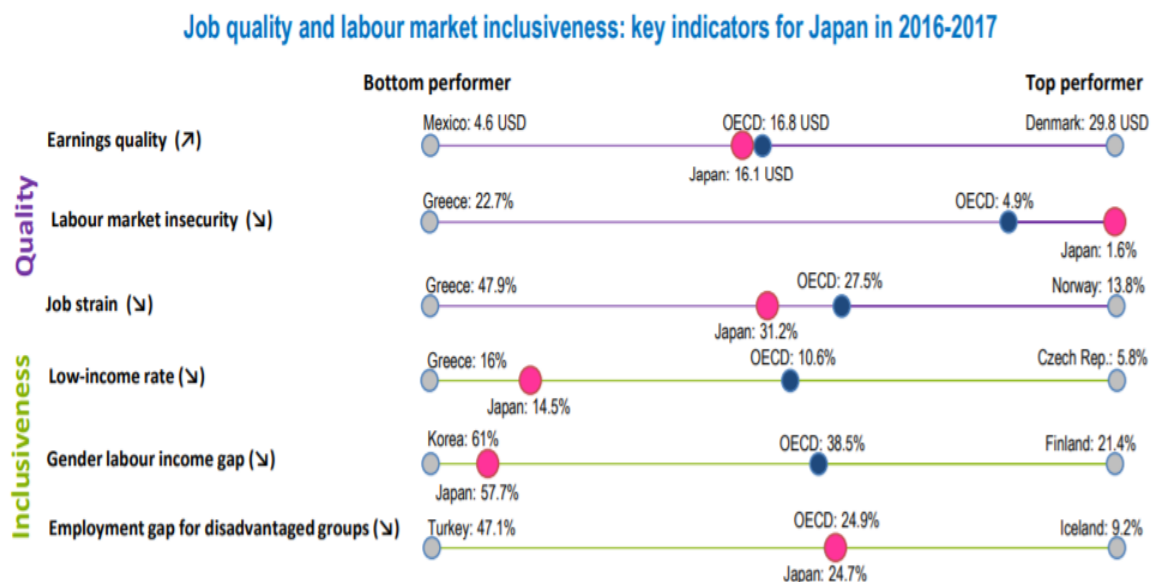


Figure 2. JACO The size of expense and employees salary: lack of labor organization expense and employee salary

The size of expense and employees salary

(billion yen)

Status of legal entities	Expense	Employees Salary
Public Interest Corporation	20,338	3,679
Community based group	1,811	40
Specified Non-profit Corporation	738	112
Labor organizations	540	119
Medical Services Corporation	33,940	8,880
Private School Corporation	10,876	3,301
Religious Corporation	3,651	655
Social Welfare Corporation	18,300	3,597
Industry group	6,877	935

Source: Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting (2008)

Figure 3. JACO Public Interest Commission by Area of Activities. Lack of activities that aims to enhance the welfare of workers

Distribution of PICs by Area of Activities, 2011

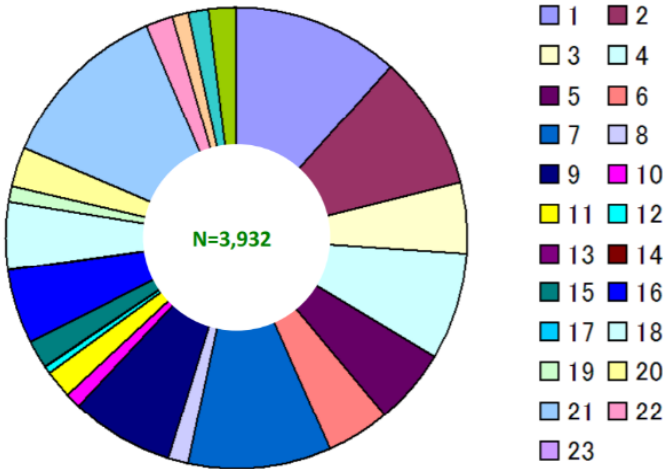


Figure 4. Reward Scorecard by Kantor, R and Kao. T – Retrieved from Professor Richard Cotton’s slide

Table 1.—Rewards Available Through Work and the Workplace

<p>Direct Financial Base salary Bonus Cash profit sharing Stock programs Employee referral program (cash rewards for successful hires) Suggestion programs (cash for ideas)</p> <p>Indirect Financial Adoption assistance College savings plan College tuition and fees Commuter reimbursement (pre-tax) Company cafeteria Company store Dependent care Dependent scholarships Discount tickets Educational assistance Fitness facilities discounts Health and welfare benefits Incremental dependent care (travel) Insurance via payroll deduction Long-term care insurance Matching gifts Relocation program Retirement plan(s) Saving Bonds via payroll Deductions Scholarships Stock purchase program Student loans Tuition reimbursement</p>	<p>Work Autonomy Casual dress policy Challenging work Constructive feedback Covered parking Ergonomics/comfortable workstations Flexible work schedules Free parking Interesting work Job skills training Modern, well-maintained workspace Open communication Performance management Promotion opportunities Safe work environment Suggestion program (no cash reward) Telecommuting opportunities Uniforms/uniform allowance Workshops</p> <p>Career 360° skills assessment Career advancement Coaching Lunch-and-learn series Management development Mentoring program Open job posting Pre-retirement counseling Service awards Training and development</p>	<p>Affiliation Athletic leagues Community involvement Diversity programs Employee celebrations Employee clubs Professional associations Seminars Spring and holiday parties Support groups Volunteer connection</p> <p>Other/Convenience ATMs onsite Car seat vouchers (for newborns) Carpooling/van pooling/shuttles Child care resources Credit Union Employee assistance program Employee card and gift shop Expectant parent program Legal services Medical center Military deployment support Online services Onsite food services Onsite flu shots Onsite dry cleaning pickup Onsite Post Office Personal travel agency Wellness program Worldwide travel assistance</p>
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Source: Kantor, R. and Kao, T. (4).

Figure 5. Introduction to the E-Mental Health Toolkit

What is e-mental health?

The term e-mental health refers to the use of the internet and other electronic communication technologies to deliver mental health information and care. E-mental health services are an effective and complementary option to traditional face-to-face mental health support. By providing accessible and convenient assistance, e-mental health can play an important role for patients seeking help [1].

Technology is evolving and new innovation comes into the market at a very fast pace. E-mental health can include but are not limited to:

- instant messaging and video-based counselling services (also known as telehealth or telepsychiatry)
- consumer information portals
- online support groups, forums and social networks
- mobile phone applications
- online assessment or diagnostic tools
- blogs and podcasts
- therapeutic gaming programs, robotic simulation and virtual reality systems.