

Occupational Therapy Pilot for Employers: A Strategic Solution for Ontario's Workforce Mental Health Crisis

Scaling an Evidence-Based Model to Support Employment Ontario Service Delivery

The opportunity

Mental health challenges affect one in three Canadians, with 27% reporting reduced workplace productivity and an average of 2.8 lost workdays annually due to mental health issues. One of employers top workforce concern is **recruitment and retention and employee mental health support**.

A groundbreaking pilot by St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, PATH Employment, Workforce Planning Hamilton, and McMaster University has designed and tested an innovative solution: **Occupational Therapists (OTs) providing targeted coaching to build employers' confidence and capacity to hire, support, and retain employees with mental health challenges**.

The evidence

Strong employer demand confirmed: Research with 11 diverse employers (30-500 employees across sectors) revealed consistent gaps in mental health capacity, even among organizations with existing training and Employee Assistance Programs. Employers specifically requested:

- Applied guidance for real workplace situations
- Professional coaching to implement general training
- Tailored support for specific employee challenges
- Ongoing consultation beyond one-time training

The solution

Integrated service model:

1. **Training foundation:** Partner with existing providers (The Working Mind, Mental Health Works, CAMH) rather than creating new content
2. **Applied coaching:** OTs provide 3-4 quarterly coaching sessions helping employers implement training in real situations

3. **System connections:** Facilitated links to mental health supports for both employers and employees
4. **Flexible delivery:** Organizations can access training only, OT coaching only, or both services

Key service features:

- Anonymous case consultation protecting employee privacy
- HR compliance review ensuring legal alignment
- Industry-specific customization based on employer needs
- Scalable partnership model leveraging existing infrastructure

Impact potential

For employers:

- Reduced recruitment and retention costs
- Improved employee performance and engagement
- Decreased mental health-related absenteeism
- Enhanced workplace culture and trust
- Access to professional mental health expertise

For the employment system:

- Addresses top employer workforce concern
- Builds on existing EO service relationships
- Leverages established training partnerships
- Creates new revenue and service opportunities
- Demonstrates innovation in employment support

Evidence of effectiveness: Positively piloted on an employer. Past OT clients report using learned skills daily in management roles, and employers value the objective, professional perspective OTs provide in sensitive situations.

Scaling pathway

Partnership integration opportunities:

- **EO service providers:** Add OT coaching as enhanced service offering
- **Training organizations:** Integrate OT support as premium add-on service
- **Government policy:** Align with mental health and employment strategy priorities
- **Healthcare partnerships:** Connect employment and mental health systems

Next steps

For EO system managers:

- Explore integration with existing employment services
- Consider pilot implementation with current employer partners
- Assess training partnership opportunities in your region

For policy makers:

- Align with provincial mental health and employment strategies
- Consider funding mechanisms supporting employer capacity building
- Evaluate policy frameworks enabling healthcare-employment collaboration

For employment organizations:

- Partner with local healthcare providers for OT expertise
- Integrate with existing workplace mental health training
- Develop employer-facing mental health capacity services

The pilot partners are actively seeking scaling collaborators and can provide implementation support, training materials, and evaluation frameworks.