



The Benefit Brief

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The Case For Workplace Wellness

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A Look Back

There was a time when the term 'wellness' was mentioned in the corporate world only when there was a need to enhance employee morale and team spirit. Health promotion programs were designed to be offered with little or no associated costs, and almost certainly without an expectation related to return on investment (ROI). Direct linkage to disease prevention was rare. Broad-based programs targeted improved physical health, and included topics like nutrition, exercise and laughter. These initiatives delivered a caring message from employer to employee.

Without thinking about the consequences, we have gone about our daily lives embracing the sun-worshipping, fast food-eating, 'super-size me', no time for exercise, work anywhere-anytime, cigarette smoking, 'got-an-ache-pop-a-pill' approach.

Today's Wellness Focus

'Wellness' has evolved greatly over the last decade and in particular, has experienced unprecedented growth in the last few years. Many factors have contributed to this in Canada:

- government-sponsored health care continues to diminish
- aging baby-boomers are facing increased health concerns
- critical labour shortages are predicted
- greater emphasis is being put on human capital as the most important determinant of business success.

What's Affecting Our State of Wellness?

Our society is feeling the pain of the 'enjoy now, pay later' attitude related to lifestyle and health-impacted behaviour. It is not surprising then that each year in Canada, more than three-quarters of deaths result from four groups of non-communicable diseases: cardiovascular, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory. To add to this, sadly, one out of every five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

Why Workplace Wellness?

Like a spider weaving an intricate pattern to form its web, so too is wellness a complex network of health states, characterized by its interrelatedness, not fully realized until now. But why workplace wellness? How has this issue become a responsibility of Corporate Canada? Research has proliferated in the area of workplace health and has shown us the following important connections. Consider these staggering statistics:

- It costs \$2656 more per year to employ a smoker in Canada than a non-smoker. (Health Canada, 1995)
- Employees who take four 10-minute smoking breaks per day, work one month less per year. (Centre for Health Promotion and Publications, 2000)
- Obese adults incur annual medical expenditures that are 36% higher than those of normal weight. (Health Affairs, 2002)
- Obesity, physical inactivity, and poor nutrition are poised to overtake tobacco use as the leading preventable cause of death in Canada. (University of Toronto, 2004)
- Specific types of work stress and/or strain are related to 2x incidence of mental illness and substance abuse, 5x rate of certain cancers, 2x rate of infections/injuries and 3x incidence of heart and back problems. (Shain, 2000)

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- Depression is the fastest growing category of disability resulting in days lost. (Global Business and Economic Roundtable)
- Rising mental health claims, primarily related to stress, depression and anxiety disorders, were the top health and productivity-related concern for organizations. (Watson Wyatt survey, 2005)

Wellness has outgrown the fitness breaks of the 90's to become a business critical issue at present. There are existing and innovative programs that can address the tidal wave of physical and mental health concerns that will face us over the next decade. If we sit back and decide that this is simply the cost of doing business, then Canadian business will most certainly become too costly.

What are the Important Components of Workplace Wellness?

Health Canada describes the following as critical elements in the evaluation of a healthy workplace: Physical environment, Health practices, Social environment and personal resources.

These elements carry important considerations for employer and employee alike. Establishing and maintaining optimal health then is no longer the sole responsibility of the employee; it has evolved into a shared, collaborative effort between employer and employee. When you consider this information together with the fact that a large proportion of chronic illness is preventable or manageable through modifiable lifestyle behaviours, the case is made for targeted workplace initiatives aimed at improving employee health and wellbeing.

Despite the fact that the majority of organizations are aware of the relationship between health and the bottom line, current data tells us that few are prepared to deal with it. Buffet Taylor and Watson Wyatt's independent surveys uncovered the same finding: there is a passive acceptance that this is the new cost of doing business.

A Call to Action

The writing is on the wall! Employers can't afford to ignore it any longer or it could spell disaster over time. There's no time like the present to consider workplace changes that will produce healthier, happier and more productive employees who can see that you care.



MSP Update

MSP rates are increasing effective January 1, 2011, monthly rates will be \$60.50 for one person, \$109.00 for a family of two and \$121.00 for a family of three or more. Currently monthly rates are \$57.00 for one person, \$102.00 for a family of two and \$114.00 for a family of three or more.

Easy Ways to Give Back During the Holidays

Some companies put a lot of emphasis on giving back to the community and helping those less fortunate. Most don't. Here's a composite of ideas that will help those who need it at a time when they need it most.

It'll also make you, your team, your company, feel great ... and help your Karma at the same time.

- Scholarship awards. Whatever your company is passionate about - technology, innovation, cooking, whatever - put a program together and award a scholarship for students that best meet the criteria.
- Toys for Tots drive. Take your group for an afternoon shopping spree (on the company, of course) and donate it to Toys for Tots. Or have the employees bring in toys from home that are no longer used for donation.
- Food bank drive. Same as the Toys for Tots thing, except to the supermarket.
- Have a bottle drive. To make it exciting have teams compete against one another for the most money raised.
- Sign up your team or department for a community service program. Whether it's volunteering at a homeless shelter or doing something with the elderly or disabled, it'll also bring your team closer together.
- Build a home for Habitat for Humanity.
- Give your employees time off to do this stuff. Better still, if you're a corporate executive or business owner, make it part of your company's goals to have every group sign up for a volunteer or community program.
- Support a local business with your holiday party. Holiday parties have gotten bad press over the past couple of years, but if you're going to do it, at least support a local business. That's a good thing.
- Organize a Red Cross blood drive.
- Buy local. From holiday food shopping to Black Friday and Christmas gifts, it's spending time. It only takes a few seconds to look at the label and, even if it costs a few percent more, if you can afford it, buy local.



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