

Promoting Organizational Health

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Now, more than ever, Canadian companies are adopting total rewards strategies to engage employees and compete for top talent. At the same time, there is mounting evidence to show that improving overall workplace wellness can lead to a healthier bottom line. A growing number of employers are beginning to capitalize on the convergence of these two trends, and are positioning health and wellness initiatives as valuable elements of a total rewards package.

Just as the central tenet of a total rewards strategy is to align compensation, benefits and other incentives with business goals and employee needs, the same holds true when implementing effective health promotion strategies. In both cases, the objective is to understand the relevance and perceived value to the employee, and then design a program that optimizes the potential for achieving the organization's goals.

Those goals can be crystal clear. According to a 2005 Ipsos-Reid poll, 66 per cent of Canadian chief executive officers rank physical and mental health problems as a threat to their companies' productivity and competitiveness. This is driving the need for creative solutions to foster employee health.

Unhealthy, unsafe and stressful workplaces cost Canadian employers billions of dollars annually, says the Industrial Accident Prevention Association's 2004 report, *Creating Healthy Workplaces*. The good news is that comprehensive healthy workplace interventions cost far less than they are likely to save the company. In fact,

the report estimates that such interventions can return as much as \$8 for every dollar spent.

The National Quality Institute's Canadian Criteria for a Healthy Workplace measures workplace health based on the following components:

- Commitment to the value of people in the organization.
- Planning goals and objectives, allocating financial resources, conducting formal employee needs assessments and creating a process for plan design.
- Implementation and documentation of processes for demonstrated management commitment, for employee input and assessment and for programming and measurement.
- Sustainability of initiatives and effective communication of the results.

While workplace health strategies can be comprehensive, they don't need to be complicated. Initiatives should encompass core physical and mental health issues, and address employees' needs as members of their workplace, family and social communities.

Employers can leverage a total rewards strategy to support a healthy workplace through a variety of initiatives. Access to the right care at the right time is critically important. Wellness programs can prevent and control illness while employee assistance programs will help manage issues at home and work. Information and education will help employees reduce health risks, and at the same time encourage employees to be more conscientious health-care consumers.

IT STARTS AT THE TOP

Creating and sustaining healthy workplaces doesn't happen simply by launching new programs. Successful programs are fully endorsed at the most senior levels, where managers are trained to clearly understand the critical role they play. These programs make employees feel valued and accountable for being at work and healthy. So, the first question organizations must ask themselves is whether or not they are ready to make that kind of commitment.

“So far, we know that firms with leading practices in health promotion that contribute to productivity have aligned these practices with business strategies, use an interdisciplinary approach, are supported by leaders who make resources available and include operations managers on the team,” says Dr. Graham Lowe, president of The Graham Lowe Group, a workplace consulting and research firm, and author of *The Quality of Work: A People-Centred Agenda*. “These exemplary firms view improvements in the quality of work life as a prerequisite to reduced health costs and increased productivity. They also place a premium on communicating, learning and improving when it comes to workplace health and wellness.”¹

To design a plan that reaches out to employees with diverse needs, lifestyles and at various life stages, the key is to start with an organizational assessment and an employee lifestyle screening tool. This can provide a better understanding of the group's current health state, the inherent health risks and the policies and practices that may be affecting employee behaviours. That understanding can then form the foundation on which to build a strategy that is manageable, sustainable and targeted.

The analysis phase is therefore perhaps the most important stage in program development. It can also be the most challenging.

Organizations have access to a wealth of data from sources such as their benefit providers, employee assistance program partners, employee satisfaction surveys, absence and disability statistics and turnover records. But they often need help to consolidate that data and turn it into meaningful information they can use. Many employers are looking to their benefit consultants and providers for that support.

Once data is gathered and analyzed, the next step is to consider what supports and services need to be in place to achieve the organization's health goals. For example, does the benefit plan design support the new health strategy? If it is too narrowly focused on intervention, what changes are needed to move it to a broader focus on prevention?

Another issue to consider is whether the benefit plan should offer more non-traditional benefits. Some employees place a higher value on non-traditional benefits such as massage and nutrition counselling. They are viewed as more relevant and therefore more valuable than traditional benefits. Non-traditional benefits have also been found to play a key role in helping employees manage stress and prevent other health risks.

It is important to ensure your benefits and employee assistance programs are accessible, credible and relevant to the entire employee population. At the same time, they must target the specific needs of high-risk employee groups. Programs should be integrated and aligned whenever possible, and providers should be challenged to continually offer innovations that keep pace with changing needs and best practices.

PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH

Employees' mental performance drives business success in today's knowledge-based global economy. Mental health is vital to ensuring creativity, innovation and positive work relationships. Yet according to *The Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health*, poor mental health now accounts for an estimated 30 to 40 per cent of disability claims. It is also a leading driver of drug benefit costs.

Much mental illness and stress-related chronic physical disorders can be prevented through early intervention, detection and treatment. The key is to start by listening to employees, such as through employee satisfaction surveys and focus groups. Programs that look for and eliminate sources of work-related stress can begin the cultural shift toward a more mentally fit workplace.

Many organizations are beginning to design reward programs

that meet the diverse needs of its employees at various life stages and with different lifestyles. Innovative work-life programs give employees flexibility in their work arrangement or schedule, and support personal fitness goals and community involvement.

According to Gretchen van Riesen, vice-president, global pensions and benefits at CIBC, her organization has created a host of innovative workplace policies and practices that link health promotion initiatives, a healthy workplace culture and a total rewards strategy. For example, its online health risk assessment tool for employees has consistently identified psychological distress as the number one health risk with the most potential to affect productivity.

“Our assessment technology has provided us with the aggregate data needed to analyze areas of risks where productivity is vulnerable and where there is readiness for change,” says van Riesen. “We’ve also found that one of the fundamental determinants of health is actually the employee-manager relationship. A behavioural approach to returning employees to work during an absence, where the manager and employee meet on a regular basis, has been highly effective.

“We continue to refine our process,” she adds. “But introducing risk management to our program has been a win-win situation for all.”

CREATING TEACHABLE MOMENTS

Effective, clear and consistent communication is critical to raising awareness and achieving maximum participation in health and wellness programs. By using five key communication principles, employers can create teachable moments that will make their health initiatives relevant and compelling for employees, and engage them to take action.

1. Target communications to attract those at highest risk.
2. Stage communications to catch people at different levels of readiness to change.
3. Demonstrate wellness as a corporate value and design programs that encourage healthy behaviour. This includes fostering healthy competition among employee groups, which encourages uptake

and program penetration and fosters team building and social support networks.

4. Protect employees’ right to privacy. Offer programs that are engaging, not invasive.
5. Approach communication as a continuous process, not an occasional task. Benefit providers can use their websites to present health information at the right time and in the right context, such as when an employee is inquiring about their coverage or about a claim.

Offering health promotion programs alongside a flexible benefits package can also prove effective. Encouraging employees to make informed choices, and to take accountability for those choices, will ultimately lead to a better employee understanding of the value of their total rewards.

SUPPORTING THE BUSINESS CASE

In the past, workplace health programs have often not been properly measured in terms of return on employer investment. Today, insurers and health program providers are developing more reliable metrics to help companies measure key performance indicators. Those include program participation and satisfaction levels, drug and other health claims incidence and costs, productivity measures (including casual absenteeism), disability or worker compensation claims and employee morale.

One example where such metrics are being developed is a health and wellness study conducted by the Atlantic Health and Wellness Institute and co-sponsored by Sun Life Financial with Pfizer Canada Inc., AstraZeneca Canada Inc. and the Nova Scotia Public Service Commission. The four-year study will implement a comprehensive program of workplace wellness initiatives and evaluate them based on a range of clinical and economic factors. A goal of the program is to help employers formulate the business case for their health and wellness initiatives and track their return on investment. Learnings from the study will assist with the development of the necessary measurement tools employers need to do that.

Workplace wellness initiatives can go a long way toward fostering

a nurturing, high-performing workplace. But they can't succeed without the right level of trust and commitment on the part of the organization and its employees.

The ultimate goal is to create a fully integrated, prevention-focused health and wellness strategy across the organization that supports employees and at the same time makes them accountable for managing their health. The right tools, at the right time, focused on the right opportunities, can turn a healthy workplace into a winning culture and a healthier bottom line.

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¹ Lowe, Dr. Graham. "The dollars and sense of health promotion," *HR Reporter*, Sept. 23, 2002.

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