

# Programs in the Workplace



## The compelling case for smoking cessation programs in the workplace

- by Erin Dick

With so many smoking restrictions now in place, smoking at the dinner table or at the office is truly the stuff of a bygone era – something many people have only seen on TV shows like *Mad Men*, but have never experienced first-hand. It's hard to fathom that nearly half of all Canadians smoked in the 1960s (49.5%)<sup>1</sup>, and while that number seems almost surreal in today's environment, the negative long-term impact of smoking still exists.

We've come a long way. Today, legislation and high cigarette costs have greatly restricted smoking, and there's much higher awareness of the health risks, including those related to second-hand and third-hand smoke. According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation, the smoking rate has dropped to about 23%<sup>2</sup> and almost all public areas and workplaces are smoke-free. In a nutshell, there's much less smoking taking place in Canada – and what is taking place occurs more in private spaces.

While the overall trends are positive, the key negatives are that long-term health and cost issues related to smoking are too often overlooked. The fact is that the habit – and its effect on employee health and employer costs – continues to be both relevant and significant today. With over five million working-age Canadians still smoking, a high rate of smoking among the youngest generation of workers, and an annual cost to employers of thousands of dollars for each smoking employee, efforts to reduce the rate of smoking in your workforce are well worth undertaking.

### Reality check: The cold hard facts about smoking in Canada

- **The numbers.** About 5 million working-age Canadians still smoke (29% of 20-34 year olds, 24.6% of 35-44 year olds, and 23.1% of 45-64 year olds)<sup>2</sup>.
- **The impact.** According to the 2010 Sun Life Canadian Health Index™<sup>3</sup>, smokers are more likely to report being overwhelmed by stress (32% vs. 22% of the overall Canadian population). They are also less productive, more likely to be absent,<sup>4</sup> and have a life expectancy that is 13.9 years lower than a non-smoker<sup>2</sup>.
- **The potential employer cost savings.** When costs relating to health and disability claims, absenteeism, and lower productivity are totaled, an employee who quits smoking can save your organization thousands of dollars per year.<sup>4</sup>
- **The desire for change.** This year alone, one in four smokers resolved to quit smoking.<sup>3</sup> While quitting is a difficult task that often needs repeating, the desire for change is there and success is most often achieved when the right support is in place.

## The case for smoking cessation programs

According to The Conference Board of Canada, employees who quit smoking can save their employer about \$3,396 per year.<sup>4</sup> Employers have a direct interest in helping their employees quit smoking – and it's why providing a smoking cessation program for employees is "less cost, more investment" than you might have thought.

Workforce demographics relating to smoking are also a concern. Generation Y employees – those born between 1982 and 1993 – are part of the group with the highest smoking rate (29% for ages 20 to 34).<sup>2</sup> While Generation Y employees currently represent about 25 per cent of the workforce, that number will rise over the next decade, and will make them the largest group in the workplace.

If Generation Y employees don't break the habit as they age, the additional cost to employers could be significant. This represents a huge challenge, as smoking is one of the most difficult bad health habits to break.

According to Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, it takes an average of 3.1 tries before someone successfully quits smoking<sup>5</sup> – and almost 80% of Canadians cite a lack of willpower and drive when working towards their healthy living goals.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, this is one initiative in which employees need all the help and support they can get. The good news is that employers are ideally positioned to offer the tools, support and incentives that employees need to quit – through general wellness initiatives and targeted smoking cessation programs in the workplace.

## Reap the rewards of smoking cessation

Employer health costs continue to rise, and preventative programs – like those related to smoking cessation are becoming an increasingly important cost-management tool. With the fastest growing employee demographic – Gen Ys in their 20s and early 30s – reporting the highest levels of smoking, the long-term cost benefits of lowering the smoking rate of this group are significant.

Few of the steps to better health are as difficult as quitting smoking, but a program that supports the initiative can make all of the difference. Employers are uniquely positioned to offer this through an integrated wellness program that includes smoking cessation support and incentives. It's good for your employees and good for your bottom line. Now that's an investment worth making.

<sup>1</sup> Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, "Smoking in Canada", February 2011

<sup>2</sup> Heart and Stroke Foundation's 2011 Report on Canadians' Health, February 2011

<sup>3</sup> 2010 Sun Life Canadian Health Index™, www.sunlife.ca/canadianhealthindex

<sup>4</sup> The Conference Board of Canada: "Smoking and the Bottom Line: Updating the Costs of Smoking in the Workplace" – August 2006

<sup>5</sup> Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada, "Quitting Smoking: Findings from the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey" – September 2004

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## Best practices – How to lower smoking rates in your workforce

1. **Conduct an assessment of your employee population.** By finding out how many employees smoke and how many are at the "ready to change" stage, you can focus your initiatives for the greatest impact.
2. **Make the program personal.** Regular, facilitated group meetings can provide employees with the peer and professional support that's often needed to quit the habit. One-on-one coaching can also be offered for those who prefer a more private approach. The inclusion of family members in the process can also be a critical element in creating a supportive, successful network for the employee.
3. **Monitor results.** Program participant follow-up sessions are an important way to help participants keep their resolve. At each of these sessions, participants should be interviewed, have their needs assessed, and have any additional support materials provided.
4. **Include other wellness initiatives.** Employees who participate in smoking cessation programs often become more aware of their general health (exercise, nutrition, stress reduction). By providing employees with access to these other wellness solutions, you can further improve their health results and your cost savings.
5. **Integrate smoking cessation with your group benefits plan.** There are a number of smoking aids and therapies that can be instrumental in helping a smoker kick the habit. By ensuring that the cost of these aids is fully or partially covered under your group benefits plan, you can provide smokers with the additional incentives and support they may need to be successful.

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