

How committed is your organization to wellness? A controversial look at shifting corporate values and business attitudes toward employee wellness.

The first in a five part series...

Here's a quick quiz:

1. Did you consult your employees before deciding what form your wellness program would take?
 YES NO DON'T KNOW
2. Are the members of the wellness committee given company time to plan events and services? (Answer "no" if there isn't a wellness committee in place at all.)
 YES NO DON'T KNOW
3. Have the components of your wellness program changed in the past year or two?
 YES NO DON'T KNOW
4. Do you have a way for lower paid employees to take advantage of wellness program offerings without an initial outlay of cash?
 YES NO DON'T KNOW
5. Do your wellness program offerings differ between branch offices?
 YES NO DON'T KNOW

If you answered "no" to any of the above questions, you need to take a closer look at how your wellness program came to be and how it is being managed.

Employee Health and Wellness programs are more than a "perk".

We've all seen the reports: workplace wellness programs result in long-term savings - when they are implemented correctly.

The business case has been made time and again: workplace wellness programs boost morale, increase productivity, cut sick time, build loyalty, slow turnover rates, reduce Worker's Comp claims, and more.



Still we continue to encounter organizations that don't seem to get it. They view wellness as something that concerns specific employees, not the company as a whole. Because they don't understand the benefits, they focus on the money going out. Their wellness programs pay lip service to the concept.

Does your business think workplace wellness is merely a cost of attracting and retaining qualified individuals, or does it know that it is *an investment* in the health and wellbeing of your company?

This five part series examines workplace wellness programs in Canadian businesses – the good, the bad, and the inert. Running throughout the article is the theme of "care" and its importance in coming business climate.

Part I: Changing times, changing needs.

Business attitudes towards the well-being of their employees continue to evolve.

Under the old way of thinking businesses offered benefit packages with the underlying hope that they would never actually be used. It's not that your boss was being malicious or stingy. It's purely a byproduct of the bottom line: use your benefits to the full extent, and the premium goes up. This put the emphasis on keeping expenses under control, as well as on illness-focused options (Long Term Care, Disability, etc.) as opposed to prevention.

A quick history lesson in workplace health will explain how we got here. In the early days of industry, workers were considered expendable extensions of the machinery. If they were injured or killed on the job, they were quickly removed, perhaps dropped off at their homes, and replaced by someone new. Strikes and laws ended that, handing employers the responsibility of taking care of sick and injured employees.

Soon extended benefits simply became part of a compensation package. Depending on your position and the type of company, your benefit package could represent a significant sum paid out by the company. It was seen as a cost in addition to the salary. Still the focus was on treating illnesses as they arose, not prevention.

The 1990s brought a new problem: the skilled worker shortage. Certain sectors were dominated by sense of free agency, where employee loyalty couldn't be bought at any price. And then studies showing the actual cost of replacing and training a new employee became more common. Depending on the position, hiring a replacement runs between *1.5 and 2.5 times their annual salary*. On top of that, sick and unhappy employees take more sick days, are less productive, have more accidents on the job, and finally quit.

Smart businesses countered this trend by learning to care.

Leading companies brought in Extended Health Care (EHC) packages, Health Spending Accounts (HSAs), and workplace wellness programs. Other companies emulated the trendsetters, but some couldn't understand why they weren't having the same success holding employees and reducing costs. The difference is simple: Caring.

Unfortunately, workplace wellness programs are often psychologically and administratively relegated to the category of "benefits." Because many packages already covered certain types of treatment, for example on site massage therapy by a Registered Massage Therapist, these forms of wellness promotion were favoured as a means of mitigating cost outlays.

We say "unfortunately" because it brings with it the attitude that it is something the employee should pay for up front and then be reimbursed by the insurer. This shifts the program from being an *investment* made by an employer to the worker's responsibility. It also makes it dependent on the employee's ability and willingness to pay. (The second installment in this series illustrates this point with an in-depth case study.)

Welcome to the 21st century

We can no longer maintain the illusion that our work and personal lives are severable. Stress from the workplace doesn't magically dissipate when you walk out the front door of the building, and problems from home (e.g. lack of sleep, personal stress) spill into the workplace.

Work-life balance has become an epic struggle with technology enabling us to do more, rather than less. This constant state of stress affects our relationships in the workplace and at home, creating apathy and often hostility.

As an added bonus, if you thought the worker shortage of the 1990s was bad, just wait another five years. The baby-boomers begin to retire in 2008, and you have an unprecedented rate of "disengaged

employees". This adds up to what Deloitte Research calls "the Talent Crisis."

From their 2004 report entitled *It 's 2008: Do You Know Where Your Talent Is?*:

Disenchanted workers pull down productivity, increase churn, and darken the morale of the people around them. The annual economic costs are huge: as much as 100 billion Euros in France, US\$64 billion in the UK, US\$6 billion in Singapore, and a whopping US\$350 billion in the United States.

How can managers reduce the losses caused by an exhausted and demoralized workforce? Helping employees to effectively manage information overload is one important step.

Providing them with the tools they need to get their job done in the most effective way possible is another. Redesigning jobs and working conditions are other important interventions, along with ensuring that key people are effectively developed and well-deployed.

Seen in this light, your workplace wellness program takes on a new importance. From the same Deloitte report:

[A] crucial and often overlooked source of disengagement comes down to workplace relationships. Emerging research suggests that workplace toxicity may trump other factors when it comes to employee morale and performance. The first step in tackling workforce discontent may involve looking in the mirror.

The number one reason people leave comes down to their relationship with their boss.

Concerned about the future health of your company given these changes? Good. Take that concern and focus it on the health and happiness of your employees.

Good leaders care. History is full of examples of caring leaders inspiring their followers to go the extra mile. Schwartzkoff, Patton, Mountbatten, and even Rommel went the extra mile to protect those in their charge; what are you doing for your employees?

In part two of this article, we take a close look at the implementation strategies of some Canadian businesses, as they bring wellness programs to their workplaces with varying degrees of care and, of course, success.

**For more information on workplace wellness programs and health promotion tools, visit:
<http://workplace.naturalhealthcare.ca/> and <http://www.employeeenergizer.com>.**