

INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

by Graham Lowe

This article is based on the author's report, *The Wellness Dividend: How Employers Can Improve Employee Health and Productivity*, which can be downloaded free at www.grahamlowe.ca.

Employee health promotion has taken root in workplaces over the past decade. This trend is likely to continue in Canada, given that employers face costly employee health issues. Employee absenteeism is rising. The aging workforce will strain future drug, disability and other employee health costs. Lost productivity accounts for about one-third of the annual \$51 billion cost of mental illness (Dewa, Thompson & Jacobs, 2011). In a global knowledge-based economy, employers can't let an unhealthy workplace reduce an employee's potential to contribute their energy and ideas.

Research on employee health promotion, or what is now called workplace wellness, has grown exponentially. This article summarizes what occupational health nurses need to know about successful workplace wellness initiatives, based on the latest research evidence. Occupational health nurses are well positioned to communicate this knowledge to employers so that wellness goals can be achieved.

Tracking wellness progress

More Canadian employers aspire to improve employee health and reduce health-related costs. There also is growing acceptance that workplace wellness programs must address an individual's physical, psychological and social well-being. However, when it comes to wellness there is a big gap between talk and action.

In fact, most Canadian employers don't offer any wellness pro-

grams at all. According to the 2012 Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey, only 40% of employees report that their employer offers such programs or services (Sanofi-Aventis Canada Inc., 2012). And among employees who have access to wellness programs, only 45% make use of these. Similarly, a Conference Board of Canada survey of large employers found that only around 1 in 4 had a comprehensive wellness strategy that addresses health risks and the underlying causes of wellbeing and productivity (Stewart, 2010). More common are stand-alone initiatives with limited scope, such as employee assistance programs, flu shot clinics, CPR/first aid training, ergonomic assessments, and wellness information.

In the US, where more employers offer wellness programs, the *Annual Review of Public Health* estimates that only 7% of companies use all the components required for successful workplace health promotion (Goetzel & Ozminkowski, 2008). These components include health education, links to related employee services (such as employee assistance programs), a supportive physical and social environment for health improvement, and employee screenings with treatment and follow-up.

Comprehensive approach

Indeed, evidence shows the benefits of a comprehensive approach to wellness. Consider two Canadian examples.

Tune Up Your Heart (TUYH) is a cardiovascular wellness program at Chrysler Canada's plant in Windsor,

Ontario (Chung et. Al., 2009). The 343 employees who volunteered for TUYH received an initial cardiovascular risk assessment. In addition to education and awareness-building, participants set health improvement goals for weight loss, smoking cessation, nutrition and physical activity. Over an 18 month period, TUYH participants experienced an average risk reduction of 12.7% resulting in substantially reduced prescription drug costs. Another comprehensive program, Healthy LifeWorks, was implemented in a Canadian government department. It showed a positive relationship between risk reduction across 11 health risk categories, absenteeism and drug costs (Makrides et. al., 2011).

These evaluations document the value of multi-pronged, comprehensive wellness interventions. More broadly, a recent review of numerous studies identifies common success factors for employer-sponsored wellness strategies (Kaspin, Gorman & Miller, 2013):

- A corporate culture that promotes wellness as a means of enhancing employees' quality of life, not just to reduce costs.
- Leaders and employees are motivated to support wellness initiatives and to improve their overall health.
- Policies and the physical environment enable employees to participate.
- Programs adapt over time to the changing wellness needs of employees.
- Community health organizations are partners in providing support, education and treatment.

- Technology facilitates health risk assessments and access to wellness education.

Program design features

The design of wellness programs influences their success. Design must take into account workforce demographics, job characteristics and health status. An immediate goal for occupational health nurses is to help employers find ways to increase participation in existing programs by improving their design.

A review of 23 workplace health promotion programs found a median participation rate of 33% among eligible employees (Robroek et. al., 2009). Women were more likely than men to participate in programs, except for fitness centres, where there were no gender differences. Interestingly, participation did not vary by age, education or income. Programs with the highest participation offered incentives, took a comprehensive approach (e.g., offering a combination of fitness, education, counseling, nutrition, health risk assessments, stress management, smoking cessation, etc.), and focused on multiple health behaviours rather than just physical activity.

In terms of demographics, older workers may be more resistant than their younger counterparts to employer-sponsored health promotion initiatives. But at the same time, helping employees to manage chronic conditions and conducting ergonomic assessments can address health issues more likely experienced by older workers. These resources should, of course, be available to all workers. Still, the most positive effects could be seen among older workers, possibly even resulting in delayed retirement – a key workforce planning goal for many Canadian employers.

Successful wellness programs at Canadian companies actively engage employees at all stages of a new initiative

Employee morale also influences participation. This suggests a potential synergy between workforce engagement and wellness that employers have not tapped. Wellness can be leveraged to increase engagement by involving employees in planning, implementing and monitoring initiatives. For example, successful wellness programs at Canadian companies such as BC Hydro and Telus actively engage employees at all stages of a new initiative. As a result, employees are more likely to participate and less likely to feel the program is being imposed on them by management (Conference Board of Canada, 2010). Furthermore, this participation may also improve employee morale.

Involving employees

Wellness committees are an effective way to involve employees and foster a sense of ownership of wellness initiatives. Worksite wellness committees (WWCs) can play a critical role in the successful implementation of programs, particularly if they are broadly representative of all employee groups.

For example, a study of WWCs at PPG Industries Inc., a large multinational corporation, highlighted how committees can provide better health promotion services to more employees in an organization (Felter et. al., 2013). How WWCs respond to local conditions influences whether or not corporate wellness goals are achieved. It is at the worksite level, not the corporate level that the systemic changes required to introduce and sustain behavioural changes

for individual employees occur. High-impact WWCs do the following:

- Assess employee health risks and use this data to set priorities and targets;
- Have the capacity to facilitate change in terms of an adequate budget, resources and authority;
- Undertake systematic program planning;
- Set the stage for implementation by providing required training, coaching and consultation; and
- Conduct on-going monitoring and evaluation of the programs.

Participatory workplace redesign also can involve front-line employees in health and safety improvements. When employees are involved in the design process they take greater ownership for their overall health and safety.

Auto manufacturer BMW used this approach to design a factory for workers age 50 and older (Loch, et. al., 2010). BMW recognized that the average age of its production workers would increase to 47 by 2017. While its older workers are absent more and work harder just to keep up, their expertise is essential for productivity. 'Project 2017' recruited a team of age 50-plus production workers (supported by engineers and health professionals) to redesign assembly-line work to reduce physical strains and the chance of errors. Worker-suggested changes were mostly simple and inexpensive, such as wood flooring, orthopedic footwear, magnifying lenses, adjustable work tables, large-handled tools, larger fonts on computer screens, rest breaks, and ergonomically optimal job rotation.

BMW's solution for its aging workforce followed the basic principles for building healthier organizations. These principles can be applied to any wellness initiative:

- Consult with employees;
- Involve them directly in the design process;
- Be open to a wide range of solutions; and
- Evaluate and learn from changes.

Promoting mental health

A major limitation of most wellness initiatives is their focus on physical health. Yet workplace risks to mental health are more pervasive than risks to physical health. Given the heightened awareness about mental health issues, we can expect wellness initiatives to expand in this direction – again, a goal that occupational health nurses can help to achieve.

More action is needed to address mental health issues in the workplace, a goal that has been championed by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC). Employers need to support employees who are experiencing mental health problems, as well as design the work environment so that it contributes to well-being.

To this end, the MHCC partnered with the Canadian Standards Association in 2013 to launch the voluntary *National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*. The

BC Hydro's return to work program provides an ROI of \$2 to \$4 per dollar invested

Standard provides a framework for identifying, assessing and reducing psychological health risks in the workplace. It builds on the occupational health and safety (OHS) management systems many employers already have in place (Canadian Standards Association, 2013). In this regard, occupational health nurses can play a leadership role by educating their OH&S partners about the Standard.

Because workplace mental health promotion is still in early stages of development, more research is needed to identify the most effective practices in this regard. Recent systematic reviews of interventions to prevent and manage depression in the workplace conclude that, at least based on rigorous scientific standards for evidence, only a few could be recommended (Dietrich, et. al. 2012; Furlan, et. al., 2012; Czabala, Charzynska & Mroziak, 2011). The most effective initiatives combine diagnosis with education and training, such as a stress inoculation training program. Some researchers also recommend focusing on depression, the most common mental health disorder.

Measuring Impact and Progress

Studies show that comprehensive wellness initiatives benefit both employees and employers. A team of Harvard researchers reviewed 36 rigorous studies of the financial pay-offs of workplace health promotion (Baicker, Cutler & Song, 2010). They found that health care costs fall by an average of \$3.27 for every dollar invested and absenteeism costs fall by \$2.73 for every dollar spend. These return-on-investment (ROI) calculations are based on comparisons between workers who participated in wellness programs, with their peers who did not. The health risks targeted by most programs were obesity and smoking, the two leading causes of preventable death in the US. In over 80% of the studies, employee health data was collected using health risk assessments – tools not yet widely used in Canada.

Few Canadian employers calculate their ROI from workplace health and wellness initiatives. Economics does not drive wellness investments in Canada to the same extent as in the US. The two main reasons for Canadian employers to invest in wellness are

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creating a healthy and productive workforce and fostering a corporate culture that supports healthy lifestyles. Financial returns or cost reductions through reduced absenteeism and disability claims are less important (Sanofi-Aventis Canada Inc., 2012). However, more employers are attempting to measure the impact of interventions on reduced employee health risks and related costs. American employers have a much greater incentive to do so, because they are responsible for 20% of all health care spending in the US.

Nonetheless, examples from Canada mirror the more extensively documented ROI in the US. BC Hydro's return to work program provides an ROI of \$2 to \$4 per dollar invested. The company also measures the benefits of its health promotion activities by tracking and benchmarking absenteeism (Stewart, 2010). CIBC introduced a back-up childcare centre for its employees. This initiative helped alleviate the stress associated with child-care worries, and at the same time reduced absenteeism by 2,500 days during the first year of operation, for a productivity saving of \$1.5 million (Conference Board of Canada, 2008).

An emerging trend is mining employee health claims data to provide a disease and health risk profile of the workforce. This can be done in partnership with the employer's health and disability insurance providers. For example, when BP America Inc. analyzed its health care claims, it discovered that 6% of employees accounted for 60% of claims costs, a statistic that informed the design of a wellness program that bought health care costs down (Geisel, 2012).

Finally, this may be an opportune time to introduce employee health risk assessments (HRAs) as a tool for identifying needs and tracking progress. The 2012 Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey found that 92%

of employees currently in benefit plans would participate in on-site health risk screenings for heart disease, diabetes, stress, depression and other medical conditions. However, this sort of screening is offered by only 17% of employers surveyed (Sanofi-Aventis Canada Inc., 2012). While HRAs have been used for several decades, their impact on individual health behaviour and employer costs has been limited. To increase the positive outcomes from HRAs, more emphasis is needed on determining employees' health interests, concerns and preferences. An HRA could be a useful tool for those occupational health nurses who play a role in developing wellness programs.

Building Healthier Organizations

To summarize, many studies confirm that successful workplace wellness interventions provide individualized risk reduction and disease management within a comprehensive program design that includes a range of individual and organizational resources. The question for management is not whether to introduce wellness programs, but how to design, implement, and evaluate programs to achieve the best outcomes.

For those employers who already have workplace wellness initiatives, the next step involves expanding their reach to get at the full range of workplace determinants of health and performance. And for employers considering the introduction of a wellness program, addressing both the individual and organizational dimensions of wellness will bring quicker results.

Employee wellness initiatives can provide a springboard to sustained organizational success. Employers who promote employee health and safety reap cost savings and productivity advantages,

as well as a healthier workforce. The challenge for occupational health nurses is to package this message in ways that make it resonate for employers.

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