

# Mindful Wellness

*Benefits Canada's* 2014 Healthy Outcomes Conference explored the return on investment in health and wellness programs—and how to create change for the better

*By Brenda Bouw*

**E**mployers are increasingly realizing that the health and wellness of their employees affects the health and wellness of the organization.

But when it comes to developing a strategy that truly delivers return on investment (ROI), many long-held beliefs may not be what they seem. What are the gaps in incentivizing wellness, and how can employers get the whole picture?

The theme of this year's conference was **Mindful Wellness: Challenging the Status Quo**. More than 60 delegates participated in think-tank sessions and interactive workshops to discuss and debate wellness topics in good conscience: what's working and what isn't, as well as how to create more effective wellness initiatives that reward both employees and employers.



## Why Wellness Isn't Working and How We Can Fix It

There is a gap between how healthy Canadians *think* they are and what's *really* going on in their bodies—driven, in part, by high levels of health illiteracy, explained David Willows, vice-president, strategic market solutions, with Green Shield Canada.

Willows said a surprising 60% of adult Canadians have a low level of health literacy, meaning that they're unable to act on information and services to make appropriate health decisions. That ignorance can lead them to ignore or misdiagnose their own health issues, increasing the risk that the problems will worsen.

Willows pointed to data showing that people with low health literacy skills are 2.5 times more likely to be in fair or poor health. "The importance of health literacy on health and health behaviour is evident," he said.

**"Wellness programs are seen as a way to improve employee productivity, reduce absenteeism and disability costs, reduce healthcare/drug costs and attract employees"**

— David Willows


And it's a growing concern for employers and insurers, which are already coping with the escalating costs of employee health and benefits programs—particularly as the large baby boomer segment of the workforce gets older and relies more heavily on these plans.

Looking at the average company, Willows said it's estimated that about 20% of employees are intrinsically committed to managing their health. About 60% can be influenced to be healthier but struggle with finding the time or incentive to get fit and eat better. "We need to focus more on [employees] and try to get them engaged," he added.

It's the last 20%—the least healthy employees—who are hard-wired to have poor health habits and will be difficult to influence.

Willows also pointed out that only 20% of claimants within Green Shield's client base account for 75% of the drug costs. Furthermore, the top 5% account for 45% of the costs. Common diseases among both sets of employees include arthritis, diabetes, depression, asthma and hypertension. In many cases, employees may take medication for one or more of these diseases.

While the data is discouraging, Willows said companies can address the challenges of an unhealthy workforce through more strategic and proactive health and wellness programs. He believes there's a misalignment today between what is currently offered at many organizations and the high-risk health issues that employees face—most prominently in a sedentary lifestyle.

"By keeping employees healthy, wellness programs are seen as a way to improve employee productivity, reduce absenteeism and disability costs, reduce healthcare/drug costs and attract employees," Willows added. 



David Willows

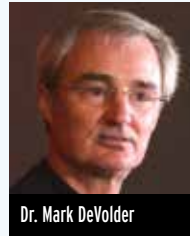
## KEYNOTE SESSION

### HARNESS THE HURRICANE

Adapt to Extreme Change and Achieve New Heights

Change is constant and unpredictable. It can also be scary—especially when it's happening to you and your organization.

The best way to handle change is to "accept and let go" of the past and "find opportunity in the rubble," said Dr. Mark DeVolder, a change and engagement specialist with Synergy Sense Consulting Ltd.



Dr. Mark DeVolder

"Accept doesn't mean agree," he continued. "It means, it happened and there is nothing you can do about it—other than accept the fact that it happened."

DeVolder—whose experience includes coaching companies through mergers and acquisitions and offering guidance to NASA—said there are three stages that most organizations go through when dealing with change: the Crisis, the Holding Period and the New Beginning.

Each stage requires work to succeed, he noted. "Some companies are doing well around the issue of change. Some are trying and failing miserably."

The Crisis is when a change is announced or forced upon a company. DeVolder explained that the three most important questions to ask during this phase are as follows:

- 1) What is the change?
- 2) What will be different?
- 3) Who is losing/gaining?

"It needs to be stated succinctly for people," he said. "To help people accept and let go, it's important to articulate and have them understand what they will be losing—because they will be losing something."


The Holding Period is the time when change seems to drag on. It's also when conflict often happens, noted DeVolder. For many people and companies going through change, this period is often quite challenging.

"The work of Stage 2 is that we have to learn to wait patiently and learn as much as we can," he said.

While the Holding Period is tough, DeVolder noted that it's actually Stage 3, the New Beginning, that many people find the most difficult at the end of the change process.

"This is when it actually happens: the big transition. Will they make it? There are no guarantees," he said. "The work is to let go and take a leap of faith. That can be difficult. Ultimately, it comes down to making decisions."

DeVolder recommended that employers help their employees focus on the positive aspects of change and the opportunities it will bring, while also acknowledging the challenges they'll face together.

"By showing them they know both sides, leaders will help people let go," he said. "There will still be resistance, but leaders who are able to be compassionate while identifying why change is necessary will be most successful. It has to be genuine." 

## Interactive Workshops

To keep the discussion going, delegates broke out into smaller groups to talk about a wide range of wellness issues and challenges. Based on the discussions, moderators offered their insights and reported key take-aways.

### Incentivizing wellness: Carrots or sticks?

**Are employers using the right incentives to truly change behaviour?**

**Moderator:** Marc Mitchell, PhD candidate, University of Toronto and Cardiac Rehabilitation Supervisor, University Health Network

**Take-aways:** There needs to be a greater shift away from wellness events that happen once a year, such as in the spring/



Marc Mitchell

summer, to a year-round culture of wellness. While many believe that rewards for participation are good incentives for employees, there are concerns about

the potential for reward fatigue. Overall, delegates are looking for more evidence and examples of effective programs that inspire employees and incentivize other organizations that implement effective wellness programs.

### Drug plan usage and productivity

**Are employers doing enough now to keep their drug plans sustainable for future years?**

**Moderator:** Kathy Sotirakos, senior market access manager, private insurance, Amgen Canada Inc.

**Take-aways:** Plan sponsors are constantly looking at management techniques and new health and wellness programs, and



Kathy Sotirakos

they're starting to consider plan design changes. A number of tough decisions will need to be made in the coming years—especially given the aging

workforce, which is expected to rely more heavily on benefits programs. There is an opportunity now for employers to challenge their suppliers to gather the data and evidence to better understand the value of their benefits plans in order to sustain drug plans for

the future. Everyone has a role to play, including insurers, plan advisors and even manufacturers, which make medications and bring innovation to plan members.

### Defining and measuring the value of health benefits

**What metrics do employers use to measure the value of their health benefits?**

**Moderator:** Mark Jackson, senior manager, market access, PIVINA Consulting



Mark Jackson

**Take-aways:** Absenteeism data is a good way to measure the value and effectiveness of health benefits. Employers can use absenteeism data as a way to detect

potential health issues, intervene early and try to prevent disability claims. It's also about doing the right thing for the employee. Ultimately, the goal would be to integrate more data with absenteeism to paint a more complete picture.

### Plan approach and the role of providers

**How are employers developing their health benefits strategy? Should providers play a larger role?**

**Moderator:** Danny Peak, senior manager, national, private payer strategy, Sanofi Canada Inc.



Danny Peak

implement an effective wellness program. It's important to have a champion in the organization that can work with leadership and try to align the health

benefits strategy with the corporate strategy. Companies should try to get their providers to play a larger role and work with them on developing leadership buy-in so they can offer a relevant and sustainable wellness program. Everyone has a responsibility to engage in this conversation.

### Smoking cessation support

**Should smokers pay a financial penalty? Should non-smokers be rewarded?**

**Moderator:** Carmen Hogan, vice-president, sales & service, Green Shield Canada

**Take-aways:** About two-thirds of those who discussed this topic believe there should be penalties for smokers. Those who disagreed did so because they felt you can't penalize only smokers—what about people who have poor eating habits, for



Carmen Hogan

example? Almost everyone agreed that employees should be rewarded for *not* smoking. Rewards could include lower premiums or extra plan credits. The bottom line is, it's

important for employers to know which employees are smokers and offer tools to help them quit. Consider incentivizing providers such as pharmacies or dentists as part of the solution.

### Wellness and leadership buy-in

**What level of leadership should own the decision-making on a wellness strategy? What metrics are most important?**

**Moderator:** Jack Shih, associate director, national policy planning, Merck Canada

**Take-aways:** Only some companies give their HR departments full autonomy over the implementation of wellness programs, while others require input from C-suite



Jack Shih

executives. ROI is a key measure of a plan's effectiveness. While it's sometimes difficult to demonstrate, the measurements are useful to help companies

make any necessary adjustments in their wellness programs from year to year. Government tax credits, insurance premium discounts and recognition, such as industry awards, can also work as incentives for companies—and their peers—to implement wellness programs.

### Linking wellness and engagement

**How can managers and HR specialists better engage employees through wellness initiatives?**

**Moderator:** Graham Lowe, president, The Graham Lowe Group

**Take-aways:** It's important to break down the silos separating engagement strategies and wellness initiatives. Data from engagement surveys, HR and benefits utilization should be a collective resource to facilitate an integrated profile



Graham Lowe

of organizational health. More robust employee management committees with expanded mandates can link engagement, wellness, and

occupational health and safety goals. However, there is a significant barrier: middle managers and front-line supervisors lack the time, training and resources to connect wellness and engagement.

### Mental health and responsibility

**Are companies doing enough to support the mental well-being of their employees?**

**Moderator:** Karen Seward, president, Cira Medical Services

**Take-aways:** There is social acceptance of mental health but not necessarily professional acceptance. Companies shouldn't just manage mental health but should recognize it and support



Karen Seward

it. They need to acknowledge that people in the workplace may not have a behaviour issue but a resiliency issue, which can lead to a mental health

issue. Regardless of the health issue, the organization's responsibility is to provide the support; the employee's responsibility is to engage with that support.



Want to see who else was there? Go to [benefitscanada.com/photo-gallery](http://benefitscanada.com/photo-gallery)

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Putting the Analytics in the Hands of Employers

Four expert panellists at the Healthy Outcomes Conference discussed how to measure the costs and return on investment (ROI) of wellness programs, as well as who is responsible for driving them.

### PANELLISTS (FROM THE LEFT)

- ▶ **Dr. David Satok**, corporate medical director, Rogers Communications Inc.
- ▶ **Tanya Hogan**, director, health solutions and pharmacy projects, Shoppers Drug Mart
- ▶ **Chris Camp**, chair, Halifax Professional Firefighters Benefits Trust
- ▶ **Adam Marsella**, national manager, private market solutions, GlaxoSmithKline



**Q:** Do employers currently have the right tools and resources to understand the costs and ROI of the various programs they offer?

**Satok:** "In order to get ROI, we need to look at the cost of wellness activities and programs versus savings to the company. This is still a difficult task to get to a hard number...Today, we are less concerned and now follow the holistic approach of employee value offering (EVO) over ROI. EVO is all about the culture of the organization."

**Q:** Recognizing that change is a long-term process, what kinds of interim measures can employers use?

**Hogan:** "It depends on how complex the program is that you're considering implementing and the size of your employee population. If it's high cost, you should invest in data upfront. There are many existing programs available to employers with little cost—in which case, you don't want to get caught up in trying to demonstrate ROI."

**Marsella:** "When it comes to integrating data from multiple sources/vendors, the two options are to outsource it—find a vendor or partners that will do it for you...or roll your sleeves up and do it yourself, which is a significant amount of work."

**Q:** Do you think ROI is important? If so, how do you measure it?

**Marsella:** "You need to try to link it back to the values of the organization—

think that's a much stronger driver [than ROI]."

**Camp:** "I don't buy into ROI as the sole reason for implementing wellness programs. From our perspective, you should focus on the employees and the programs first and, eventually, you'll get the ROI. Yes, it's important to measure the programs, but we're doing ourselves a disservice by focusing on the financial benefit right away. It's going to come, but it will take time. As a union member, I realize we have to work together with employers. This isn't about collective bargaining; it's about trying to effect positive change in people. When you make that change, affect that life positively—and maybe even save that life—it's worth more than any ROI."

**Q:** Whose responsibility is it to drive change toward a broader, more strategic view of wellness?

**Satok:** "I think it's everyone's responsibility. The question is, who is going to step up? If your CEO steps up and says it's a priority, you just got the golden ticket as a wellness provider. If not, the people responsible for wellness programs within a company need to step up, because it's the right thing to do."

**Hogan:** "There isn't a single stakeholder who's responsible; we all have a role to play. For employers, it's about retention and attracting talent. Having these programs is beneficial to everyone in an organization, both employees and the employer."



## Winning Employer Strategies Series

As part of the conference agenda, *Benefits Canada* invited several employers to share their best practices for workplace wellness. Find more case studies at [benefitscanada.com/winningwellness](http://benefitscanada.com/winningwellness)

### Stantec Inc. An Evolving Wellness Blueprint

When Stantec Inc. first adopted its wellness program eight years ago in the U.S., the original goal was to curb spiralling healthcare costs. The Edmonton-based planning, engineering and consulting company introduced the same comprehensive incentive-based program focusing on exercise and nutrition, as well as annual biometric screening, for its Canadian employees a couple of years later.



Trudi Hampel

Today, the company—which has grown to 13,000 employees in 200 locations around the world—sees the program as a critical element of its staff recruitment and retention efforts. Employees are attracted to the company's focus on keeping its employees healthy, including a few friendly

fitness competitions. Employees can earn points for improving their health in various ways, including wearing a KAM (kinetic activity monitor), taking health quizzes, getting regular checkups and participating in other challenges throughout the year. Employees can earn incentive points that translate into money, which they can then choose to have deposited into their healthcare spending account (which can be used to cover the unpaid portions of glasses, dental, massage, prescriptions, etc.) or their personal wellness spending account, which can be used for health classes such as yoga or Pilates or for gym memberships.

In addition, the company holds an annual draw for the employees who have earned more than 200 points. Thirty names are drawn randomly, and winners receive a \$20 prepaid Visa card. The top five point earners in both the U.S. and Canada also earn a \$500 prepaid Visa card.

“Really, what we want to do is to get people to move,” said Trudi Hampel, Stantec’s HR manager. “We all know healthy employees are good for business...at Stantec, wellness has become part of the culture.”

This year, more than half (53%) of its Canadian employees participated in the wellness program—which, Hampel said, is the highest participation rate the company has seen since the program’s inception.

Stantec communicates the program annually in a wellness guide, as well as through a monthly newsletter and a quarterly update for employees on their point status.

Internal Stantec data show that the program is producing healthier employees and saving money, Hampel said. For example, the company said biometric results have improved, and pharmacy costs—as well as sick time and disability costs—are lower for program participants versus non-participants.

But, Hampel added, it’s not just about the money Stantec

saves on healthcare costs. Employees also get a lot out of the program. “It’s not about what we’re getting back but what people are getting out of it. We want to continue to help people make health their habit.”

### University of British Columbia Creating a Web of Well-being: Leading to the Unexpected

When most people hear about mindfulness—the practice of being in and appreciating the moment—they think of a calming exercise that takes place off the clock, at weekend retreats or local yoga studios. However, the University of British Columbia (UBC) is one of a growing number of organizations that are looking at the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace.

The university hired a mindfulness expert last year and introduced the practice on campus through a series of one- to three-hour workshops for employees, work units and managers. It also hosted some mindfulness drop-in groups.

Natasha Malloff, UBC’s senior manager of health, well-being and benefits, said there was so much interest in these events that the university decided to expand the program while also conducting research on the impact of mindfulness on workplace performance. It partnered with UBC’s Sauder School of Business to see whether mindfulness could help its employees to better focus on their work, develop stronger emotional intelligence and enhance creativity.

The program included 84 participants who took part in mindfulness exercises for two hours a week over five weeks, as well as a one-day retreat. Of those in the program, 65% participated in the research study.

When the program was complete, participants were asked to report how they were able to translate what they learned into their daily work. Malloff said the results were encouraging.

“A lot of the self-report feedback we got was examples of how the employee was able to remain calmer in conflict situations—whether it was with a colleague, in a meeting or with a student,” she explained.

Participants reported being less emotionally reactive and said they became better listeners. Many also reported having increased clarity and focus on their work.

“For us, this was a win-win,” said Malloff. “We were able to support research while impacting health outcomes.”

Preliminary results from the research study are expected this fall. UBC hopes the research results will lead to more mindfulness offerings as part of its wellness programs in the future.



Natasha Malloff

## Maximizing Well-being and Performance

**M**ore Canadian companies are discovering the strategic advantages of having an effective health and wellness program, including increased employee productivity and lower health claims costs. But there's also an additional benefit being realized by companies with robust wellness plans: increased employee engagement.

According to Graham Lowe, president of The Graham Lowe Group Inc., there's a strong correlation between workplace well-being and engagement. The two are



Graham Lowe

closely linked, he said, even though they are often managed as distinct goals and strategies. "The same conditions in the work environment that promote engagement also promote wellness," Lowe noted.

He pointed to Aon Hewitt's *Best Employers in Canada* study, which shows that highly engaged workplaces report employees with better physical health, lower job stress and less absenteeism compared with less-engaged workplaces. He also cited research conducted at a Fortune 100 company showing that overall employee well-being predicts future performance and cost-related outcomes.

"In other words, well-being is a leading indicator of future human capital costs for employers," Lowe explained.

Having a healthy, engaged workforce can also be a

**"Healthy employees working in healthy environments are more productive, creative and collaborative"**

— Graham Lowe

### 8 INGREDIENTS FOR A VIBRANT WORKFORCE


1. Trust, respect and fairness
2. Two-way communication
3. Autonomy and input
4. Adequate resources
5. Supportive supervisors
6. Challenging, interesting work
7. Recognition and rewards
8. Safe, healthy environment

competitive edge for companies when attracting and retaining staff—and, in turn, making a profit. "Healthy employees working in healthy environments are more productive, creative and collaborative," said Lowe. "The result will be a higher-performing and more sustainable organization."

Still, he acknowledged that building and maintaining a highly engaged healthy workforce isn't easy. He recommended that employers start by looking for synergies between their employee wellness and employee engagement strategies.

In his report, *The Wellness Dividend*, Lowe noted that employers can also use wellness to increase engagement by involving employees in planning, implementing and monitoring initiatives.

He cited successful wellness programs at BC Hydro and TELUS as just a couple of examples of companies that have actively engaged 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," he said.

What's more, the programs that come from those initiatives have other indirect benefits, such as improving employee morale. "Employee morale also influences participation, suggesting a potential synergy between workforce engagement and wellness that employers have not tapped," Lowe added. 

Brenda Bouw is a freelance writer based in Vancouver.



# Thank You to the 2014 Healthy Outcomes Conference Sponsors



PLATINUM SPONSOR



EXPERT PANEL SPONSORS



do more  
feel better  
live longer



WORKSHOP SPONSORS



DINNER SPONSORS



BREAKFAST SPONSOR



## Homewood Health™

A name synonymous with mental health and addiction services.



Backed by more than 130 years of experience, we ensure your employees achieve the best outcomes.

We provide medically focused in-patient and out-patient care, Return to Work Services, and Employee and Family Assistance Programs.

What sets us apart is our mental health and addiction expertise.

For more information,  
please contact us at:  
1.888.689.8604  
busdev@homewoodhealth.com  
www.homewoodhealth.com

