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Healthy Organizations - Today And Tomorrow

By: Sue Pridham

The definition of organizational **health** has changed dramatically over the past 25 years and will continue to evolve as quickly as workplaces change.

The trends show a movement away from a 'treat the symptoms' approach to a focus on prevention. Leading companies are replacing traditional **health** centres with comprehensive wellness programs. Annual **health** screenings are brought on site along with exercise facilities.

Healthy organizations are integrating **health** and wellness in ways that reflect the corporate culture and physical environment. Policies and procedures are becoming more employee-centric to address changes in attitudes, demographics, and business processes.

Leading organizations are also demonstrating a commitment to practices that create an environment where employees feel comfortable, confident, engaged, and supported at work. They recognize that employees are key to business success. Healthy workplaces have moved beyond a 'nice to have' perk to a critical and dynamic strategy at the core of business success.

The Conference Board of Canada reports that health information and promotion programs are the fastest growing components of human resource strategies. So what has changed in the workplace to warrant this new thinking and what are companies doing to keep in step with the times and one step ahead of the competition?

First, we no longer need to be convinced of the value of workplace health and wellness strategies. We have 25 years of research to support the business case that workplace health makes good business sense. Research has consistently shown that healthy employees are absent less, have higher morale, are more productive, and have lower healthcare costs which result in a healthier bottom line for the business and a higher level of customer satisfaction. Moreover, the effects of the workplace environment are felt throughout society – on families, businesses, and the healthcare system.

Unhealthy Workforces

Unhealthy workforces are costing Canadian organizations billions of dollars annually. Statistics Canada indicates that the cost from all causes of employee absence alone is about \$8.6 billion per annum.

Second, we are now experiencing a war for talent. "Employers can no longer rely on good wages to attract key talent," says Janet Crowe, national wellness manager at TELUS. The Gen Ys are entering the workplace with a bundle of demands. They expect that the workplace will support them not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well.

TELUS believes that annual health screening programs brought into the workplace – including flu shots, blood pressure and cholesterol testing, and breast cancer screening – not only bring convenience, but peace of mind as well.

Husky Injection Molding has created a physical work environment that supports employee health and well-being.

Its five-building, 70-acre campus features a state-of-the-art, 11,000 square foot fitness centre, outdoor walking trails, a sand volleyball court, and a portable basketball court as well as bicycles for transportation between buildings. It also supports an onsite child development centre and health conscious cafeterias.

Its food services philosophy is one of the most forward-thinking in the country. Together with a naturopathic doctor and the World Wildlife Fund, they have prepared a banned/restricted food list based on pesticide concerns, antibiotic use, depletion of fish stocks, and nutritional value.

"Our goal is to offer our employees healthy food choices that promote well-being and energy," says Glenn Atkinson, director of employee health, safety, and wellness.

More Open And Responsive

Progressive workplaces have become more open and responsive to the needs and interests of their employees. Annual employee satisfaction surveys are common and employers are taking a proactive approach to address what they are hearing. This sends a powerful message that employee ideas and concerns are taken seriously and that the company cares.

1-800-Got-Junk boasts turnover rates for its call centre staff which are far below industry standards. One reason for this is employees have a forum for openly expressing their ideas and, as a result, feel their personal lives are considered. One idea that was acted on was to provide work schedules two weeks in advance so employees could plan their personal lives.

Another company has addressed work life balance by encouraging employees to refrain from sending emails before 6 a.m., after 6 p.m., and on weekends. As well, meetings booked after 4:30 p.m. are not encouraged. These initiatives have helped to reinforce a company culture which promotes leaving work at work.

Workplace policies have become more employee friendly and flexible to address work life quality. With concerns about increased commute times, fuel emissions, and juggling work and family, more companies are expanding their 'work from home option' to provide optimal work life balance. 1-800-Got-Junk provides its nonsales centre staff with laptop computers for work outside the office or if they need to be close to home for personal commitments.

Envision Financial has put together a five-year strategy to help its employees better cope with increased demands of work and personal responsibilities. It allows new mothers the option of taking an extra year off work through unpaid leaves of absence. For parents returning to work, it provides job sharing, working from home, and parttime work with benefits.

F.H. Black and Company, a certified management accounting and consulting firm, has taken a proactive approach to employee health. Coined as 'peternity leave,' employees are given time to care for their sick pets.

Focus And Attention

Another workplace trend is the focus and attention on diversity. In addition to programs to deal with cultural diversity, many workplaces are addressing interests related to generational diversity. While the boomers are looking for resources and support to attend to their personal health needs and those of their aging parents, the younger generation is concerned about career advancement while raising a family.

As the workforce ages, wellness programs will become more important to manage disability and health, says Ruth Wright, a senior research associate studying human resource issues with the Conference Board of Canada. Organizations are experiencing rising healthcare costs with stress and mental health topping the list. Many employers are conducting training for managers to help identify signs and symptoms of chronic stress and mental illness. Employees want to work for companies that are caring and supportive.

When Canadian employees at Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) get sick, they can call up a new internal website for help. As part of its offerings, the site carries an unusual invitation to meet with CEO Chris Clark to talk confidentially about their health challenges. He is a role model for providing a supportive culture that fosters health and well-being as he talks freely about his battle with cancer on an internal site devoted to wellness. Through Clark's leadership, PwC has developed a wellness culture which includes support through guidance on prevention and general health as well as advice and networks when illness strikes.

Citigroup's wellness culture also stems from strong leadership and a role model who walks the talk. Robert Smuk, president and CEO, works out regularly at the company fitness centre as part of his efforts to control Type 1 Diabetes.

Open communication is at the heart of Citigroup's culture. Smuk meets regularly with his staff for 'fireside chats' where employees share pizza and talk informally about their ideas and concerns. He has created an atmosphere where employees feel secure that they will be listened to and treated fairly.

"I believe that physical health impacts mental and emotional health which, in turn, positively influences productivity and the bottom line. As a leader in the organization, it is my goal to enable an infrastructure where employees can take ownership of the program and their health and well-being," he says.

Bricks And Mortar

Organizational health is expanding beyond the bricks and mortar of the office. Leading organizations are also paying attention to the health of the communities in which they reside. Corporate giving and a commitment to preserving the environment enhance health inside and out. Opportunities to give back help employees feel engaged and connected to their places of work, while organizations are contributing to the broader good.

At Envision Financial, employees receive three paid days per year for community volunteer commitments. And Envision donates \$100 to their chosen charity for every 40 hours of volunteer time the employee contributes.

The Canada Life Assurance Company has replaced multi-tasking with multi-purposing. Its multi-faceted approach to giving often combines physical activity and corporate philanthropy with the grassroots volunteer efforts of its staff and financial security advisors. Through the Key to Giving – the national corporate citizenship program of Great-West Life, London Life, and Canada Life – the company supports charitable organizations across the country in areas such as health and wellness, arts and culture, education, civic initiatives and social services. The company's title sponsorship of the annual Canada Life CN Tower Corporate Challenge is one such example. This year, more than 100 employees combined their love of fitness and community to climb 1,776 steps up the CN Tower, helping to raise funds in support of the World Wildlife Fund.

With constant technological change, some of the high touch elements of the workplaces of the past are no longer present. Companies are recognizing the need to foster social interaction. Dr. Julien Barling, associate dean, School of Business, Queen's University, says one of the greatest indicators of whether your employees will stay is whether they have a best friend at work. Relationship building has become another important element of healthy organizations.

One event Autoliv in Markham, ON, believes helps to build healthy relationships amongst its plant and office workers is the Wacky Olympics. Employees participate in teams and enjoy an hour of fun and games including water balloon races, Frisbee toss, and hoola hoop competitions. This encourages teamwork and helps unite its diverse work force.

STAPLES Business Depot, in Richmond Hill, ON, holds a snowman building contest to provide some relief from the long days of winter. A trophy is awarded to the winning department while associates sip hot chocolate, and admire their snow sculptures. The STAPLES ball hockey league also promotes team work and healthy competition. More than 50 associates play at lunch and after work in the company parking lot, and improve their fitness level along the way.

Many enlightened companies recognize that managing the health of their organization is a work in progress that demands ongoing focus and attention. The common thread is their long-term commitment and integrated strategy. Although there is no one-size-fits-all formula, themes include open communication, respect for the individual, facilities and programs that support health, management of workload and pace, social responsibility, social interaction, flexible and fair policies, and a focus on continuous improvement.

Healthy organizations of the future will integrate technology in new and innovative ways to communicate health messages, create a sense of community, and measure success. More rigorous data management and integration will be at the core of program sustainability. Technology will provide a mechanism for capturing and recognizing relevant data. The business case will provide measurable outcomes while demonstrating robust economic consequences.

With more decentralized and home offices, there will be increased focus on the way work is designed, processed and managed, and how it impacts our health. There will also be more attention to individual health needs and interests and creative solutions for blending work and family life. Incentives will be put in place to help us stay on track with an increased responsibility and accountability placed on both the employer and employee to optimize health and well-being.

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