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## **Wellness – Where’s The Hidden ROI?**

By: Bruce Bell

When implementing wellness programs ROI, we need to look at several outcomes to determine the impact.

While wellness means different things to different people, the common element is to encourage individuals to make **healthy** lifestyle choices.

Wellness programs can offer access to information on diseases, nutrition, telephone support, interactive web-based programs, gym memberships, stress management programs, **health** risk assessments, **health** fairs, vaccination programs, holistic **benefits**, and more.

As the link between **healthcare** claims and **benefits** costs becomes more apparent, the concept of wellness initiatives within the workplace is gaining interest from Canadian employers.

Add to the mix an aging workforce, cost shifting by government agencies to the private sector, new and expensive drug therapies, and a constituency expecting access to the latest and greatest therapeutic protocols and it’s not hard to appreciate that **healthcare** costs are destined to rise into the foreseeable future.

### **Preventive Strategies**

As such, plan sponsors are turning their attention to preventive strategies wrapped up into wellness initiatives which have the potential to impact employee behaviour towards adopting healthier lifestyles.

Much of the activity in this arena is coming from those corporations which are leaders within their sector and which possess the resources required to analyze, deploy, and monitor programs which have been tailored to fit within their corporate philosophy.

So why aren’t more companies moving towards wellness? Clearly it is a new area and, for some companies, the very task of deploying a wellness strategy can seem daunting.

However, what seems to be a major roadblock is the difficulty of measuring outcomes or, in business speak, the return on investment (ROI).

Employers need to set expectations which are in line with the broader reality of today’s workplace and focus on those outcomes which can be measured and are meaningful to the overall health of an organization.

There are multiple difficulties (outside of the laboratory) to draw a straight line from a wellness strategy to measurable returns, strictly in terms of reduced healthcare costs.

Many questions come to mind as they relate to measurable outcomes in wellness:

- What is the annual rate of employee turnover?
- How long do employees stay with the corporation?
- Can wellness programs impact chronic or acute conditions, such as Cancer or MS?

## **Corporate Philosophy**

By now you're wondering, "what value is there to having a corporate philosophy which encourages wellness?" Not everything that is measurable is of value and, conversely, just because you can't measure it, doesn't mean there is no value.

The real short-term benefit of a well-conceived and deployed wellness strategy may actually be increased productivity and loyalty. Let's not overlook the three Rs – Recruitment, Retention, and Rewards. Gaining a reputation as the place to be is a highly desirable position in an increasingly competitive labour market. Just ask your colleagues in Calgary as they compete for resources.

Consider for a moment that as a corporation you have taken the care, time, and expense to put in place programs which encourage the well-being and health of your employees. The very act of implementing these programs sends a strong message to your employees that you care. If the success of the program is strictly measured on reducing short-term healthcare costs, not only will the results be disappointing, but, as an employer, you may be seen to be focusing on keeping healthcare costs down, rather than caring for the well-being of your employees.

Many employers attribute their wellness strategy to improved employee morale and productivity. Sounds to me like investing in your employees leads to higher productivity, which goes to the bottom line and I like that kind of ROI.

Bruce Bell is the chief executive officer of HealthSource Plus.