

Health and Wellness Programs – How to Start or Support Yours Right Now

Most people have heard about those “dream” companies that offer on-site fitness facilities with premier equipment, flat screen televisions and basketball courts, or an office café with a gourmet chef at the helm. But for most organizations, these high-end perks are out of reach because they simply don’t have the resources to invest.

The good news is that wellness efforts don’t need to be fancy or expensive to make an impact at work. With a little commitment, creativity and effort, your organization can start up a workplace wellness initiative, or support the success of one already in place, right here and right now.

Who has time for health and wellness initiatives?

As a leader, you probably already have a lot on your plate. From meeting deadlines and motivating your staff to managing employee performance issues, leading a team can be incredibly satisfying and equally challenging. You might think, “Who’s got time to pitch in with health and wellness initiatives?”

Numbers You Should Know

Before you close the book on helping out with health and wellness in your organization, consider:

- Employees who are sedentary, overweight, smoke and have a high alcohol intake miss work 50% more often than those who don’t have these four risk factors. They also use up two to three times more in health costs.
- Chronic conditions related to obesity cost Canada \$4.6 billion in 2008, which included lost work time due to employee absences.
- In 2007 - 2009 24.1% of Canadians were obese. In the US that number hit 34.4%.
- According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, 83.1% of workers in Canada think stress in their organization is a big concern.
- High levels of job stress can double the risk for heart attack.

What happens when I encourage and support health and wellness?

It may take a little time, but organizations that support and promote health and wellness report:

- Fewer absences
- Better productivity
- Lower health costs (disability, worker’s compensation, benefits costs, etc.)
- Improved morale and loyalty

What can I do to create a healthier workplace now?

Everyone, especially leaders, can play a role in organizational health. If you’re lucky enough to have a workplace health and wellness committee, join it or encourage members of your team to sign on. Don’t have one? Maybe it’s time to lead the way and start one.

In fact, the more diverse your team is, the more ideas and insights will be brought to the table. Whether you're a large organization with a moderate budget or a smaller company with limited resources, these five quick tips can help get the ball rolling.

1. **Look at the issues.** Gather up whatever data you can and figure out if there are any specific health-related concerns or patterns. Have you noticed productivity slipping? Are people getting sick more often? Has the vending machine become most employees' lunch of choice?
2. **Ask around.** Whether you send out a formal survey, get feedback from a "healthy workplace focus group" or simply talk to people on their lunch break, find out what's important to your employees. After all, building a high-end gym is meaningless if what people really want is simply the availability of healthy snacks.
3. **Enlist others.** A healthier path can sometimes feel like a lonely road. Get support from other members on your team. If you don't ask, you may never discover that your quiet and collected colleague is actually a yoga guru or that your assistant is a healthy chef extraordinaire.
4. **Start small and stick to it.** The little things can make a huge difference. Set goals that are realistic for your time and resources and are consistent and ongoing. Some "small" healthy ideas include:
 - Forming a work team – be it bowling, soccer or baseball that plays every week.
 - Launching a "Fresh Friday" potluck event that focuses on healthy food.
 - Putting up a bulletin board in the lunchroom and asking employees to contribute "healthy hints" and recipes.
 - Negotiating corporate discounts with local gyms.
 - Handing out pedometers and honouring a weekly or monthly "Best Step Star".
5. **Celebrate the victories.** Did the work soccer team win the championships? Or did that walking program result in some serious weight loss? Don't forget to celebrate these wins! They not only make those participating feel connected, but also encourage others still on the sidelines to get involved.

What can I do to support ongoing initiatives?

If you already have a health and wellness program in place you can still do your part to lead the way by:

- **Walking the talk.** As a leader, you help to set the vibe for your team. If you eat chips for lunch every day while buried under paperwork in your office, you're not so subtly letting your employees know health is low on your priority list. Instead, try embracing healthy initiatives and chances are at least some of your team will follow.
- **Helping to sell.** You likely have a lot more influence on workplace health than you realize. A personal invite from their boss to join the work soccer team or contribute to the monthly healthy potluck event can help team members feel included and motivated.
- **Flexing for success.** It's one thing to wax poetic about the benefits of good health and quite another to actually support it. For the most part, employees need you to provide a little time and flexibility – whether it's time to attend a wellness event, a committee meeting, or doling out a balanced enough workload so they have time to hit the gym after work.

Your support of employee health – no matter how big or how small – can go a long way in creating a healthier and more productive group that's committed to supporting the team and you as a leader.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EAP at 1 800 387-4765 for service in English or 1 800 361-5676 for service in French. Visit workhealthlife.com.

