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\$8.50
VOLUME 15-1
PM 40039657



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ON THE COVER:
A holistic look at the business case for wellness in the workplace





Wellness in Action

Ways to engage and retain employees through well-being initiatives look different for every organization

» BY ELIZABETH CHORNEY-BOOTH

Our workplaces don't exist separately from us. The same themes we have in our personal lives are also apparent in our work lives. At home, many of us are trying to adopt better eating and exercise practices. Likewise, companies of all sorts and sizes are bringing the concept of active living and overall wellness directly into the workplace.

National initiatives have helped a variety of organizations, kick-start campaigns that encourage employees to get in shape, physically and mentally. Companies, ranging from small tech firms to municipal levels of government, are learning that programs as simple as basic health education, flu clinics, and off-hours sporting events not only get staff moving, but also improve overall well-being and workplace morale.

Workplace wellness programs needn't be overly complicated or expensive. As long as a company carefully examines the needs and interests of its staff to develop programs that will actually elicit participation, a simple workplace wellness program can reduce measureable factors, such as absenteeism and injury claims, while simultaneously boosting less tangible benefits, such as camaraderie and job satisfaction. Ultimately, a healthy and happy workforce is a productive one.

Take a look at three examples of great workplace wellness in action across Canada.

Lotek Wireless Inc.

Lotek Wireless Inc. is a company with specific wellness concerns. Relatively small, Lotek specializes in fish-and-wild-life monitoring systems and has designed the tracking systems to be assembled at a client's site. The company's headquarters in Newmarket, Ontario employs approximately 70 people, with additional facilities in Newfoundland, New Zealand, and the U.K. Because of the nature of the operation, Lotek's staff is involved in many different kinds of work, from straight-ahead office jobs to hands-on assembly, which means employees can suffer from a wide range of work-related health problems.

The differences in the practical aspects of the jobs at Lotek raise specific concerns, but the similarities Lotek staff share have general, company-wide importance and impact. While the Lotek team is diverse in gender and ethnicity, the majority of employees fall into an older-than-average demographic, with the average age falling at 45. Lotek's human resources manager Kathy Boles says that this is the result of a high retention rate, with the typical employee staying with the company for more than ten years. While such a length of service is enviable, an older population translates to more age-related wellness issues.

"Because people have been with the company for so long, our age is creeping up," Boles says. "Over the last five years, when

we realized that our ages were averaging at 45, we knew we needed to start thinking about getting our people healthy.”

The Lotek wellness campaign started slowly, with the introduction of quick micro-breaks on the assembly floor, beginning about six years ago. The concept is simple: every morning and afternoon, a short piece of music is played and the employees stand up, stretch, or dance

run down to the assembly floor spinning the female employees around), she began developing other initiatives. While Boles put a particular emphasis on her wellness programs during October’s Healthy Wellness Month, many of her programs are now fully ingrained in Lotek’s workplace culture.

Some aspects of Lotek’s programs are straight health initiatives, including the

game of lawn darts or bocce on the Lotek lawn not only gets the staff active, but also builds relationships and morale. Boles says that she has the complete support of the company’s founder and president, James S. Lotimer, who routinely participates in the games and challenges.

“You see the president and the general manager of operations out there playing with the other staff,” Boles says. “It’s coming from the top—and people think that it’s OK to go out instead of working through their lunch hour.”

Boles has noticed some concrete improvements in the company since Lotek has embraced the wellness initiatives over the past five years. From 2008 to 2012 she has seen a significant decrease in sick days. She also notes that the company experiences almost no Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claims, which is impressive considering the physical nature of some of the jobs on the assembly floor.

Still, for Boles, the most significant impact has been the enthusiasm and engagement that she sees from staff.

“We’re like school kids when we’re out there playing,” she says. “We still want to remain that way even though we’re 50 or 60. We pull that out of the people and there are a lot of laughs. It’s just a lot of fun.”

“Over the last five years, when we realized that our ages were averaging at 45, we knew we needed to start thinking about getting our people healthy.”

around to give their bodies a break. While this is especially important to the workers who spend their days hunched over a microscope or soldering iron assembling the high-precision technical devices, many of the office workers also take the opportunity to stand up and get their blood flowing.

When Boles saw how much the staff enjoyed the micro-breaks (when they first began, the director of operations would

promotion of paramedical usage, lunchtime health seminars, on-site flu clinics, the creation of a scent-free environment, and the introduction of blood pressure testing and exercise equipment. The most interesting aspects, however, have a more multifaceted affect. Boles has organized activities such as competitive games, a stair-walking club with a challenge for employees to climb 1,700 stairs within a week; the equivalent of climbing the CN Tower. A



GETTING MOVING: Jim Lotimer, Lotek President, joins an employee playing lawn darts at a lunchtime activity that the social/wellness committee puts on.



FOR THE BIRDS: Lotek staff members making bird boxes during work hours, to be placed along the adopted river bank of the stream.



TEAM BUILDING: Victoria Airport Authority staff members participated in the "VAA Boot Camp Challenge" held at a local fire hall.

Victoria Airport Authority

Historically, the staff at the Victoria Airport Authority (VAA) in Victoria, British Columbia hadn't put much emphasis on developing a formalized workplace wellness program. Then, when Shireen Clark and Sarah Hill, who both work in the airport's administration department, spearheaded a campaign for Healthy Workplace Month two years ago, they realized that a little bit of wellness can go a long way in their workplace.

VAA's Healthy Workplace Month initiative focused on daily challenges that were emailed out to the company's fewer than 40 staff members. The challenges were designed to stimulate employees, on either a physical or mental level, every day with points awarded to participants and prizes given out each week for motivation.

Since the Airport Authority has a small but diverse staff covering various physical and sit-down jobs, Hill and Clark were careful to vary the kinds of activities they offered. Tasks included, having employees identify a top "brain food" and then incorporate it into their diets, perform ten



TAKE A HIKE: The finance and corporate service team at VAA, have an annual walking meeting.

properly executed squats, or pay a compliment to a co-worker.

"We tried to do something really challenging physically at least once a week," Clark says. "Because not all staff can do that, we'd also challenge the brain and do

something that would really make them think."

"There were certain days when people would respond to the fitness challenges, other days people would respond to the mental challenges," Hill adds. "And that

was kind of the point of making it different every day, to reach out to everybody. Because not everybody is into doing lunges, but they may be into doing a math equation.”

Hill and Clark say that while there was a fairly high participation rate last year, with the VAA’s president participating every day, this year they will make a greater effort to communicate with the outdoor maintenance workers who are not able to quickly access the challenges that came over the company email. Overall, however, the feedback from the staff has been overwhelmingly positive.

“One employee in particular told me that she felt better physically,” Hill says, “and that even her pants felt looser because of all the healthy food she was eating.”

Clark says that the even though the month of challenges is over, the VAA

makes you feel better about coming to work and achieving your goals as a team.”

Municipality of Northumberland County

Northumberland County encompasses the geographical area in Ontario that is east of Toronto, and west of Kingston and includes the town of Cobourg, Ontario. The municipal staff is made up of approximately 480 employees responsible for the area’s social services, tourism, public works, and a long-term care facility among other services. Like Lotek and VAA, the individual jobs that fall under the municipality are diverse, but on an even larger scale.

Northumberland County’s wellness program began when a single department within the municipality needed relief. Approximately six years ago, administration staff noted that workers in the municipality’s recycling plant were suf-

gym time, free apples, and other programs designed to promote active living.

The municipality’s health and safety emergency planning manager, Ken Stubbings, is the chair of the wellness committee. Stubbings says that the committee sent out a survey to determine what kind of programming would best suit the needs and interests of different groups of employees. Rather than dictate what the employees should be doing, the committee takes its cues from the staff’s suggestions and feedback.

“I don’t like to push it. As soon as you get pushy it comes across as negative,” Stubbings says. “But, for example, if the guys from the roads department come to me and want to form a ball team for a tournament, then I’d promote it because that’s a buy-in for that group. That’s what they’re interested in.”

While the municipality hasn’t made it a priority to target individual departments, if one segment of the employee population begins to experience health-related problems, the committee tries to respond. For example, the staff at the long-term care facility began to experience issues with back pain, so the committee introduced yoga classes for that group. There are also plans to expand the activities offered in the next year to attract a wider variety of participants, particularly men who are less likely than their female co-workers to participate in yoga or pilates.

While Stubbings says that it’s difficult to measure the impact of the wellness program, he does note that Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claims were down 20% in 2012 from 2011 and that absenteeism has also followed a downward trend. In 2013, the municipality plans to continue existing programs and may expand the initiative to include aspects that deal directly with mental health.

“We took the approach of doing the easy stuff first,” Stubbings says. “I can see us in 2013 taking a bit more of a focus on that. The physical stuff is easier to grab hold of right away. The mental health stuff needs to be treaded on a bit more delicately.”

Even so, the morale-building that comes from playing beach volleyball or

The Victoria Airport Authority intends to continue promoting a culture of wellness and healthy living.

administration intends to continue promoting a culture of wellness and healthy living. In addition to the challenges, employees were invited to participate in a boot camp and there are plans to bring a fitness instructor back to the office several times throughout the year. Clark is also looking into developing a program where staff will receive discounted gym memberships or fitness equipment. She also wants to send out a quarterly newsletter of health and wellness information. She says these initiatives are important to keep the staff healthy also to create a more productive workplace.

“It boosts the morale, it boosts everybody’s day,” Clark says. “It shows that everybody cares about each other and creates a friendlier atmosphere at work.”

Hill agrees. “You feel a stronger commitment to your job if you have a bit of a personal commitment as well and have some bonds at work,” she adds. “It certainly

fering from repetitive motion strain and lower back and shoulder pains. A pilates instructor was brought in to hold regular sessions to help alleviate those affected. This program remained the only formal wellness initiative in the organization for several years, but the municipality’s managers were inspired to build on its success and spread wellness programs to other departments.

Two years ago, the municipality decided to take on the Employer of Choice program, which included the implementation of a more widespread wellness plan. A committee, including one staff member from each department as well as an occupational health nurse, was formed to come up with a formalized wellness strategy. Municipality employees can now take advantage of programs like lunchtime seminars on healthy eating and proper posture, after-hours beach volleyball games, a perks program for fitness gear or



FUN INITIATIVE: Northumberland's wellness expo builds morale as well as muscle.



other activities naturally relieves stress and makes the municipality a healthier place to work, both mentally and physically. While Stubbings is hesitant to take too much credit, he does believe that his program has some lasting results that are difficult to measure.

“I wouldn’t say that it’s all related specifically to our program, but I’d like to think that it does have an impact,” he says. **YW**

Learn by Example

LOTEK:

- Consider the age of your workforce
- Assess the physical demands of each job
- Tailor activities to the work day—micro-breaks, for example

VICTORIA AIRPORT AUTHORITY:

- Offer favourite brain-food snacks—a bowl of fruit, for example
- Build a habit, offering employees a physical or mental challenge weekly
- Motivate people with prizes

MUNICIPALITY OF NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY:

- Start with small initiatives that can grow
- Get feedback with a survey
- Respond to cues and suggestions from employees

