

# How's your health?

By Curt Cherewayko

There's plenty of evidence out there supporting the idea that a healthier workplace is a more productive workplace.

The latest figures from human resources services firm **Towers Watson** show that companies with the most effective health and wellness programs, or health and productivity programs, experience 11% higher revenue per employee.

That fact is particularly noteworthy in B.C., where labour productivity has grown at a smaller rate than any other province.

According to the **B.C. Government**, the dominance of the service and construction sectors in B.C.'s economy has made it difficult to mitigate low productivity because both sectors are labour intensive and, therefore, resistant to productivity gains.

With that in mind and faced with the prospect of a smaller potential supply of workers, B.C. needs any edge it can get.

But while many B.C. companies are investing more in health and wellness

programs, the quality of and employee participation in such programs vary.

At the top of the spectrum are companies that use health and wellness programs to create a culture in which employees continuously and proactively manage their health inside and outside of the workplace.

At the other end are companies whose health and wellness programs include nothing more than the few basic services that are offered in standard employment assistance programs and, perhaps, a quarterly boardroom yoga session.

The **BC Human Resources Management Association's** (BCHRMA) **Ian Cook** said that the many organizations in B.C. who have robust health and wellness do so because they are able to tangibly measure the results, or return on investment, of such programs.



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B.C. companies need any edge they can get to boost productivity, but the quality of wellness programs in the province is inconsistent

**Employee assistance**  
A less costly but nonetheless effective part of the BCHRMA efforts to address employee wellness is to ensure that employees take

full-advantage of the association's robust employee assistance (EA) program.

EA programs are largely underused by companies, said Cook, because employers don't promote them and employees don't think about them.

"You're already paying for it, you're just not actually achieving the tangible results from it because nobody knows about it," he said.

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"But there are very few organizations that have got it tightly nailed," he added.

He said that many employers look at health and wellness in the workplace as something similar to the company barbecue: "It's a good thing to do but doesn't have any real tangibles."

He added that larger companies that have dedicated human resources departments typically have the most robust health and wellness programs.

But B.C. is largely populated with small and medium-sized business, in which, said Cook, "human

resources is invariably done by the owner and a consultant they know.

"So wellness is in the pocket of stuff they'd like to get to but can't."

Cook gives the BCHRMA an average rating when it comes to the level of health and wellness engagement it has with its 20 staff.

It has no limit on sick days and allows for flexible work schedules.

"We manage based on contribution and we expect you to take care of yourself," he said.

And it gives employees an annual stipend to use to spend on healthy living.

## Foremost sources of stress affecting organizations in Canada and the U.S. today

- 75%** Excessive work hours
- 65%** Lack of work-life balance
- 64%** Fears about job loss
- 42%** Companies addressing fears about job loss
- 40%** Companies acting on work-life balance
- 24%** Companies taking actions to address excessive workloads

SOURCE: TOWERS WATSON

## The impact that a superior health and productivity program can have on a business

- 11%** higher revenue per employee
- 1.8** fewer days absent per employee
- 28%** higher shareholder returns

SOURCE: TOWERS WATSON

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# Incentive programs: Fit challenges reward employees for meeting their health goals

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**Antonio Zivanovic**, CEO of **Corporate Occupational Solutions Inc. (COS)**, describes EA programs as reactive.

His company helps businesses implement more proactive health and wellness programs in the workplace.

Those programs can include everything from simple ergonomic adjustments and smoking cessation to fitness boot camps and work-life balance workshops.

But to start, COS helps companies assess the health of individual employees and of the entire workplace using on-site and online health-appraisal tools

The appraisals determine benchmarks for measuring how health and wellness initiatives affect absenteeism rates, employee engagement and other productivity drivers.

Zivanovic said that very few companies truly have a complete workplace health and wellness program.

"What most companies do have is a number of great services offered to their staff without strategic links to the business objectives and cost drivers within specific budgets," he said.

#### **Benchmark: dedication**

Vancouver-based accounting firm **Manning Elliott LLP** brought in COS to conduct work-life balance and stress management seminars a couple years ago after the accounting firm's partners made it a goal to be named among the top 50 employers in Canada by certain industry and media organizations.

Manning Elliott lengthened workdays between February and May – the busy tax season – by half an hour and shortened work weeks in the summer by a day.

Two registered massage therapists are at the offices in March and April to provide company-paid, in-house massages to employees.

And the company just converted its benefits plan into a total rewards package, in which employees – instead of being designated a limited number of massages, chiropractic adjustments and other services – get a lump-sum allowance to spend on whatever health services they like.

"If you have a group of dedicated [employees] that will do as much for you as you do for them, I believe that is a benchmark [for success of a health and wellness program]," said **Sylvia**

**Marks**, Manning Elliott's team development and human resources co-ordinator.

#### **Effect on profit**

**Judith Plotkin**, vice-president of business development at Vancouver's **Human Solutions**, which offers a number of holistic services for improving workplaces, noted that given the plethora of data that ties health to productivity, it's not as hard as it once was

for human resources workers to get the boss to sign off on health and wellness programs.

"They can literally measure their profit before and after wellness programming," she said.

But it can still be challenging to get employees on board.

Plotkin said that that has led to an increase in incentive-based programs, such as fit challenges, in which

employees are rewarded for meeting their health goals.

"They don't need to be big incentives, they can be fun and health-promoting incentives, like a coupon for new running shoes," she said.

Vancouver's **Incognito Software Inc.** is launching a fit challenge to get greater participation by employees in its health and wellness programs.

The company was ex-

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- Ian Cook,  
director of research  
and learning,  
BC Human Resources  
Management Association

periencing 30% attendance rate at some of the quarterly workshops it was hosting on topics like sleep, performance and healthy snacks.

**Wai Bing Liew**, Incognito's HR manager, said that the intention behind the fit challenge is not to reward employees "but to give them a taste of how it feels to be healthy and to have achieved their fitness goals." ■  
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