Illustration: Frances Clancy

KEEPING UP IN A DOWNTURN

THE RECESSION HAS CANADIAN COMPANIES PARING DOWN AND CLAWING BACK COSTS. DOES OUR NEW ECONOMIC REALITY HAVE ROOM FOR WELLNESS PROGRAMS?

by Terri Goveia

The Air Canada employees heard about the shakeup in late March. The airline's longtime CEO, Montie Brewer, had stepped down as bankruptcy rumours loomed and a new executive team promised an era of tighter purse strings. The industry had taken several hits in the last decade, struggling post 9-11 and through SARS, but at least one department within the company was ready to adapt to yet another challenge. "We were already in the mode of thinking differently and doing things differently," says Mélanie Doiron, manager of disability and health awareness programs.

Doiron and her team aren't the only ones trying to fit wellness programs into a changing corporate landscape. As many organizations revisit their benefits strategies and the bottom line, where does workplace wellness stand?

The New Reality

The realities of a recession-era business environment are stark. Headlines about failing companies—and entire industries—tell one side of the story. A late 2008 Watson Wyatt survey of Canadian executives supplies the other: almost half of the employers surveyed planned to downsize their workforce. And, while many eschewed major cuts to rewards strategies, some had already trimmed extras like company travel and training programs and 15 per cent said they either had already eliminated or reduced employee programs like tuition reimbursement and subsidized dining.

If ever there was a time for wellness strategies, it's now, says Karen Seward, senior vice president of business development and marketing at Shepell-fgi. The layoffs and restructuring that accompany a downturn leave a drastically different workplace behind. "Often, we're focused on the people leaving," she says. "We forget about the people who we're now asking to do more in a day than we've ever asked them before."

Needless to say, employees are more stressed than ever. They worry about job security, the extra pressures at work and about the recession's personal impact. A recent survey by Shepell-fgi's research group found that as the economic news worsened last year more employees turned to employee assistance programs (EAP) for help with credit issues and financial counselling. There's extra pressure on wellness and support programs, too. Seward has noted a "huge increase" in EAP access. "The number of people using our programs is up 2%-3% than what it normally is," she says. With pressures mounting on both ends, how can companies keep up wellness during a downturn?

To Spend or Not to Spend?

Many Canadian companies are "staying the course" when it comes to their wellness strategies, says Gregory Durant, group and healthcare practice leader at Watson Wyatt Worldwide. That trend mirrors American corporate plans to support wellness programs like EAPs during the recession. In March 2009,

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a Buck Consultants survey in the U.S. found that 60 per cent of respondents were leaving wellness budgets intact and those planning changes didn't anticipate major cutbacks.

Still, many are taking a second look at the numbers. At Air Canada, spending on wellness for its 27,000 employees has taken a cautious turn, says Doiron. "We have to be more conscious about the benefit of every program versus the cost," she says. "We're reviewing every program to make sure that the money is spent on benefits that respond to employee needs at this time."

That means a continued emphasis on stress-management and redoubled efforts on wellness communications, which is always a priority since the airlines are in an industry prone to change, notes Doiron. "People often see EAPs as something [that's there] for a crisis," she says, noting that the company is letting their employees know that they can use it to stave off crisis and get proactive help since depression and stress tend to be higher during volatile times.

It also means a re-emphasis on less-costly wellness strategies, like walking and weight-loss programs. "We need to be more creative," Doiron says.

Proactive Investment

Some companies might put off new wellness strategies, but most recognize that cutbacks can cost them in other ways. "They realize you can [either] cut expenses or improve productivity," notes Watson Wyatt's Gregory Durant.

At TELUS, investment in wellness is actually going up. The telecommunications company wants to address recession fallout proactively, says Janet Crowe, director of health services. Her department is making mental health and family assistance a priority for its 30,000 workers across Canada this year. "We are trying to address these things before people come to us," she says. "If people are concerned about finances or a combination of finances and childcare, we'll have that in place."

While some of the company's existing wellness efforts—such as fitness promotion and health prevention, or on-site naturopaths and massage therapists at some of its larger offices—are helpful for stressed employees worried about the future or their financial situation, Crowe points to the company's wellness partnerships as particularly valuable recession-era safety lines. In British Columbia, TELUS has hosted financial advisors from local credit union Van City, which offered financial workshops in their offices. It has also teamed up with a nutritionist to offer a nationwide webinar on healthy eating—something many forget about when stressful times hit, Crowe notes.

Another company that isn't letting the recession affect its programs is Coast Capital Savings. The Vancouver-based credit union has an ongoing mental health strategy that addresses findings from a 2006 in-house survey that found notable levels of mental distress: 22% of employees rated their mental health as fair or poor, 38% had little interest or pleasure in doing things and 4% had suicidal thoughts. Its strategy includes intervention, access to professional help and a follow-up Return-to-Work program as well as an EAP offering and on-line support. "We have no problem talking to our colleagues about other illnesses such as cancer or diabetes and our goal is to bring mental health into that same realm," says Lynn Roberts, vice president of human resources.

While the recession wasn't a factor in implementing the program, it is there for those who might face particular distress now—highlighting the need for companies to have a sound foundation to help employees during peaks and valleys. "If we hadn't had the fundamentals in place to ensure that those that need help, can get help, we wouldn't have been able to pull something together in short order and have it work," she says. "You can't find an 'off-the-shelf' program or strategy that will work overnight. It is about building and maintaining a supportive, healthy, stigma-free environment."

The company is making one nod to hard times by ramping up communications on depression and its symptoms, having more discussions with employees about stress and trying to bring employees' teenaged children into the educational conversation. No matter what the economy does, though, Coast Capital will continue its educational and support efforts, Roberts says. "These are things we do in good times and in bad."

Stretching Wellness Dollars

TELUS made a choice to put more money into wellness, but those that don't have the budget have to think differently. "Companies are saying, 'I don't have any more money to spend, so how do I use what I have more effectively to support people?'" says Karen Seward. For starters, companies should take a look at what they already have. Durant points out that companies would do well to conduct a wellness diagnostic, not only going over what programs are in place, but also determining how well they're aligned with company objectives during the downturn.

They should also pay careful attention to what employees

need right now. "It's as important as ever to understand and listen to employee needs and react quickly if other concerns arise," says Doiron.

In some cases, that means getting a sense of what they're talking about around the water-cooler. "You have companies where people are spending their free time Googling, trying to understand the financial markets," Seward says.

There is also increasing awareness around those people who are going to retire. "Maybe they can't afford to retire now, maybe their portfolio is half of what it was," says Seward.

With that information, companies should take the kinds of creative steps seen at both TELUS and Air Canada. Seward suggests forging partnerships between vendors or insurers or, if possible, adding an extra line of support for employees. One of her employer clients has established a confidential support line for employees. Those who call in sick will get immediate help for what's keeping them off work. "If I call in and say I'm overwhelmed and need a day to get myself together, you'll get hooked up with a counsellor who can get you reoriented," Seward explains. The same goes for employee family members—a laid-off spouse would be directed to counselling, and so on. Michele Bossi, Canadian productivity and practice leader at Buck Consultants in Toronto has one client that has implemented a credit system that rewards employees for taking part in healthy activities, granting them credits they can "cash in" at their health spending or fitness account.

Preparing for the Next Phase

Gauging the wellness environment can also work for those companies, like smaller employers, who can't afford wellness programs during the recession. "One of the best things they can do is have a very supportive environment," says Bossi. "It's about having an environment that makes people want to come to work and any company can do that."

Even those that don't have formal programs in place can do a wellness inventory during the recession to determine what they can use when things improve. "We're seeing a lot of people who didn't have EAPs before now recognizing the service it could provide," says Seward.

That recognition and a little preparation can also pay off big in the long run, according to Durant. "The economy will turn around," he says. "It would be great to have the organization poised to take advantage of that."

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