

W H I T E P A P E R

The Case for Workplace Wellness

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A Look Back

There was a time when the term 'wellness' was mentioned in the corporate world only when there was a need to enhance employee morale and team spirit. Health promotion programs were designed to be offered with little or no associated costs, and almost certainly without an expectation related to return on investment (ROI). Direct linkage to disease prevention was rare. Broad-based programs targeted improved physical health, and included topics like nutrition, exercise and laughter. These initiatives delivered a caring message from employer to employee.

Today's Wellness Focus

'Wellness' has evolved greatly over the last decade and in particular, has experienced unprecedented growth in the last few years. Many factors have contributed to this in Canada:

- *government-sponsored health care continues to diminish*
- *ageing baby-boomers are facing increased health concerns*
- *critical labour shortages are predicted*
- *greater emphasis is being put on human capital as the most important determinant of business success.*

What's Affecting Our State of Wellness?

Our society is feeling the pain of the 'enjoy now, pay later' attitude related to lifestyle and health-impacted behaviour. Without thinking about the consequences, we have gone about our daily lives embracing the sun-worshipping, fast food-eating, 'super-size me', no time for exercise, work anywhere-anytime, cigarette smoking, 'got-an-ache-pop-a-pill' approach. It is not surprising then that each year in Canada, more than three-quarters of deaths result from four groups of non-communicable diseases: cardiovascular, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory. To add to this, sadly, one out of every five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

Why Workplace Wellness?

Like a spider weaving an intricate pattern to form its web, so too is wellness a complex network of health states, characterized by its interrelatedness, not fully realized until now. But why workplace wellness? How has this issue become a responsibility of Corporate Canada? Research has proliferated in the area of workplace health and has shown us the following important connections.

Consider these staggering statistics:

- *It costs \$2656 more per year to employ a smoker in Canada than a non-smoker. (Health Canada, 1995)*
- *Employees who take four 10-minute smoking breaks per day, work one month less per year. (Centre for Health Promotion and Publications, 2000)*
- *Obese adults incur annual medical expenditures that are 36% higher than those of normal weight. (Health Affairs, 2002)*
- *Obesity, physical inactivity, and poor nutrition are poised to overtake tobacco use as the leading preventable cause of death in Canada. (University of Toronto, 2004)*
- *Specific types of work stress and/or strain are related to 2x incidence of mental illness and substance abuse, 5x rate of certain cancers, 2x rate of infections/injuries and 3x incidence of heart and back problems. (Shain, 2000)*
- *Depression is the fastest growing category of disability resulting in days lost. (Global Business and Economic Roundtable)*
- *Rising mental health claims, primarily related to stress, depression and anxiety disorders, were the top health and productivity-related concern for organizations. (Watson Wyatt survey, 2005)*

What are the Important Components of Workplace Wellness?

Health Canada describes the following as critical elements in the evaluation of a healthy workplace:

- *Physical environment*
- *Health practices*
- *Social environment and personal resources*

These elements carry important considerations for employer and employee alike. Establishing and maintaining optimal health then is no longer the sole responsibility of the employee; it has evolved into a shared, collaborative effort between employer and employee. When you consider this information together with the fact that a large proportion of chronic illness is preventable or manageable through modifiable lifestyle behaviours, the case is made for targeted workplace initiatives aimed at improving employee health and wellbeing. Despite the fact that the majority of organizations are aware of the relationship between health and the bottom line, current data tells us that few are prepared to deal with it. Buffet Taylor and Watson Wyatt's independent surveys uncovered the same finding: there is a passive acceptance that this is the new cost of doing business.

A Call to Action

Wellness has outgrown the fit breaks of the 90's to become a business critical issue at present. There are existing and innovative programs that can address the tidal wave of physical and mental health concerns that will face us over the next decade. If we sit back and decide that this is simply the cost of doing business, then Canadian business will most certainly become too costly.



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As Ceridian's Director of LifeWorks Strategic Solutions, Estelle Morrison is responsible for creating innovative programs to address the mental health and wellness needs of customers across Canada. An experienced professional in all aspects of EAP services, Estelle's 15 years in the industry, together with her training and affiliations, have firmly established her as a knowledge expert in this critical area of business. She holds a master's degree in Applied Psychology from the University of Toronto and is a Certified Employee Assistance Professional (C.E.A.P.).

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