

**THE BIG SAVE**

Wellness programs can pump up the bottom line

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Five years ago, Alex Rodov, founder of Toronto-based QA Consultants, decided to set up a wellness program for his company's employees.

The workers' exacting and sensitive work for the software testing company's clients was the main reason behind that decision, said Ryan Abel, QAC's senior manager of human resources. "If we mess up, there are big problems," he pointed out. "There's a lot of money at stake, and we want to keep everyone fit, healthy and mentally sharp."

From *Amazing Race*-type team-building exercises to gym memberships that are free as long as they are used at least 12 times a month, QAC's wellness initiatives have met that goal. They have also created, Mr. Abel said, a happy workplace environment.

"For us," he added, "it's more [about] how can we do things better because we want to grow as a company."

While he hasn't costed out the financial payback of the programs, Mr. Abel has noted two other positive outcomes: lower turnover and minimal recruiting costs.

Indeed, studies of workplace wellness programs have found clear financial gains for employers. At Bruce Telecom, based in Tiverton, Ont., which has just less than 100 employees, the focus on wellness has saved the company \$136,000. Human resources manager Jackie Arnold estimates that \$51,000 has been invested in the company's various wellness strategies.

Allan Stordy, chief executive officer of Calgary-based Arete Human Resources Inc., carried out a study of the results of employee assistance programs, also known as EAPs, in both small and medium-sized businesses in 2013. In it, he said, he found "evidence that performance, based on self-appraisal, improves significantly" among employees who access those programs.

What's more, their employers made an average net gain of \$526 an employee against the average \$294 they were losing to absenteeism and low productivity.

"Basically, employees were not performing up to the level given their salary," he explained. "It was costing the employers, and so after the services there was a net gain."

Small businesses might balk at making such investments, he acknowledged. But with lower staff numbers, they are particularly affected when an employee doesn't show up for work because of stress, illness or mental health problems. Prevention, Mr. Stordy said, "is going to help them save money down the road."

Yet wellness initiatives don't need to be expensive, said Lisa Kay, owner and lead partner of Toronto-based Peak Performance Human Resources Corp., and their costs can be spread out.

"Instituting a culture of wellness is a huge way of getting people active," she said. Companies can encourage lunch-hour walks instead of "everyone meeting in the lunch room," she suggested.

"Inexpensive programs that are fun, social and interactive help to relieve stress and get people outside."

Health-based competitions such as weight-loss challenges can also be effective if they are motivating, practical and, above all, voluntary, she added.

Lunch-and-learn sessions are another way to increase levels of employee engagement. "We do them when time allows," said Mr. Abel of QA Consultants, "and we actually have the employees teach it. So it creates camaraderie and a close-knit, family atmosphere."

At Bruce Telecom, the 2015 winner of Benefits Canada magazine's Workplace Benefits Award, health experts have been brought in for lunch-and-learn sessions, and they have proven to be popular with employees. The company also refurbished its onsite gym with new equipment and set up group classes.

An event called "What's for Dinner?" was another hit. Participants contributed \$10 each for ingredients, brought crockpots into the office, and learned easy, healthy recipes.

Providing choice and flexibility is key, said Ms. Arnold. "You have to figure out what you want to achieve. Where are your costs? Is it people not coming to work? Then why aren't they coming to work?"

"You want to tap into the people who are thinking about getting well," she said, "not necessarily the people who are already going to the gym three times a week."

Bruce Telecom also hired London, Ont.-based Employee Wellness Solutions Network, for example, which offered workers one-on-one counseling sessions every four to six weeks.

EAPs are another tool companies can use to help employees cope with stress, anxiety, alcoholism and other mental issues among staff.

At QA Consultants, flexible working arrangements and benefit plans also helped enhance the working environment, said Mr. Abel.