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# Benefits

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A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a blurred indoor setting with warm tones.

***“Like training  
skills, we saw the  
wellness program  
as an investment”***

— Jeff Harrison, London Hydro

## « STRATEGY »

# POWER SOURCE

London Hydro's focus on wellness sparks improvements in drug plan costs and absenteeism

*By Yaldaz Sadakova / Photography by Brandon VandeCaveye*

It all started with a job interview a few years ago when Jeff Harrison was applying for a new position as manager of health and safety with London Hydro. One of the points he made during the interview was the importance of introducing a health program to create a culture of wellness.

Harrison got the job and, five years ago, put in place just that kind of program. With both physical and mental health components, the program targets all employees—including a large segment that works out in the field—and engages them in creative ways.

The philosophy behind the utility company's health strategy is that staff members' wellness is just as important as their talent, Harrison explains. "Like training skills, we saw the wellness program as an investment in the lives of our employees," he says, adding that healthy and happy people are also more productive.

### Flipping the Switch

London Hydro's program (managed by Employee Wellness Solutions Network) began in 2009 with an initial staff health assessment measuring five components: cancer risk, coronary risk, nutrition, fitness and weight management. Almost 40% of the company's 300 employees (who are, on average, in their mid-40s) participated. The risks uncovered were substantial. "Seventy-one percent of the participants looked like they did have a high cancer risk," says Meaghan Jansen, founder of Employee Wellness Solutions Network. The second most prevalent risk was excessive weight, with 67% of participants scoring above the recommended weight.

Harrison says the high cancer risk numbers didn't surprise him because—as someone who is into personal fitness—he knew that certain lifestyles can predispose one to the illness. But he was worried. "We were looking at a red flag within our staff," he explains. "We knew we had some work to do."

Enter personal wellness coaching, in which employees work one on one with a professional to meet customized goals. "We leave it in the hands of consultants and employees," says Harrison. "They can meet as often as they need to." During 30-minute sessions with the coaches, employees discuss physical and mental health issues as well as lifestyles. "Some people aren't sure how to deal with stress," Harrison says, explaining that coaching gives them stress management tools. In 2013, 100 employees participated in the sessions, compared with 94 in 2012.

The personal wellness coaches also walk around the office on a regular basis, handing out green tea, fruit and other healthy foods, and educating employees about their benefits. During the summer, the coaches bring in homemade lemonade as well as blenders in order to make smoothies for the staff.

London Hydro's wellness strategy also includes a number of group initiatives: lunch-and-learns; incentive programs, in

which employees are challenged to meet healthy goals and rewarded with items such as gift cards; and workshops on topics such as de-stressing.

Additionally, the utility company holds an annual health fair, where staff can meet local physicians working in different areas and learn about topics such as smoking cessation, meditation and reiki (an alternative medicine technique that uses palm touch for healing).

In February 2013, London Hydro launched a mental health program with educational sessions for managers to learn to recognize the signs of depression and other mental health issues among employees. The program includes sessions for all staff to “give them some awareness so they can be more supportive of a worker” who is dealing with a mental health problem, Harrison adds.

And the organization has a wellness committee, comprising employees from various departments, which works with the wellness provider to offer feedback on the health initiatives. “There’s a lot of opportunity for people to inject their ideas,” Harrison explains.

This comprehensive approach to wellness allows London Hydro to target not only motivated individuals but also “people who don’t even know what they don’t know,” Jansen explains. Since there is something for everyone, the employee engagement rate is about 90%, she adds.

### Plugged In

Initially, introducing the wellness program had its challenges. “There was some apprehension at the start,” Harrison recalls. “Was this something that was going to work? Were we going to see a return on our investment?”

Another challenge was getting employees to participate in certain activities, such as the lunch-and-learns. “People were saying, ‘Lunch time? That’s my time,’” Harrison remembers. Now, however, after experiencing their benefits, employees see these sessions as an opportunity to learn important things that affect their lives, he adds.

In addition, about half of London Hydro’s employees work out in the field, so most of them cannot use personal coaching. “The way we target that group is by inviting the [corporate wellness

provider] to a portion of their regular safety meetings and having them share a health and wellness topic,” Harrison explains, adding that the field workers have at least six safety meetings a year.

To communicate all of its wellness initiatives, London Hydro uses announcements on TV screens in high-traffic areas, newsletters and emails. Email campaigns have included a holiday de-stressing guide, safety tips and advice on healthy foods. The company also uses announcements in washroom stalls and brochures attached to pay stubs to ensure that everyone gets the wellness message.


The idea behind this wide-ranging communication strategy is that some people need to see and hear a message multiple times, Jansen says. “Not everybody is going to jump on the bandwagon at once.”

### Meter Readings

What do the numbers say about London Hydro’s wellness strategy? Between 2009 and 2012, the number of sick days at the company declined by 38%. “Absenteeism factors in to the bottom line when you’re looking for a return on investment,” Harrison says.

During the same period, the organization’s drug costs went down by 12%, and health claims costs declined by 8%. Extended healthcare costs increased by 1%, and paramedical costs went up by 29%—an increase often seen when drug expenses or health claims decline, as people take more preventative action, Jansen explains. (Often, this short-term increase in costs is the price for long-term savings.)

Between 2009 and January 2013, employees participating in weight management initiatives had an overall weight reduction of 3%. Cancer risk was reduced by 21% among participants. And employees taking part in fitness initiatives improved their fitness levels (measured through annual questionnaire responses) by 11%, on average.

A thorough wellness strategy that creates a healthy, engaged staff and reduces absenteeism? Now that’s a bright idea. 

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## Q&A

**JEFF HARRISON** EXPLAINS HOW LONDON HYDRO SPREADS THE WORD ON WELLNESS TO EMPLOYEES

### How often do you communicate with employees on wellness initiatives?

There’s constant communication going out to staff. We’ve submerged the whole organization in this concept of wellness—it becomes woven through the organization. Eventually, it starts to change the way people think, which, in turn, gives you a more favourable outcome.

### How do you make sure employees get the message?

[We have] this mass information campaign. If the presence is there, people take notice. One of the keys is that our wellness provider has brought the information in such a variety of ways that it has caught everybody’s attention—we’re really getting it from all angles. In order for something to be successful, it has to be well communicated.

### What role do testimonials play?

People are seeing the results of co-workers losing weight, quitting smoking [and] becoming more active, [which is] resulting in changed behaviour. Employees are being encouraged by fellow workers to get involved and take charge of their lifestyle. Because they work together, there is a lot of personal contact with the person who works next to you and says, ‘You need to work with our wellness consultants [because] they’ll help you reach your goal.’