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***“If people feel good
coming into work every
day, then they’re going
to be able to focus on
their work”***

— Jackie Arnold, Bruce Telecom



« STRATEGY »

SMALL BUT MIGHTY

How a company with just 85 employees saved more than \$100K with its wellness program

By Alyssa Hodder / Photography by Jaime Hogge

Five years ago, Bruce Telecom, a telecommunication services company headquartered in Tiverton, Ont., underwent a major leadership change. The new team was worried about higher levels of sick leave and lower levels of employee engagement—the spark igniting the company's wellness program a year later.

“At that time, there wasn't a lot of focus on employee development and investing in the employees,” says Jackie Arnold, HR manager with Bruce Telecom. “We thought [the wellness program] was the right thing to do, and it turned out over time to be successful.”

Making the Business Case

While the company didn't have to struggle to get buy-in from senior leaders, there were many discussions about what buy-in really means. For example, the leadership team decided to let employees participate in wellness initiatives on company time.

It's important for leaders to be directly involved, adds Arnold. “You can say you endorse something, but unless you're in

there doing it alongside people, people don't really believe you're endorsing it.”

Getting buy-in from union leaders was critical, too, since almost 90% of Bruce Telecom's workforce belongs to CUPE. Although the wellness program isn't part of a collective bargaining agreement, the union encouraged employees to participate, simply because it saw the value.

From HRAs to Crock-Pots

Once the business case was made, the company partnered with Employee Wellness Solutions Network (EWSNetwork). An internal wellness committee, along with EWSNetwork, is responsible for ongoing programming.

The wellness program kicked off in 2011 with health risk assessments (HRAs) to identify risk factors within the employee population—an initiative Bruce Telecom plans to repeat this year.

The company had an on-site gym, but, over the years, the space had become more of a storage area. In the first year of the program, the wellness committee cleaned it out and fixed it up. Open to all employees 24-7, the revamped gym has a free weights area, fitness equipment and

group classes (e.g., yoga and Zumba).

Each employee can also meet one on one with an EWSNetwork consultant every four to six weeks. These confidential consultations tackle a wide range of issues, from weight or stress management to dealing with an ill family member.

“I think people feel more comfortable going to talk to an independent wellness consultant,” says Arnold. “They feel they can go and talk about their health issues, but it's not related back to anything in the business.”

The company offers a comprehensive traditional benefits plan (95% employer-paid) with drugs, dental, vision care and paramedicals, as well as an employee assistance program. It also held health fairs in 2012 and 2013 with exhibitors such as chiropractors, massage therapists and naturopathic doctors. (The company plans to hold another fair later this year.)

In 2013, Bruce Telecom hosted a Women's Health Day and a Men's Health Day to raise awareness and meet the needs of these demographic groups. It also brings in ad hoc guest speakers—and they're not afraid to discuss difficult topics. For example, the wellness

committee organized a women's pelvic health seminar. "When we did the seminar, we thought, *How is this going to go over in a work environment?*" she recalls. "But it worked really well and was actually one of our most popular lunch and learns."

Another innovative idea was the Supper's Ready campaign. More than 25 employees paid \$10 (toward the cost of ingredients) and brought their Crock-Pots to work. They learned how to make an easy healthy dinner, and Crock-Pots were simmering all over the office. "It was fun, and it was another way we reached more people," says Arnold. "When you try these different things, you figure out what people are interested in."

The True Value of Wellness

Over the past three years, Bruce Telecom has invested a total of \$51,000 in the wellness program. "We took a bit of a leap of faith that this was going to work," notes Arnold.

Clearly, that leap paid off: the company realized a total cost savings of \$136,000.

To understand the full impact, the company analyzed metrics such as the number of health claims, drug claims and sick days. "We also looked at employee engagement because we felt that went hand in hand with what we were trying to do as an organization," Arnold adds.

Between 2011 and 2013, there was a 17.8% reduction in health claims per employee, a 10% drop in drug claims per employee and 1.08 fewer sick days per employee, per year.

"There could be cynics out there who say, 'Why would you put that much money into it?' But we're seeing a three-to-one return on investment just from a sheer dollar point of view, and we're only in Year 3," says Arnold.

Employee engagement has also increased by 13% over the past three years, as measured by the company's annual employee survey. Bruce Telecom saw significant increases in scores on questions such as *My manager cares about me as a person* and *I have someone at work I can talk to*.

"The wellness program provides regular opportunities for employees to make the workplace human, building a sense of belonging and greater engagement," Arnold explains. In fact, she views it as the foundation for the company's corporate culture. "If people feel good coming into work every day, then they're going to be able to focus on their work."

Reaching Out, Taking Risks

To make sure all employees have a chance to participate, the wellness committee sends out a monthly e-newsletter as well as ad hoc email campaigns. Quarterly town hall meetings, which all employees attend, are dedicated to wellness once a year. And EWSNetwork consultants do walk-arounds at all four company locations to raise awareness.

The hardest group to reach is the technicians, explains Arnold, since they're usually out in the field. Food can be a good motivator—for example, leaving a basket of apples early in the morning with a note from the wellness committee.

Or providing pizza and wings for a wellness lunch and learn? "Which sounds ridiculous, right? But it worked really well," says Arnold. "We have a local pub that people like to go to...we offered food we thought they would like, and we brought in a male naturopathic doctor. There were no women at the session, but the feedback from the male leaders there was phenomenal, in terms of speaking their language."

Going forward, the company wants to focus more on mental health, looking at stress management, harassment and violence in the workplace, as well as compliance with the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety.

Smaller companies can breed gossip and rumours, says Arnold, which affects people's wellness. "We're seeing a lot of stress-related types of leaves, and in a small company, that can have a big impact. So we're trying to understand why that is and how we can help."

With several years of experience, what advice would Arnold offer? Get buy-in and define what it looks like for your wellness program, as well as leadership's expectations. Have fun with it, and don't underestimate the other benefits, such as team-building. Arnold also recommends working with an external partner to expand the depth of programming.

Most of all, don't be afraid to do things differently, advises Arnold, noting some of the committee's riskier programs were the most successful.

"We've taken some risks where things didn't go as well; we do our lessons learned. I'm pretty happy with how far we've come." 

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Q&A

What did you talk about at the women's pelvic seminar?

We had a pelvic floor physiotherapist discuss issues that occur when the muscles in the pelvic floor are either too tight or too loose, including incontinence, urgency, pelvic pain, constipation and pre- and post-pregnancy pelvic health. There were a ton of questions. [It's] a great topic that no one talks about.

Which outcomes from your wellness program are you most proud of?

The support from the employees, in terms of the level of engagement in the program and being supportive of the initiatives that we're running. [And] the teamwork of the wellness team itself, in terms of trying to be innovative. It's this commitment to high standards and continually trying to improve it, get more employee involvement—that constant trying to take it up a step. And the difference you see that you're making: you're actually improving the quality of employees' lives at the same time.

Can you give an example of an initiative that didn't go as well?

The pedometer challenge. We ran this a few times, and this past year, we thought about skipping it, as the enthusiasm was not really there. We talked through it and decided to integrate it with our sitting disease education campaign. The reality of sitting disease and focusing on tracking the number of steps created a renewed interest and enthusiasm: we had almost 40 people participate, and it created a buzz of discussion.

What future changes do you expect?

We have a great wellness committee, but I think we need to expand it so that we have [broader] representation. The area where we have the least amount of participation is our outside technicians...it's hard to involve everybody in everything, but I think I might try to look differently at the makeup of the team.