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WORKS WELLNESS



Taking the business case for wellness programs beyond anecdote By Christopher Clark

AMONG THE MANY gyms and health clubs in the city, there's one few people know about, to which fewer still even have access. It's located underground and gets by without 20-foot windows and ceilings. There's no juice bar; no rack for airing out yoga mats.

And yet, this smallish gym is busy every day of the week, all hours of the day. It hosts regulars and less-than-regulars, those following lifelong fitness plans and those trying to lose 10 pounds before a summer wedding.

The gym is in the basement of the law firm Harrison Pensa, and it represents an approach to employee wellness that was foreign to businesses not so many years ago.

You don't have to go all the way back to Don Draper and *Mad Men* in the 1960s to find businesses that paid little attention to the health—physical and emotional—of their employees.

In recent years, however, many organizations have begun to look at their people differently. They've begun to treat the term 'human resources' quite literally, understanding they can increase productivity and perhaps lower costs by helping their people to live healthier, happier lives. They have introduced employee wellness programs.

Personal injury law clerk Jill Terpstra in the Harrison Pensa gym

This not a Pollyanna world, however. Change often occurs at the margins, and cannot always be measured. Many of the benefits attributed to wellness programs are rather nebulous. Nevertheless, many businesses have decided the programs are worthwhile. Some are now ingrained in the corporate culture and are considered a perk when it comes time to recruit new employees.

"We have started to notice a change in awareness of the whole concept," says Garth Jansen, who, along with wife Meaghan, operates the Employee Wellness Solutions Network (EWSN) "I used to have to start by explaining what employee wellness was, why an organization might benefit from it. That's no longer the case today. Most organizations and businesses understand the concept. So we can talk about their specific situation much earlier in the discussion."

The Jansens have been in business since 2003, and now have clients across the country. In London, there are dozens of businesses with some kind of employee wellness program. One of the keys to the concept is that every program is different, designed to fit the organization in question.

Harrison Pensa is unusual, not because it has a program, but because it has a dedicated gym it makes available to the 140 people at the firm.

Meaghan and Garth Jansen, owners of Employee Wellness Solutions Network



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COVER



"That's not the norm," Jansen says. "In most cases, employees exercise elsewhere, at a health club or playing sports or whatever they choose."

Employee wellness is not all about working out in a gym, however. It takes a much broader view—the idea that a generally healthy workforce will be more productive, sick less often, require less healthcare and work better together. Some of those goals can be measured; others are more anecdotal.

Either way, Geoff Pulford is a believer. "I support the idea, even without having a way of specifically measuring it." Pulford is CEO at Harrison Pensa and doesn't use the gym. He runs outside instead.

"I know from my own experience I feel I'm more productive when I'm exercising and eating right. We work in a stressful environment, with a lot of deadlines, and the program helps people deal with that. We don't need to measure it to know it has a positive effect."

Pulford credits Meaghan Jansen with revolutionizing the firm's wellness program more than a decade ago. "We've had the gym for many years. It was built by one of our original firms, Harrison

Harrison Pensa CEO Geoff Pulford and partner Harry Van Bavel

Elwood, before we merged. But when we started working with Meaghan, she stepped up the entire program and took it to a new level. Now it's about nutrition and exercise and living right."

The EWSN "toolbox" includes consultations with employees to set specific health goals. It includes regular newsletters about everything from healthy cooking tips to exercise ideas and goals. It can include exercise programs, but it can just as easily focus on strategies to deal with stress.

"We start with our clients by asking what their objective is," Garth Jansen says. "For some companies, it's about cutting healthcare benefits costs. It's very much about the bottom line, and we set things up to be measurable. We track costs, sick days, drug claims and the classification of those drug claims. Usually the top claims are for lifestyle drugs, for conditions that can be changed or improved with lifestyle

changes. For other organizations, it's about establishing an overall culture, stressing lifestyle and job satisfaction for employees and prospective employees."

EWSN operates across the country, contracting with health and fitness experts in cities where their clients are located to develop and run programs suited to their needs. Their approach is dictated by the realities of the workplace. Few workplaces have dedicated gyms, so consultants do things like offering in-chair yoga programs in the boardroom, or converting an auditorium into a gym at specific times.

This fall, EWSN hopes to begin working with a Halifax-based company that runs off-shore oil rigs. It's not possible to meet with workers on the rigs for safety reasons. And because the work is so intense, employees work one month on and one month off. So they tend to fly home during their month off.

"There really was no time to meet with the workers, and that's when we proposed holding consultations at the airport, while they're waiting for their flights every month. You have to be flexible," Jansen says.

Like religion, wellness programs require some faith. "If you want to poke holes in the numbers, you certainly can," Jansen acknowledges. "If you have a great year, if sales go up 20%, it's not possible to say exactly why that happened, but I believe an effective wellness program plays a role in those kinds of results."

So does Jeff Harrison, manager of health and safety at London Hydro. He introduced a wellness program for London Hydro's 300 employees as a pilot project in 2008.

"It was a huge success, and it became a full-fledged program in 2009. We have 30% participation across our organization, which we think is very good."

The Hydro program begins the day someone is hired. As part of the orientation program new employees are informed about the wellness program and given an opportunity to do a personal wellness profile with one of the two EWSN consultants who work

regularly with Hydro.

"If they choose to take advantage, they fill out a survey which the consultants go over with them, making recommendations, setting up programs or offering whatever advice fits with their goals and situation," Harrison says.

In some cases, it's something as simple and complex as quitting smoking. "The

consultants will work with them on whatever their goal is, and we make them available for half an hour every month to meet and discuss their goals."

Hydro also has a gym on site, although it's run more like a regular fitness facility. Employees can choose to pay a membership fee and use the equipment.

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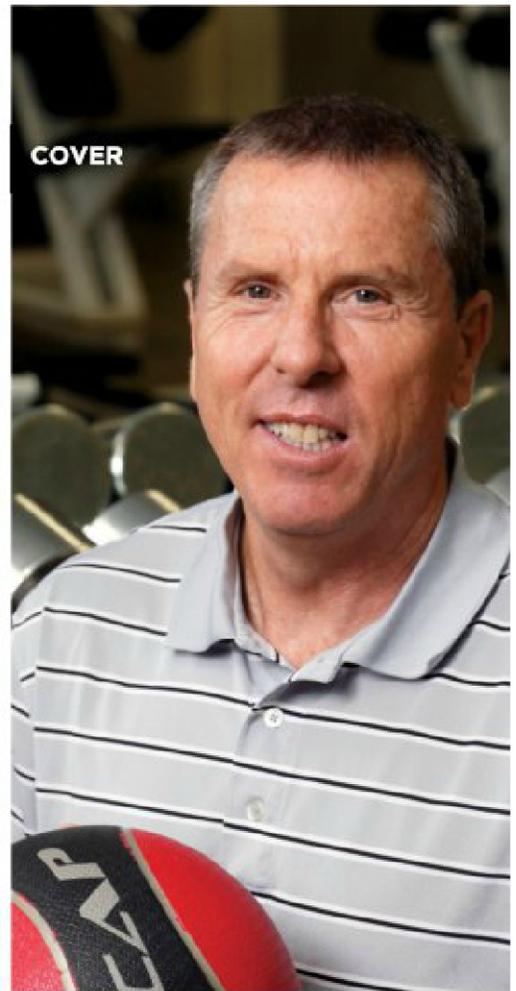


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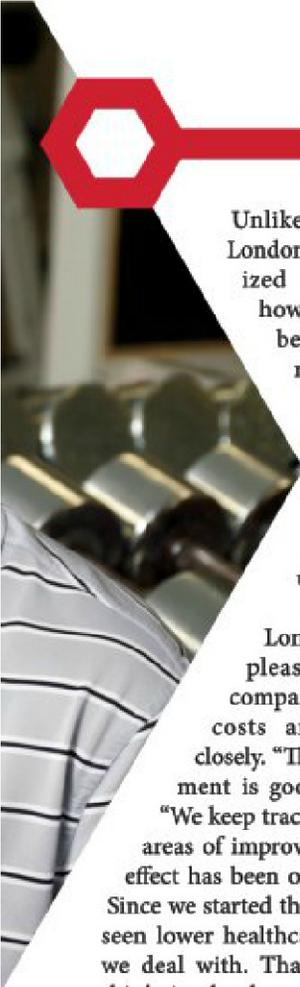
COVER



London Hydro health and safety manager Jeff Harrison

Some employees work with their EWSN consultants to create fitness goals and work toward them in the gym. Most, however, come in contact with the program less directly. They might attend the occasional 'lunch-and-learn' on a topic such as heart health or healthy cooking. They might sample a fruit smoothie being prepared in the cafeteria by the EWSN consultants, with recipes cards available to make it at home. Or they might see the pay stub inserts with tips, encouragement and updates about upcoming events and programs.

"One of the keys to making the program work is communication," Harrison says. "We have a communication person here who works with the EWSN consultants to keep everyone informed about what's available and going on. We use pay stub inserts, email, our on-site TVs and anything else we can think of to spread the word."



Unlike Harrison Pensa, London Hydro is a unionized workplace. That, however, has had no bearing on the wellness program. It is not a negotiated benefit, but rather something available to all employees, union and non-union alike.

Customers of London Hydro will be pleased to know the company tracks wellness costs and benefits very closely. "The return on investment is good," Harrison says. "We keep track of attendance and areas of improvement. The biggest effect has been on the medical side. Since we started the program, we have seen lower healthcare costs for issues we deal with. That is something we think is clearly a result of the program."

Like fitness itself, such programs are a constant battle. There will always be a segment of any workforce that would prefer the bosses mind their own business and not push cardio health and kale chips down their throats at every opportunity. At London Hydro, where the program is considered a major success, fewer than half the employees participate to any significant degree.

Supporters of such programs always have to justify the costs to their bosses, partners or shareholders. Without some evidence of their success, they could easily become a target at budget time, particularly when the overall economy is weak.

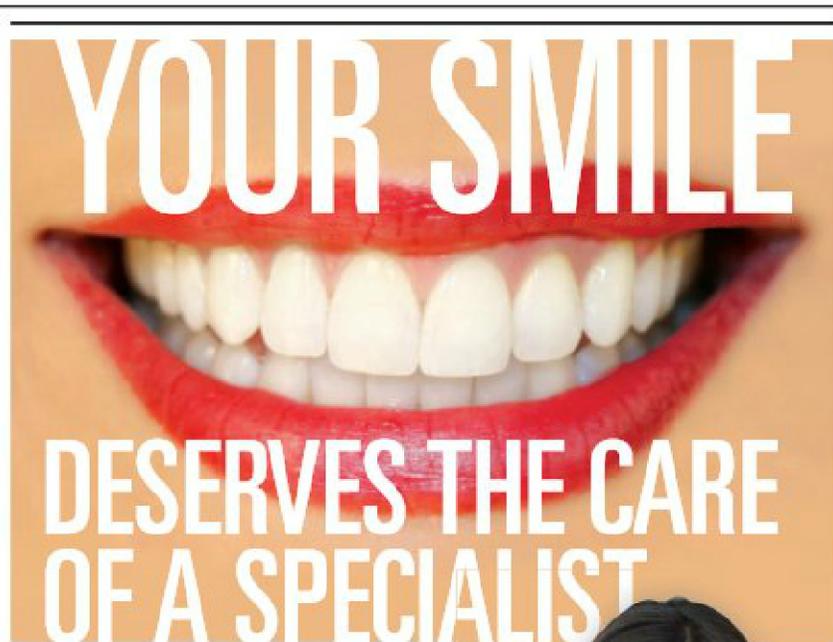
"There is a cost, no doubt, and we do have to justify it at budget time," Pulford says. "But much of the cost was a capital cost of building the gym and change rooms, and that was done several years ago. Still, there are ongoing costs for equipment and operating the showers, things like that."

For Pulford and his colleagues, the costs are far outweighed by the benefits.

The gym and wellness program is something they tout when recruiting lawyers to join their firm. "And the gym is always being used. There isn't a day when it's not used by someone, and that includes weekends," Pulford says. "It also helps that Meaghan and Garth are so easy to work with. They run a great program."

"I don't think we could stop the program now, even if we wanted to," says Harrison. "It has become part of our organization, part of our culture. I can't foresee a time when it won't be part of London Hydro." **Q**

To read more about workplace wellness, visit Christopher Clark's blog at www.christopherclarkwriter.com/blog



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