

GoodLiving

When all you can do about it is laugh

Job making you sick? The key to workplace wellness may be having fun

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You spend a good portion of your life doing it. You can lose sleep over it, stress about it and cry about it. You can even get sick over it.

It's work. And it *can* be a lot of work sometimes.

A Statistics Canada labour and income study released in June finds the weekly number of employees missing work because of an illness or disability increased from 431,000 in 1997 to 758,000 in 2006.

Within that same time period, the percentage of Canadian organizations offering at least one wellness initiative or health promotion program increased from 44 to 90.3 percent, according to a 2006 National Wellness Survey Report conducted by Buffet & Company Worksite Wellness.

In other words, it looks as though Canadian employers are starting to see the

importance of educating and encouraging their employees about the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle, specifically through workplace health and fitness programs or initiatives.

Linda Lewis-Daly, principal of Lewis-Daly & Associates, a workplace wellness planning firm, agrees that awareness of workplace wellness is growing.

"We're an educated workforce," Lewis-Daly, who planned wellness initiatives at a major Canadian telecommunications company for almost 10 years before starting her own consulting company, said in an interview. "We're more aware of our health and more aware of workplace impact on our health."

It's all about me ... and us

Studies suggest the benefits of workplace wellness initiatives include higher employee morale, higher employee retention rate and, ultimately, a better client retention rate.

Health and wellness experts identify three areas

companies typically address in their wellness planning: the physical workplace (like safety), health practices (such as smoking cessation or nutrition workshops), and social environment and personal resources (organizational culture and programs to help employees deal with stress, for example).

"The physical domain is very safe," said Lewis-Daly, adding everyone can participate in lunchtime yoga classes or nutritional planning workshops. Creating a positive workplace culture, she suggests, can be more difficult.

So how exactly do employers create a healthy, positive work environment and culture?

For Lewis-Daly, it's important to look at both the individuals and the organization as a whole. She asks clients to consider what she calls the "Me, We, Us" model when planning wellness initiatives and programs.

The "Me" part asks what the employer is doing to support the employee. The "We" part should address how



managers are fostering two-way communication between themselves and their staff. It should also evaluate whether managers have the tools to identify stress and conflict that can contribute to an unhealthy work atmosphere. The "Us" looks at how the culture is reinforced from the top down by senior management.

Nancy Evans, senior vice president at Environics Communications in Toronto, agrees the culture employers create is vital to a healthy organization.

Her organization placed fourth this April in *Canadian Business* magazine's annual "Canada's 50 Best Workplaces for 2007." The study examined the trust-building dimensions of workplace culture, including credibility, respect, fairness, pride and camaraderie.

Going to see Police

Evans said Environics has "planned and unplanned fun" that contribute to a positive workplace culture. Individualized employee learning pro-

grams, internal and external guest presentations, annual company retreats and part- or full-subsidies for external non-work activities are some of the official programs in place.

Other less official programs include company fun nights. In July, the whole company is going to see The Police in concert. Environics is footing the bill.

How companies treat their employees, Evans suggests, is key.

Fun and maturity go together at work

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"We recognize that people have lives outside the office. Sponsoring non-work activities puts people in a better frame of mind about themselves and helps with stress management."

The company's tactics seem to work. Environics boasts a 90 percent employee retention rate, said Evans, one that "absolutely" impacts client retention rates.

But fun in the workplace has to be handled with emotional maturity, she suggests.

"It has to come from a position of respect, out of the internal culture you create," she said, adding, "We hire nice people; it makes a difference."

"I'd like to see more of it," says Wendy Woods when asked about the role of fun in workplace wellness planning.

Woods, the principal of Watershed Training Solutions in Toronto, which offers presentations and training on soft skills like communication and networking, has a history in corporate finance, and knows the stresses of the corporate world.

She says her most popular programs are her "Laughter is the Best Medicine" workshop and her laughter yoga class. In her laughter workshops, Woods educates employees on the benefits of laughter in the workplace and brainstorms with them about how they can integrate it into their day-to-

day work lives.

So what are the benefits of laughter with respect to the workplace?

First, says Woods, laughter does things to our body such as reducing muscle tension and diminishing stress hormones.

"It can be a workplace tool to reduce stress and conflicts, improve relationships and enhance productivity," she said.

Also, workplace culture is changing, she suggests.

"For many years we were told that work and play were separate. Now the lines are blurring."

Although most corporate employers hire Woods for team-building exercises and not necessarily as part of a wellness program, Woods says laughter "does have a place in wellness programming."

But it can be a hard sell to executives.

"They ask me, 'How can I sell laughter as part of a budget?'" she said, stressing that it is not a frivolous concept. "Laughter shouldn't replace hard work, but has its place alongside hard work."

Laughter aside, only 15 percent of Canadian employers have a comprehensive wellness program (more than one wellness or health initiative), and those that don't cite cost as a major barrier to doing so, says a 2006 study by Buffet & Company.

"It doesn't have to cost a lot of money," said Lewis-Daly. A wellness initiative can be as simple as setting up a hoop in the parking lot for employees to use at lunch, she added.

One of her clients was struggling with a negative work environment. An employee set up a board in a common staff area, wrote what she was grateful for on a post-it note, and stuck the note on the board.

Soon people all over the office were adding positive notes about what they were grateful for. It made a difference in the overall tone of that workplace, she said.

And of the cost objection to workplace wellness planning, Nancy Evans of Environics Communications says: "If you see it as a cost, you're going to have trouble getting where you want to go."

Employers grappling with how to change workplace culture or how to start a wellness initiative can start by asking what they like and dislike about the workplace culture, she suggests. Thinking about how they talk to their employees — what tone they use — is also crucial, she said.

Evans also suggests implementing an anonymous employee survey to help employers identify issues in the workplace that they may be unaware of.

"You have to understand your staff and what's important to them."