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Benefit Facts Article by Brian Bulger

Does Your Firm Have A Need For A Wellness Program?

A Wellness Program may seem like a superficial benefit to a business owner who keeps a watchful eye on their firm's overhead and expenses, but there are very good reasons for an employer to consider implementing one.

Employee absenteeism due to life-style related illnesses is quite common today and costs Canadian businesses significant money in lost production. I have read that hypertension, lung cancer and adult-onset diabetes accounts for as much as 90% of health care costs in Canada.

According to a Statistics Canada study **physical inactivity** also impacts health care costs as fewer Canadians are taking part in physical exercise that provides cardiovascular benefit.

Canada's **aging population**, coupled with longer life expectancy means that there are increasingly more employees susceptible to suffer from ailments such as back and joint problems, repetitive strain injuries and disabilities associated with premature cardiovascular disease.

With new technologies and the down-sizing of businesses in order to remain competitive, the **fear of layoffs, concerns about job security, hiring freezes and financial well being** are causes of increased stress and anxiety by employees who must carry heavier work loads. Disability claims and drugs prescribed for the treatment of stress and anxiety increase at a precarious rate every year.

As costs for prescription drugs increase faster than the rate of inflation and provincial governments continue to reduce funding of health care services, thereby **shifting medical costs to private benefit plans**, employers will continue to pick up the costs through higher premiums.

Case studies indicate that employers who introduce Wellness Programs that encourage regular fitness and exercise will benefit by reduced absenteeism and employees with more positive attitudes. Other components of Wellness Programs include nutrition and weight management, back care and repetitive strain injury prevention, stress management, smoking cessation and health education. To implement a successful program three steps need to be taken; 1. Conduct a workplace health audit, 2. Conduct an employee health audit and 3. Develop a strategic plan.

I would agree that there is a direct link between an employee's mental and physical well-being and job performance. Of course it would be ideal to have an in-house gym at work, but organizing a daily 20 minute brisk walk during the lunch hour can easily be done with no start-up costs and in a very short period of time could pay big dividends.