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Whipping workplace fitness into shape

What four Canadian employers are doing to keep employees fit and well

BY SUE PRIDHAM

Many employees expect to have access to exercise facilities as part of their benefit packages. When 1,500 Canadian workers were asked what employers could do to make it easier for them to adopt healthier behaviours, respondents mainly cited having fitness activities during work hours, more educational materials available, workshops and incentives or rewards for healthier behaviour, according to the *Sanofi-aventis Healthcare Survey 2006*.

In a competitive marketplace and stressful work environment, many employers are turning to fitness and wellness initiatives to help employees stay physically and mentally fit. Here's a look at what four Canadian employers are doing.

Aviva Canada

Last summer, insurance company Aviva Canada decided to build a fitness facility at its head office in Toronto to meet the needs of its 1,600 employees.

To get buy-in from the top for the proposed facility, the company developed a business case. Architectural drawings, fitness equipment specifications, financial projections, liability considerations, management options and operational guidelines were included in the comprehensive report. As part of the planning, Aviva also toured several corporate fitness facilities to observe best practices.

When the doors opened in September 2006, employees commented that the 15,000-square-foot Vitality Centre had exceeded their expectations. It includes an individual workout area with cardio and strength training equipment, group exercise studios and squash courts. Employees pay \$25 per month by payroll deduction for full use of the facility.

"With professional support and experienced and talented managers, the Vitality Centre has become a hub for fitness activity and building healthy relationships at work," said Debra Ambrose, the senior vice-president of corporate partnerships.

In just 10 months, more than 400 employees have joined the Vitality Centre and membership continues to climb. To support the additional

1,500 decentralized staff across Canada, Aviva recently co-ordinated a group fitness subsidy rate from a national health club chain.

Intria Items

In May 2004, Intria Items, a Mississauga, Ont.-based provider of payment and information processing services, developed a national stretch break program for its 17 processing centres across Canada. As part of the program start-up, Intria developed a health and safety policy, highlighting the importance of the stretch breaks for its 3,700 employees.

Employees were recruited to become volunteer "employee energizers" and participated in a customized training program. The employee energizers received ongoing support from a part-time wellness consultant through monthly stretch break bulletins, new routines and motivational challenges including the Cross Canada Stretch Break Challenge. Reward and recognition was built into the program to ensure volunteers were recognized for their efforts.

To date, more than 275 employees have been trained as employee energizers. The program's focus has recently shifted to workstation ergonomics.

"The health and wellness program has been a great success at Intria. Our employees perform repetitive-type work and stretch breaks give them a chance to get out of the static posture they maintain during processing," said Nadine Morganeli, health and safety consultant.

"The fun songs the stretches are performed to, such as 'Footloose' and 'YMCA,' put smiles on everyone's face at the end of the stretch. Our annual survey of all employees participating in stretch breaks shows a significant drop in discomfort after participating in stretch breaks, proving to us how successful the program is and how well it has been received by our employees."

Staples Business Depot

In November 2005, Staples Business Depot opened its new head office in Richmond Hill, Ont. One of its most popular amenities was a 4,000-square-foot fitness facility, Staples in Motion, on the fourth floor, featuring an aerobics studio, individual workout area and state-

of-the-art equipment.

In one year, more than 50 per cent of the 350 employees at the head office enrolled in the fitness facility, which costs \$22 per month. Last fall, as part of its 50th anniversary, Staples launched a web-based fitness program for its 13,000 store employees across Canada.

The home-based fitness program fits Staples' "lean operator" philosophy as it services workers' families too and offers an equitable solution for all employees.

Visa Canada

Visa Canada in downtown Toronto has provided a fitness-subsidy program for its 100 employees over the past 10 years. As part of its benefit package, Visa Canada pays annual gym membership fees up to a maximum of \$500 per year.

This year Visa redesigned the subsidy program to better reflect its commitment to employee health and wellness. The "health and wellness allowance" includes reimbursement for health-and-wellness-related expenditures such as home

fitness equipment, vitamins, supplements and expenses related to recreational sports and activities. Employees' use of the subsidy has increased 10 per cent as employees participate in health-and-wellness activities not necessarily related to a gym membership.

Last fall, Visa conducted a strategic planning exercise to identify employees' needs and interests and program goals. It formed a wellness committee and developed an annual plan with a variety of activities and events to keep health and well-being top of mind.

"With busy work and personal schedules, employees need a constant reminder of healthy lifestyle practices," said Martha Downes, director of human resources.

Fitness assessments, personal programs for home, yoga classes, lunch-and-learn seminars, a walking program and nutrition education are just a few of the initiatives underway.

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■ NO SWEAT

10 steps for workplace fitness success

A workplace fitness program is most successful when employers take a long-term approach, customize it and dedicate resources and time to put a plan in place.

The following 10 tips will help organizations get a workplace fitness program started on the right track.

1. Survey employees to assess needs and interests. Develop a fitness committee. Be realistic about what can be accomplished.
2. Consider the physical environment. Conference rooms can be used for workouts such as yoga or Pilates. Identify walking routes and organize a walking club.
3. Identify internal leaders and ambassadors and get them involved. Solicit professional support as required.
4. Develop a budget for external support, incentives and program resources.
5. Build in healthy competition. Create departmental or regional challenges and don't forget to include rewards. Incentives don't have to be elaborate to work.
6. Tap into community resources and company-sponsored charities.
7. Create a marketing and communications plan. Include weekly e-fit tips and a monthly calendar of events.
8. Organize stretch breaks at meetings.
9. Minimize liability by providing waivers for company-sponsored events.
10. Profile employees and departments who have made fitness a priority. Celebrate success.