

**B**oomers have been making waves in the workforce for more than 30 years. This 'larger than life' generation, born between 1946 and 1966, are now in their 50s and 60s. They have worked hard and played hard with the long-term dream of Freedom 55.

However, visions of early retirement for many is no longer feasible. With savings shrinking and life expectancy on the rise, Boomers are postponing retirement. Surveys indicate that 80 per cent of Canadians over age 50 plan to keep working well beyond 60, even past their 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The workforce 55 years and older is expected to increase from 17 per cent in 2006 to nearly 23 per cent by 2016. As the workforce ages, employers are looking for proactive strategies to keep older employees engaged, keep low risk employees from becoming high risk, and manage healthcare costs. Diseases – including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, mental health, chronic back pain, and arthritis – represent the majority of the health cost pressures employers are likely to face over the next two decades.

Employers, influenced by the pending labour shortage, are motivated to keep baby boomers – their most skilled and experienced workers – mentally and

The physiological changes associated with aging are real and may include increased aches and pains, changes in balance, decreased muscle mass, oxygen uptake, strength and flexibility, slowing metabolism, weight gain, reduced vision and hearing, and hormonal changes.

A supportive physical environment will help offset these changes by promoting physical fitness, healthy eating, and by accommodating for physical changes, disabilities, and/or chronic illness.

Physical inactivity is the strongest predictor of mortality, exceeding the risks of smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity. In addition to the physiological benefits of physical activity, there are many psychological benefits including improved life satisfaction and enhanced mental health. Many employers of choice are investing in on-site fitness facilities to help employees get fit and stay fit.

Autoliv's onsite fitness facility at its headquarters in Markham, ON, is used extensively by plant and office employees. Its fitness programs are designed to help employees who work on the line prevent musculo-skeletal disorders. The average age of the predominantly female shop floor group is 56. They congregate daily for spinning classes and other group



## WELLNESS

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# Boomers Aging Well At Work

physically fit for work beyond the traditional retirement age. Although managing one's overall health requires a high degree of personal responsibility, a supportive workplace environment is crucial to maximizing health and productivity benefits.

Many of Canada's leading employers are targeting programs to influence Boomer participation and engagement by examining their physical environment, programs and services, work/life balance policies, and culture.

fitness activities catering to all fitness levels.

At McNeil Consumer Health Care, a division of Johnson & Johnson, in Guelph, ON, a 'Revitalization Zone' is provided for employees that includes massage chairs, wellness books and resource materials, music, and a relaxing water feature. As part of McNeil's overall wellness strategy, this is one of three 'Wellness Zones' designed to help employees invest in their 'mind, body, and spirit' – the Creativity Zone (Mind), the Fitness Zone (Body), and the Revitalization Zone (Spirit).

Weight gain is one of the precursors to age influenced diseases. Employers such as Husky Injection Molding in Bolton, ON, have taken a proactive approach to their food services. Husky's food services policy is to "offer our customers healthy food choices that promote well-being and energy." The cafeteria serves up locally grown, organic fruits and vegetables, vegetarian choices, and cholesterol smart meals.

### Programs and Services

Most of us spend over half of our waking hours at work. The workplace provides a natural environment to promote health and well-being. Keeping the wellness message top of mind will, over time, influence behavior.

The first step to creating a wellness strategy is to establish a multi-generational representative healthy workplace committee or assign the responsibility to an exist-



ing group such as an occupational health committee or EAP/EFAP committee.

Then, identify the health and wellness needs and interests of your employees by conducting a confidential survey or health risk assessment (HRA). To ensure you are addressing the needs of the aging workforce, analyze responses by age group. Not only will you gain valuable information, but you will also get their attention and support.

Create an annual program plan and corresponding budget. Debrief on your plan with other stakeholders who are responsible for influencing health within the organization to ensure that programs are targeted, cost efficient, and streamlined. Include the employee and family assistance program (EFAP), occupational health and safety, and compensation and benefits in your discussions to identify cost pressures, resources, and other strategic issues.

Solicit the support of health and wellness professionals to ensure you are getting top quality programs and services. Consider hiring a consulting firm that specializes in workplace wellness to help develop your program strategy. Invest in qualified professionals to deliver your programs.

Target programs based on interest, health issues, and physical ability rather than age. Don't assume that an employee's health age is the same as their physical age. Sanofi Pasteur's campus in Toronto, ON, has a company hockey league where one-third of the players are 50+ years of age.

Campbell Company of Canada's 'Wellness Within Program' sponsors an osteoporosis education program called the Osteoporosis Olympics featuring the calcium calculator, calcium jeopardy, a strong bones competition with the grip dynamometer, and a grocery bag relay. Employees have an opportunity to take an annual screening test to check bone density levels to monitor the impact their diet and physical activity is having on their bones. The osteo-blast low impact muscle conditioning class is popular with the Boomer population.

Taking breaks throughout the day to rejuvenate, energize, and re-focus becomes increasingly important with age as the natural tendency of Boomers is to 'keep working until the job is done.'

At INTRIA, stretch breaks take place every four hour shift to increase circulation, improve posture, and prevent musculo-skeletal injury. Employee volunteers participate in professional stretch break training and deliver the program.

The supply chain population at Wrigley Canada is encouraged to head to the gym on their 15-minute breaks and 30-minute lunch breaks for some light daily physical activity. No change of clothing is required.

Onsite massage provides Boomers relief from chronic pain, stiff muscles and joints,

and helps reduce stress. Many employers are bringing registered massage therapy services onsite on a weekly basis and include paramedic services in their benefit plan.

Many employees do not have a family doctor and, for those that do, a significant percentage do not have regular check ups. An annual health screening provides early detection and makes it easy for employees to take preventative measures. At the Staples Canada Home Office, an annual health fair features qualified health practitioners including a dietician, registered massage therapist,

physiotherapist, and chiropractor. They also bring in nurses to provide health screening for blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood glucose, and bone density screening for osteoporosis. Employees at risk are referred to their doctor for follow-up.

Boomers are often faced with managing not only their own health, but that of their aging parents. Recognize that this stage of life brings about changes which can take a toll on emotional health. Provide resources and information on self care and eldercare and continue to promote your EFAP service

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for handling life's challenges and changes. The Boomer generation is less inclined to ask for help in times of need.

### Work/life Balance

Work/life balance is important to all generations. While many Boomers are still enjoying their careers, they are interested in working less and are thinking ahead to their retirement by exploring their other interests and pursuing non-work related goals. Looking good and feeling good are also high on the priority list. Many are seeking new challenges and activities as they move towards retirement including strengthening social networks and being fit for grandchildren.

Boomers may be considering part-time work opportunities and the flexibility to work from home is a way to help reduce the stress and strain of commuting.

The more control employees have over their work, the greater the level of satisfaction and employee engagement. Regular feedback, performance reviews, and open communication will ensure your older employees are able to meet the demands of their jobs and feel a sense of control over their work.

### Culture

Developing a healthy workplace culture starts at the top. Solicit a program champion who has the authority and responsibility to drive the program forward. Include healthy

workplace principles in the corporate mission and values statements. Look for ways to create an inclusive culture respecting the value that all generations bring to the workplace. Promote healthy role models of all ages and positions throughout your organization. Ensure that management adheres to policies that promote a healthy workplace.

Boomers, as they become 'empty nesters,' may have more time on their hands for volunteer opportunities. Recruit them for different roles within your wellness program including 'wellness reps,' stretch break leaders, walking and running club leaders, and wellness program ambassadors. At Enbridge Gas Distribution in Toronto, ON, one of their volunteer fitness instructors is a 58-year-old marathon runner. As a veteran step instructor, she was able to continue her fitness leadership training at the company's Enshape Centre. She actively promotes the fitness program to her colleagues, many of whom are in her age group. Their third-party wellness professional is a Boomer herself and uses a lot of 'oldies' type music to attract Boomers, along with younger generations, who love to sing along. Even the younger generations loosen up after a few classes. Zumba has been amazingly popular with older participants who prefer to dance over lifting weights.

Be inclusive in your program offerings

and use multi-generational photos and images in your marketing and promotions to engage people of all ages. Boomers like to stay young at heart by being involved with younger generations.

Be sensitive to the language used in promoting wellness initiatives. 'Get Fit' implies that Boomers are not already fit, while 'Be Fit' implies that you can start anywhere to increase your activity level. 'Understanding Wellness and the Aging Process' might be better positioned as 'Wellness for a high functioning lifestyle at any age.'

Paying attention to the health and well-being of your older employees is a win/win for everyone. Keeping Boomers well at work will ensure an engaged and productive workforce while managing rising healthcare costs.

Boomers who work for organizations that place a high priority on the health of their employees will have the choice of working healthier, longer while enjoying the social, intellectual, and financial benefits of meaningful work well into their later years. ■



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