

## Taking fitness and nutrition beyond 'flavour of the month'

*Wellness programs should be fun, quick and interactive*

BY VERONICA MARSDEN

More employers are talking about wellness as a key strategy for enhancing employee engagement. It makes business sense — healthy, happy employees are sick less often, have more energy and are more engaged at work.

To be successful, however, organizations need to take wellness beyond a "flavour of the month" approach to one that is needs-driven, ongoing and sustainable. Initiatives have to be fun, interactive and quick to capture employees' attention.

Being more active, eating better, managing weight and work-life balance top the list when it comes to important wellness goals. This is a good starting point for promoting health and well-being at work.

A first step to launching a workplace program is to form a wellness committee comprised of individuals responsible for organizational health along with other interested employees. The team's role is to plan a calendar of events, co-ordinate activities, promote the program and be ambassadors for wellness.

### Exercise — sneaking it in

More than one-third (36.1 per cent) of Canadians are overweight and 23.1 per cent are obese, according to the 2004 *Canadian Community Health Survey* from Statistics Canada. With more than one-half of Canadians carrying extra pounds, it's not surprising weight management is top of mind for many employees. Exercise can be intimidating but there are many ways to gain the health benefits of exercise without breaking a sweat:

- Encourage lunchtime group walks, frequent stretch breaks and use of the stairs.
- Provide lunchtime or after-work yoga classes.
- Offer subsidized fitness memberships or negotiate group rates at a local gym. (The most effective subsidies are ones that are flexible and allow employees to claim different types of expenses such as dance lessons, home fitness equipment or community exercise classes.)

### Friendly, team-building competition

Consider challenging employees to a 10-week weight-loss challenge. Make it fun and promote employee engagement by structuring it as a team event with a trophy and bragging rights for the winning group. Award points each time an employee engages in physical activity or another healthy behaviour. Everyone reaching a preset

goal can be eligible for a draw prize. Pedometer challenges are also a popular way to encourage walking. Employers can even set up stationary bikes in the company lobby and hold a cyclethon.

Wellness challenges organized at strategic times throughout the year are effective in keeping employees on track with their health goals. A Tour de France activity challenge in July or a Holiday Health Campaign in December help keep the program top of mind.

There are also opportunities to tap into community-sponsored events that promote physical activity and wellness, such as a Terry Fox run or the Big Bike for the Heart & Stroke Foundation, which also support giving back to the community.

Many companies also use the United Way campaign each fall as a chance to raise funds through participation in physical activity. These charitable events go a long way towards creating a sense of community within an organization.

### Healthy eating and weight management

Whether there is an on-site cafeteria service, a lunch room with a fridge and microwave or vending machines, there are a number of ways an employer can promote good eating habits at work.

Healthy eating starts with a good breakfast. An inexpensive and fun way to support healthy breakfast habits is to have the wellness committee whip up breakfast smoothies for employees to sample as they arrive to work one morning. Frozen berries, natural yogurt, unsweetened fruit juice and a little protein powder will have employees "talking breakfast" for days to come.

A strategically placed wellness board can also display a "Did you know?" tip of the week, such as highlighting the sugar content in sweetened beverages. The tip should be brief, topical and colourful to capture people's attention.

Employers can also collaborate with cafeteria and vending machine providers to offer healthy meal and snack options.

As for the weekly doughnut tradition, replace that with "fresh fruit Fridays" or designate a regular "healthy snack day" where employees can sample snack alternatives such as trail mix, dried fruits and "good for you" bars. Offer healthy snacks at the next company meeting and change the way special events and milestones are celebrated — substitute cake with a fruit and veggie tray.

Recipe clubs are also a popular way for employees to share their favourite healthy, calorie-conscious

### TIPS FOR EMPLOYEES

#### 10 ways to be fit at work

Looking for advice to give to workers about what they can do to get fit? Here are 10 ideas to pass on:

- Take a five-minute stretch break.
- Organize a walking club.
- Park your car at the far end of the parking lot.
- Bike to work.
- Get off the bus or subway one stop earlier.
- Deliver a message on foot instead of by email.
- Organize a lunchtime yoga class.
- Move a meeting outside and walk and talk.
- Use the washroom furthest away from your workstation.
- Set an alarm to remind you to get up and move around every hour.

### CASE STUDY

#### Email messages boost employee health

A behavioural-intervention program delivered by email significantly improved diet and physical activity by helping people move more, sit less and make healthier food choices at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, Calif.

In a 16-week trial, weekly emails were sent to 351 employees suggesting small, practical, individually tailored goals, such as eating fruit for a snack or walking for 10 minutes at lunchtime. Another group of 436 employees was only sent email feedback at the start of the intervention indicating whether or not their reported physical activity and diet met national guidelines.

At the end of the trial, participants in the intervention group were more physically active, eating more fruits and vegetables and reducing their intake of saturated fats and trans fats, compared to the control group. Workers in the intervention group who were not regularly active before the intervention increased their participation in moderate-intensity physical activities by almost one hour per week and decreased their sedentary activities by two hours per week. And the changes lasted four months after the trial ended.

"Email intervention programs are a very cost-effective way to get healthy," said Barbara Sternfield, senior research scientist at the Kaiser Permanente division of research, which conducted the 2009 study with NutritionQuest, developers of the program. "A tailored email program includes all the things that behavioural scientists have said for years about changing behaviour: Small goals tailored for the individual, reinforcement and tracking but delivered in a mass, cost-effective way."

recipes. A monthly potluck can then feature the healthy recipes.

Finally, some benefit plans cover the cost of a registered dietician. Ensure employees are familiar with the services provided to them through their benefits and employee assistance program.

### Promote work-life balance

Supporting work-life balance and promoting relaxation at work are crucial to fostering employee health, energy and performance. Consider offering massage days and establishing a "no email" policy during designated hours. Mid-morning and afternoon stretch breaks and organized walking groups during meal time can also help employees balance their workload and still have energy at the end of the day for family.

Another way to promote work-life balance is by supporting flexible hours and allowing employees to work from home when a child is sick or personal obligations make it difficult to travel to work.

### Celebrate the wins

Encourage employees to set realistic wellness goals and celebrate each small win. Share their success stories by posting them on an intranet site and bulletin boards.

By keeping program initiatives simple but ever-present, an employer sends the message "The company cares about you." With a committed and enthusiastic wellness committee, a program champion and minimal financial resources, an organization can have a healthy workplace culture where wellness is "a way of doing business."

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