



# EAP NEWSLETTER

*Managing Employee Health  
and Performance*

## Healthy Resolutions

Many people ring in the New Year with champagne, friends—and a host of new lifestyle resolutions. Whether that means losing weight, exercising more, quitting smoking, working less or just destressing, we all strive to be healthier, happier and more relaxed. If most of us could stick to these once-a-year commitments, it's likely that our coworkers and employers would benefit as well. Being a healthy individual has far-reaching effects. In any organization, employees are its best resource. Examples presented by successful companies, such as DuPont, seem to reinforce this adage. Healthy employees contribute to the success of the company through greater productivity and creativity at work, diminished conflict and strife in the workplace, fewer sick days and decreased use of drug and other medical benefits. It is clear that the health and well-being of individual employees can have a direct impact on a company's productivity.

A 2003 study sponsored by Health Canada on work-life balance suggests that in the last 10 years, job stress has increased while job satisfaction is down; in addition, workers are less satisfied with their lives in general and are more likely to say they are depressed. These issues can take their toll on work performance. Stress-related absences alone account for a cost of \$3.5 billion to Canadian employees each year (Williams & Normand, 2003). Add to this the cost of "presenteeism" (when an employee is physically at work but psychologically disengaged), increased accidents, strained work relationships and higher medical benefit costs, then value of preventive health programs becomes clear.

Becoming and remaining a healthy organization with healthy employees is a constant challenge. In the past, companies have concentrated on improving the physical health and safety of the

workplace in an effort to reduce the incidence of accidents and physical health problems. This focus on occupational health and safety helped decrease the incidence of death and injury from 11.3% in 1970 to 6.4% in 1997 (Human Resources Development Canada, 1999).

More recently, employers have begun to recognize the value of preventive measures for other health problems, such as weight issues, smoking, stress and psychological problems. In a 2000 survey of Canadian organizations conducted by Buffett Taylor and Associates, 64% of respondents offered at least one wellness initiative, the most common of which was an employee assistance program (EAP), offered by 49% of respondents.

Companies that strive to create a healthy, positive work environment through preventive health programs are seeing concrete financial gains. Programs such as child and eldercare services, legal advisory services, psychological or career counseling and post-traumatic stress counseling, help employees manage stress and maintain a positive work-life balance. The results for employers are increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, lower turnover of staff, reduced accidents in the workplace, fewer employee conflicts and complaints, improved work performance and reduced medical costs.

DuPont, a company that is widely viewed as a best practice organization in the area of health and safety, is a testament to the benefits of creating a healthy work environment. Through its health and wellness program, which includes health risk assessments and follow-up consultations, health education and changes to the company's cafeteria and vending food options, DuPont saved 11.726 disability days per person over two years (Conference Board of Canada, 2002).

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## Creating a healthy work environment for employees

Employers may take many approaches to fostering a healthy work environment conducive to creativity, productivity and well-being. Analyzing and diagnosing the needs of an organization is essential before tailoring an effective health and wellness program, notes Pascale Bédard, a Standard Life consultant who specializes in health and wellness services to employers. “Many employers are aware of the importance of the health and wellness of their employees to their organization’s productivity and profitability, but they have some legitimate questions. They don’t know where to start, what to do and how.”

As Bédard explains, “The first step is to target the organization’s problems, analyze its current situation and determine employees’ needs.” A diagnostic tool is used to analyze the company’s health, drug and disability data. From these statistics, it is possible to identify major conditions and trends that are related to disability, health and drug claims. “The result of this exercise is usually a huge eye-opener for the client,” she says.

Within any organization, the needs of individual employees differ. Managers and supervisors face the added responsibility of monitoring employee performance and identifying areas for attention or improvement.

There are employee assistance programs that directly address the needs of managers and supervisors. “FGIworld [Standard Life’s partner EAP provider] offers two types of programs,” Bédard explains, “Inter-Aide, which is a standard employee assistance program, and Expert-Aide, which provides assistance to managers and supervisors.” Expert-Aide provides additional services to help managers and supervisors with people management, post-traumatic services, coaching and customized training.

The next step after identifying areas of need is to develop an action plan in consultation with the organization. “Standard Life provides assistance in planning and implementing health and wellness initiatives by taking into account various factors, such as the organization’s demographic profile, values, budget and culture.” Psychological conditions, for instance, are a major source of overall health expenses. According to a 1998 study, mental illness, which can include burnout, stress and a lack of work-life balance, costs the Canadian economy at least \$14.4 billion every year through decreased productivity and healthcare costs (Stephens & Joubert, 1998).

When psychological and lifestyle issues are identified and addressed early on through on-site programs or referrals, this can reduce the incidence of subsequent drug and medical benefit use. The action plan developed in conjunction with the EAP provider and the employer could address the issues by promoting EAPs in the workplace, conducting employee surveys and focus groups, offering stress management sessions, etc. Work-life balance is another common issue. To address this problem, the employer might consider introducing flexible schedules, telecommuting options or on-site childcare services.

In order to improve the health and overall well-being of an organization, individual employees need to be aware and take advantage of the tools the program provides. As Bédard explains, “It is important for employers to promote the program among employees. This is something we encourage them to do.” To achieve this, FGIworld offers orientation sessions for employees to successfully implement the program.



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As an organization moves forward with health improvement initiatives, it hopes to see results on its balance sheet. And indeed, this is the expected outcome in most situations. To monitor progress and ensure that the program adequately meets its employees’ needs, a follow-up analysis is conducted approximately every three months, depending on the needs of the organization. “Some companies are very independent, while others will want a more immediate follow-up and re-analysis period,” says Bédard, explaining that the process is collaborative and responsive to the needs of the individual organization. “Implementing a health promotion program is a challenge for every organization, but the expertise of the insurance carrier and EAP provider can help successfully manage this process. The main outcome is to improve the health of all employees and the organization. If all parties work hand in hand, the results will speak for themselves.”

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