Winning Wellness Strategies

MAKING LOSING A WINNING BATTLE

By Denise Balch

Trying to lose weight can be incredibly challenging to do alone. But Efficiency Nova Scotia, an independent non-profit organization located in Dartmouth, N.S., recently introduced a workplace wellness program that successfully helped its employees do just that. The 80-plus team of employees at Efficiency help Nova Scotians use energy better and save money. They are a young and energetic group—more than half are female, and three-quarters are under age 40—but the company has already committed to helping employees tackle the risk factors that can lead to chronic diseases later in life.

Beginning in June 2013, Efficiency launched and delivered its first Biggest Loser Plus program, which took place over a period of three months. An employee health risk assessment (HRA) that the company administered early in 2013 identified a need and willingness by employees to increase their physical activity, improve their eating habits and lose weight—with 19% of employees obese and almost one-third overweight.

The Biggest Loser program was the first program introduced following the assessment, supported by the company’s provider, Connex Health. The goal was to increase physical activity using pedometers and facilitate weight loss. The program consisted of a pedometer challenge as well as monitoring of blood pressure, body fat and weight loss at biweekly check-ins.

A total of 82 out of 85 eligible employees signed up for the program, and employees were encouraged to form teams. The recommended weight-loss goal for each of the 16 teams was an average of 5% of total team body weight with a recommended daily steps count goal of 10,000. A level of activity that can be sustained and an achievable target of 5% are both significant to attaining successful program results and improving employee health. Per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, even a modest weight loss (5% to 10%) is likely to produce health benefits relating to blood pressure, blood cholesterol and blood sugars.

For those already diagnosed with high blood pressure or high cholesterol, an individual weight loss of as little as 5% can have a positive impact on both, according to Canada’s Heart and Stroke Foundation, and a slow rate of weight loss is most realistic for keeping the weight off long term. Just one or two pounds a week is sufficient.

In order to submit data on progress, employees were asked to complete a pre- and post-survey as well as attend regular check-ins every two weeks. A member of the wellness team monitored each check-in. Employees conducted measurements and entered their results at the check-in location on a single laptop set up for the purpose of collecting data confidentially. The data was then returned to the provider for analysis. Participants were also able to log the steps recorded by their pedometers through the StepsCount website, available as part of their pedometer purchase, on a more frequent basis.

Efficiency Nova Scotia provided incentives, both during the program and at the program’s conclusion, to encourage employees to follow through with individual and team goals. A new pedometer challenge was promoted every two weeks with gift certificate prizes for weight loss and step counts. A nutritionist was also engaged to deliver three separate sessions during the program.

There were significant achievements over the course of the program. Number of steps - Members of half of the 16 teams consistently averaged more
Growth awareness of the health risk factors related to a sedentary lifestyle and high stress levels have led many employers to offer wellness programs. But non-traditional workplaces are finding that it takes extra creativity and flexibility to promote wellness to employees who don’t come into the office.

That was the case at an Ontario-based utility company with about 5,500 employees scattered across the province. The “nomadic” workforce is mostly male, with 54% over age 45, and includes seasonal, union and non-union employees. Many employees travel from one site to another, often in remote and isolated areas.

Getting everyone together to attend a centralized workplace wellness program was out of the question. Instead, the company, partnering with Sun Life Financial, developed a program for employees on the road.

The wellness initiative started small in 2010 with flu shot clinics and gradually evolved. On-site health screening clinics were added the following year, and audiometric (hearing) tests (certain crews are exposed to high noise levels) the year after. In 2013, a three-year integrated data analysis (IDA) identified top health risks based on a range of data inputs that included drug use, screening clinic scores, employee assistance program utilization, short-term disability, long-term disability, extended healthcare, employee turnover and employee engagement.

The health screening clinics and IDA revealed serious risks for cardiovascular disease and mental health issues. Spurred by the results, the company rolled out a comprehensive program this year to reduce employee health risks and associated costs. It hopes this approach will also improve employees’ happiness and productivity in all aspects of their lives.

The program measures up to other workplace wellness programs that follow established best practices. Relationships between disability managers, HR and the union are being built with other areas of the organization to ensure leadership support. A wellness website—launching this summer—will serve than 10,000 steps per day, exceeding the program goals. The winning team logged an average of 15,062 steps per member.

**Blood pressure** - There were significant improvements in blood pressure levels, which will reduce the risk of stroke. Almost one-quarter (23%) recorded reductions in their blood pressure over the program period; two individuals reduced their blood pressure from high to borderline normal; four reduced their blood pressure from high normal to normal; and 10 experienced reductions within the normal range.

**Body fat** - Six employees moved down categories: five moved from the overweight to the normal category, and one moved from the obese category to the overweight category.

**Weight loss** - A total of 256.5 pounds were lost (an average of five pounds per person), and seven employees lost at least 5% of their total body weight. The Biggest Loser winner lost 20.6 pounds.

**Nutrition** - Sixty-six percent reported that the program improved their knowledge of Canada’s Food Guide. The goal was for employees to increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables. The nutrition winner recorded a total of 1,179 servings throughout the program—an average of 12 servings per day.

In addition to these results, self-reported data indicate that, since the beginning of the program, a higher percentage of participants meet aerobic physical activity guidelines and strengthening activity guidelines. The provider analyzed all of the data at the conclusion of the program, and modest prizes (gift certificates ranging from $20 to $50) were awarded to the participants who had the most number of steps, lost the most weight, reduced the highest amount of body fat and gained the best nutrition results. There was also a prize for the best overall individual result and the best overall team.

Post-program evaluations revealed that a large majority (88%) of participants found it worthwhile, and roughly half felt healthier as a result or felt better about themselves. Almost all participants (96%) believed they would probably or definitely maintain the healthy habits they developed during the program.

Efficiency Nova Scotia was pleased with the results of its first wellness program, and feedback from employees in the evaluation survey was positive. If employees continue with the improvements in lifestyle practices and reductions in body fat, weight and blood pressure achieved during the program, they will reduce their risk of chronic and life-threatening diseases such as stroke, cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Based on these promising results, and participant feedback, the program was launched for the second time in April 2014 for a total of eight weeks. In addition to reducing the time period for the program, other changes included recording all measurement data directly to the company wellness website developed and managed by the provider (including the weekly log of total steps completed).

So, losing weight is not that hard, after all—as long as you have the right strategy and support system. And that’s exactly what Efficiency Nova Scotia received.

Denise Balch is president of Connex Health. denisebalch@connexhc.com

### WELLNESS WITH RHYME AND REASON

When Mount Sinai Hospital’s poet-in-residence makes her rounds, she delivers the healing power of words. “Employees were skeptical at first, but now they welcome her visits,” says Melissa Barton, the hospital’s director of occupational health, wellness and safety. “It’s a few minutes out of their day to express thoughts or feelings in a creative, reflective way, which has been proven to help build personal resilience to stress.”

The poet-in-residence, funded by the Ontario Arts Council, is one of several programs that promote psychological health and safety, including the Be an Ally anti-discrimination campaign to promote appropriate interactions with those who have a mental illness; compassion-fatigue support for healthcare staff; the “stress vaccine” online training tool to help navigate stressful situations in a hospital setting; and the
as a one-stop shop for employees to access health and wellness information and tools with content customized to specific health risks (e.g., cardiovascular disease) identified by assessments. Employees will also receive a wellness newsletter (electronic or print) and can take part in the organization-wide challenge customized for heart health.

What makes this program different is how it was designed for a specific non-traditional work environment. Rather than holding campaigns to encourage participation in clinics held a couple of times a year at office locations, the company sent the health and wellness team on the road to reach as many employees as possible. On-site clinics are scheduled during internal conferences and training meetings for employees who work in the field, with most regional/local office locations holding at least quarterly meetings. The program allows virtual and manual (paper) registration, too, so that managers can create a schedule based on when employees will be on breaks or screen an entire crew back to back.

The IDA report demonstrated a reduction of health risks year over year, and the company has embraced the concept that what gets measured gets attention. Data from screening clinics held in 2012 and 2013 showed that reduced health risks (i.e., blood pressure, cholesterol) among return-clinic participants translated to a significant cost avoidance across 435 employees. Beyond the savings, the company’s prevailing attitude is that saving one life byflagging a critical health risk is worth the effort.

When designing a targeted program for a non-traditional workplace, it’s important to challenge typical assumptions. At many traditional organizations, for example, it makes sense to avoid holding workplace events during the summer vacation period. But many employees’ tendency to be away during the fall hunting season may create a schedule based on when employees will be on breaks or screen an entire crew back to back. The program allows virtual and manual (paper) registration, too, so that managers can create a schedule based on when employees will be on breaks or screen an entire crew back to back.

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