

EDITORIAL | Carrots and Sticks




This past summer, my husband, my then-16-month-old daughter and I went to the Ex. Amid the rides, midway games and other diversions was the food building, where you could purchase such artery-clogging options as deep-fried Mars bars, deep-fried cola and, rather gratuitously, deep-fried butter. You could even get a “value” deal, which included a variety of deep-fried treats.

My husband couldn't resist trying the Krispy Kreme burger at Epic Burgers & Waffles: a burger topped with cheese, tomato and lettuce with two doughnuts instead of a bun. But it came at a price—about 1,500 calories, according to the *Toronto Star*, and that's not including the optional egg and bacon. Epic spokesperson Justin Davis has summed it up well: “You know it's bad for you, but you just can't stop.”

That mentality poses a challenge for employers that are looking to build and maintain a healthy workforce. But on the bright side, more organizations are recognizing the value of prevention in keeping employees productive and are getting involved. And it's not just large employers joining the movement; smaller organizations, too, are scaling wellness initiatives to meet their needs.

When we put out the call for nominations for our Workplace Health & Benefits Awards this year, we received a flood of nominations for the newly added health & wellness program category. Organizations outlined a number of creative strategies for making wellness a priority, including educational workshops, health risk assessments, on-site heart clinics, healthy food options and fitness or weight loss challenges. (We'll be recognizing some of these leading organizations at a gala in Toronto on Oct. 13, 2011. Go to BenefitsCanada.com and click on Events for details.)

The results of these programs are encouraging: lower disability costs, an overall healthier workforce and greater employee engagement. But I wonder, is it enough? If employers are supporting and incenting healthy behaviours, should they also be actively discouraging negative ones?

If the goal is to get people to make long-term lifestyle changes, I think we need to use both carrots and sticks. Because when deep-fried Mars bars and doughnut burgers are on offer, it's not that easy to make healthy choices. Just ask my husband. 

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