MEET THE WINNERS

WORKPLACE HEALTH & BENEFITS AWARDS 2011

gala awards ANNUAL

MEET THE WINNERS

THE GALA: WHAT A NIGHT!

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: GET TO KNOW THE FINALISTS

EXPERTS SHARE HEALTHY WORKPLACE TIPS IN THE ROUNDTABLE
WORKPLACE HEALTH & BENEFITS AWARDS 2011

Page 3

gala
The 2011 Workplace Health & Benefits Awards
Honouring the innovators in employee wellness
BY LEIGH DOYLE

Page 6

finalists

Page 9

winner profiles
Workplace Health & Benefits Awards winner profiles
BY SONYA FELIX

Page 26

roundtable
Building Success: A strategic approach to employee health and wellness
Industry experts discuss how to develop effective employee programs
BY LEIGH DOYLE

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As healthcare costs spiral upward and the Canadian population continues to grey, employers have a valuable role to play in keeping working Canadians healthy. Benefits Canada knows the impact that cutting-edge and creative workplace benefits and wellness plans can have on employees’ health.

To raise awareness of the game-changing programs being developed across the country, Benefits Canada hosted more than 170 people from the benefits industry for the 2011 Workplace Health & Benefits Awards. The awards honour organizations and individuals who have demonstrated leadership and innovation when it comes to keeping employees healthy.

At a gala dinner at the Fairmont Royal York in Toronto, Alyssa Hodder, editor of Benefits Canada, emceed the celebration and handed out the awards.

This year, the awards received a record number of nominations—close to 50 in eight categories. The quality of the nominations was so outstanding that in many of the categories, only a few points separated the winners from the other finalists. Benefits Canada is grateful for the hard work of the judging panel: Sarah Beech of Aon Hewitt, Wendy Bott of Buck Consultants, Rick Campbell of Rogers Publishing Ltd., Jean-Guy Gauthier of Standard Life, Rick Holinshead of Mercer, Suzanne Jolly of UBC, Marilee Mark of Manulife Financial, Vic Medland of OTIP, Dr. David Satok of Rogers, Dr. Alain Sotto of OPG and Vicki Wood of Rogers Publishing Ltd.

The first award of the night, sponsored by Pfizer, was the Employer Award (<1,000 employees). It recognizes an organization that has demonstrated leadership and innovation in the design, administration or governance of a group benefits plan or workplace health program for its employees. DOT Integrated Financial took home the award. The judges noted that DOT Integrated Financial created a sense of ownership over the plan for the...
employees, which resulted in impressive support of the wellness activities.

The second award was the Employer Award (1,000+ employees). Sun Life Financial sponsored this award, and the competition was so tough in this category that the judges called a tie between Shoppers Drug Mart and the University Health Network. The judges described Shoppers Drug Mart’s program as innovative and unique. The University Health Network’s program was praised for its vision and results.

A great benefits program is nothing without quality communication to employees. The Communication Award recognizes an organization that has developed innovative and effective strategies for communicating a group benefits plan or workplace health initiative to its employees. It was Staples Canada Inc. that took home the award for a comprehensive communications plan that was well organized and very detailed.

Employers often work closely with a supporting organization to develop an innovative and effective alliance. The Strategic Partnership Award recognizes companies that have had such a success. The award, sponsored by Shoppers Drug Mart, was given to Campbell Company of Canada and Tri Fit Inc. Judges described the outcomes of the partnership as thoughtfully structured, well implemented and successfully sustained.

An outstanding drug plan management strategy is capable of reducing absenteeism, controlling costs and improving employee health and engagement, all while creating a positive return on investment. The Drug Plan Management Award recognizes organizations that successfully implement such a strategy. Sponsored by Medavie Blue Cross, the judges chose the Halifax Professional Firefighters Benefits Trust as the winner because of the program’s holistic approach to drug plan management that focused not only on ways to cut claims costs but also on ensuring that the drugs that are used are used properly to improve the health of employees.

The Health/Wellness Program Award (<1,000 employees) recognizes an organization that has developed an innovative and effective health or wellness program that demonstrates improved health outcomes for employees. It was sponsored by MHCSI. Dufferin Child and Family Services was chosen as the winner because the judges were impressed by the high level of employee participation and the health coaching program.

The winner of the Health/Wellness Program Award (1,000+ employees), sponsored by Ceridian, was Marine Atlantic Inc. The judges chose Marine Atlantic for introducing across-the-board participation in its wellness program and showing successful, measurable outcomes for its program.

The Lifetime Achievement Award—sponsored by Morneau Shepell—is for an individual who has spent his or her career demonstrating leadership and innovation in the group benefits or workplace health industry. Randy McGlynn from the Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan took home the award. The judges described him as a pioneer who established a vision for the business and followed through, delivering on growth and sustainability and creating strong partnerships and innovative solutions.

Congratulations to all of the winners and finalists. Benefits Canada is already looking for nominations for next year. Visit benefitscanada.com/benefitsawards to make a suggestion for a company or individual you believe is making a positive difference in Canada’s benefits industry.
With the high number of quality entries to the Workplace Health & Benefits Awards this year, choosing winners was a difficult task for the judges. All of the finalists made great strides in their respective areas, and, when that happens, both employees and employers win. The following is a list of all of the finalists in each category and a few photos of some of the happy nominees.
The employees and trustees of OTIP (Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan) congratulate Randy McGlynn on receiving Benefits Canada’s prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

Our congratulations to all nominees and finalists.

WORKPLACE HEALTH & BENEFITS AWARDS FINALISTS

**EMPLOYER (<1,000 EMPLOYEES)**
Finalists:
DOT Integrated Financial ★
Franke Kindred Canada Ltd.
Nortrax

**EMPLOYER (1,000+ EMPLOYEES)**
Finalists:
ConocoPhillips Canada
Shoppers Drug Mart ★
University of British Columbia
University Health Network ★★★
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT
Finalists:
Karen Liberman
Randy McGlynn ★
Jacques Tardif

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP
Finalists:
Campbell Company of Canada and Tri Fit Inc. ★
Standard Life and Global Corporate Challenge
Sun Life and The Economical Insurance Group

DRUG PLAN MANAGEMENT
Finalists:
Halifax Professional Firefighters Benefits Trust ★
Toromont Industries Ltd.

HEALTH/WELLNESS PROGRAM
(<1,000 EMPLOYEES)
Finalists:
Cundari
Dufferin Child and Family Services ★

HEALTH/WELLNESS PROGRAM
(1,000+ EMPLOYEES)
Finalists:
Marine Atlantic Inc. ★
Shoppers Drug Mart
Sun Life Financial
Toronto East General Hospital

COMMUNICATION
Finalists:
Gamma-Dynacare Medical Laboratories
Niagara Casinos
Staples Canada Inc.★

★ = winners
winner profiles

The 2011 Workplace Health & Benefits Awards received close to 50 nominations this year from leading organizations, big and small, that are making a difference. The field was narrowed to nine winners in eight categories. The winners are leaders in their area, and their winning ways are examples for other organizations to champion.

On the following pages, the winners of the 2011 Workplace Health & Benefits Awards explain what they have accomplished and how they did it.

By Sonya Felix
Morneau Shepell would like to congratulate the winners and nominees of the 2011 Workplace Health & Benefits Awards.

As a leader in workplace health and productivity, we’re committed to improving employees’ financial security, health and well-being and are honoured to sponsor an event recognizing the talents of those making a difference in the benefits industry!

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It can easily be said that Randy McGlynn, CEO of the Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan (OTIP) based in Waterloo, Ont., has a way with people. One of his many accomplishments over 31 years at OTIP is his commitment to providing services with a personal touch to the plan’s 112,000 members. McGlynn really cares about whether members get timely care and support to get back to work, and he wants to help those who are struggling through the confusion, fear and pain of cancer treatment or mental health issues.

“I hope that one of the things that makes a difference at OTIP is the tone at the top reinforcing our unique service approach,” McGlynn says. “If you put members first, and understand their needs and requirements, then you will create a loyal, long-term clientele. The money follows.”

OTIP is a non-profit, member-focused organization that provides group benefits and individual insurance coverage to Ontario’s education community. When McGlynn joined the organization in 1980, his initial goal was to understand who the members were and the unique challenges they faced. “I thought, if we can remove members’ challenges in managing their personal and family financial risks around income replacement and health insurance issues, then we could add value,” he says, adding that he started by designing a long-term disability (LTD) plan. “The teaching profession typically has higher mental and nervous claims than the general public, so we needed to ensure that services were available to deliver effective claims management and build prevention techniques.” After LTD, McGlynn applied the same principle to extended health and dental, and then focused on designing wellness products.

McGlynn emphasizes that member services and wellness promotion are the most significant advancements that OTIP has made over the years. “Funding has always been a challenge, and it still is,” he says. “Decision-makers need to see meaningful statistical data that they can relate to in order to allocate resources to provide necessary assistance for members and their families.” As an example, he points to OTIP’s partnership with CAREpath, a cancer assistance program that provides counselling through every phase of a member’s cancer battle. “Cancer has become the third largest disabler for our members, and we recognized that help was needed. It’s had a huge impact.”

While OTIP members appreciate McGlynn’s personal approach to group benefits, the group benefits industry recognizes him for creating a new model for industry-specific solutions to benefits needs. He’s made a huge impact on what it means to be a broker by capitalizing on large-scale broker technology, processes and buying power while still maintaining the personal service and compassion of a small-scale brokerage.

“I’m most proud of the sustainability we’ve created at OTIP as a result of our team method of delivery,” McGlynn says, noting that he plans to retire in 2012 and that the succession process is under way. “This will continue long into the future because we have system processes in place—and, more importantly, the people and relationships in place—to make OTIP a sustainable entity.”
Congratulations
to the winners of the Workplace Health & Benefits Awards

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Changing behaviour to reduce sick time

HEALTH/WELLNESS PROGRAM AWARD (<1,000 EMPLOYEES): DUFFERIN CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

A few years ago, Jennifer Moore, manager of HR and organizational development at Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCFS), noticed a spike in casual and short-term sick leaves among the agency’s 80 employees. “In any given year, about 12% of our staff were off on short-term sick leave,” she says. “This is a small organization, so you really notice when staff are away.”

Moore realized that it was time to tackle the issue of workplace wellness and hired Employee Wellness Solutions Network (EWSNetwork) in 2009 to facilitate and co-ordinate the program. An internal wellness committee made up of volunteers from various DCFS departments sat down with EWSNetwork to design a wellness program based on feedback from on-site health consultants and the wellness committee and results from an employee health risk assessment. With the goal of optimizing healthy behavioural change, the program was designed to take various learning approaches into consideration such as individual meetings and group participation.

For the past two years, DCFS employees have had access to free 30-minute individual wellness appointments—with monthly follow-up appointments—to discuss a range of issues, from customized meal plans to exercise prescriptions and stress management strategies. Group initiatives include lunchtime seminars on healthy eating and exercise classes. To raise health and wellness awareness, the agency now holds health fairs, demonstrations, walk-arounds and challenges for staff. “We reach even more people through our virtual initiatives, which include monthly newsletters, monthly wellness challenges, recipe campaigns and email campaigns,” says Moore. “I get comments all the time from people who say they love getting the emails.

“Although some people were enthusiastic, we also got a lot of questions about why we wanted to spend money on wellness,” she continues. “But it was a conscious decision that we were able to back up with a business case one year after implementation. At the time, we’d had a 17% funding cut from the government, and we had to look carefully at everything we were spending money on. We emphasized that keeping people at work and engaged is really important.”

In an environment like DCFS, stress can be a major issue. “It’s challenging, and people often find it hard to carve out time for themselves,” Moore says. “Our program gives them permission to look after themselves, and participation has continued to grow each year. We plan to continue to offer more variety.”

The results are impressive: staff now take fewer sick days, short-term disability rates are down, and risk factors related to fitness, nutrition, stress and weight are noticeably reduced. Over time, more people have shifted from just thinking about changing their behaviour to actually practising and managing healthy behaviour.

“Even smaller organizations like ours can focus on wellness,” says Moore. “It’s been really important for us to make the connection between our agency’s values and the wellness program. We recognize the need to care for our employees, and this is one way we can accomplish this.”

The Health/Wellness Program Award (<1,000 employees) was sponsored by

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With an aging employee base and benefits costs rising, Marine Atlantic Inc. decided to really get serious about workplace wellness back in 2004. The marine transportation company, which provides ferry service between Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia, already had an employee assistance program and held flu vaccine clinics, but it wasn’t enough, says Rhona Green, vice-president of HR. “We saw that we needed a whole program to focus on preventing health problems for our employees.”

So in 2004, Marine Atlantic implemented the Medavie Blue Cross @live health risk assessment and clinical screenings as the beginning of a journey to foster a culture of wellness. Green knew that it wouldn’t be easy to motivate the 1,400 full-time and seasonal employees who work across Marine Atlantic’s various locations, including two-week-on and two-week-off shifts on the ferries. A few years earlier, she’d tried to introduce @live as a health promotion tool for employees. “I thought if I just advertised and put it out there, all would be great,” she says. “But it went nowhere. This time, we realized that wellness can’t be a top-down initiative; it has to be employee-driven.”

By creating an employee wellness committee in 2005, the wellness program became an employee initiative. Now the committee develops wellness strategies each year; promotes the health assessment tool; organizes clinics, health talks and biweekly weigh-ins; engages a fitness trainer; communicates via an intranet wellness site; and contributes to monthly articles in an employee newsletter.

“We started the first wellness challenge in 2006 and built up from there,” says Green. “We do relatively well with participation, and people look forward to the program. Some have told us that if it were not for the program, they wouldn’t have made changes in their behaviour.” The @live Wellness Challenge, which was launched in 2008, subjects participating teams and individuals to intense scrutiny of their health and lifestyle. Over six months, baseline, midpoint and end measurements are taken and calculated by team to come up with the overall score. Wellness points are accumulated for doing tasks related to fitness, work/life balance and volunteering, and individuals earn points for the team by making healthy choices. A wellness banquet is held at the end of the challenge, and there is a luncheon with prizes for the winners.

“We view our wellness program from a holistic perspective that extends to mental and emotional well-being,” says Green. “We know that support for the community through volunteer work and fundraising is important, too, and it has become a big part of our approach.”

Although the value of wellness at the individual level is difficult to measure, Green notes that what is measurable is positive. The number of employees who complete the health risk assessment or return to update their profile rises each year. Improved eating habits, exercise and stress management have helped to reduce the number of employees considered high risk from 18% in 2006 to 14% in 2010.

“This is truly about our employees,” says Green. “Without their drive and participation, we would never have achieved this award.”

Helping employees drive change

HEALTH/WELLNESS PROGRAM AWARD (1,000+ EMPLOYEES): MARINE ATLANTIC INC.
CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR’S WINNERS. ALL HAVE DEMONSTRATED BEST PRACTICES IN WELLNESS & WORKPLACE HEALTH.

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ampbell Company of Canada truly walks the wellness talk, says Veronica Marsden, president of Tri Fit Inc. “Creating a supportive environment for optimal employee health and well-being sends the message that wellness is a way of doing business.” Campbell Canada’s success in fostering such an environment has earned it a reputation as a best-practice organization. But in 2003, the health focus went up a few notches with the realization that, although it had reached the maximum potential for safety in the workplace, employees were still getting sick due to aging and lifestyle issues. So, Fanny Karolev, an occupational health nurse and Campbell’s manager of worklife, health and wellness, looked at employee assistance program usage, short-term and long-term disability rates, and worker demographics to create a business case to support employee wellness.

The time was right, says Karolev, explaining that a stronger employee wellness strategy aligned perfectly with the company’s new vision: “extraordinary authentic nourishment for all,” a philosophy governing all aspects of the business. Senior leadership agreed and gave Karolev a budget to proceed. She took a course at the National Quality Institute on how to implement wellness programs and began consulting with experts. Tri Fit Inc., an Oakville, Ont.-based company specializing in corporate wellness, came on as a partner to conduct a health risk assessment and biometric testing and, ultimately, to design a range of wellness programs.

Karolev was so committed to sustaining the wellness initiative that she cleaned out her office and installed free weights, a mirror and an elliptical machine for employees. “It was a tiny space, but people used it,” she says. Not long after, Campbell's set aside 2,000 sq. ft. for an on-site fitness centre. Now, over one-third of the company’s 540 employees in Toronto are gym members, and 35% of those use it at least twice a week.

But the fitness centre is only part of the wellness offerings at Campbell Canada. For example, various programs use assessment tools, exercise, nutrition and counselling to address health issues, such as building strong muscles and bones, promoting heart health and reducing cancer risk. The LifeScale Program, a self-service tool, is available at all sites 24/7 to let employees monitor their blood pressure and keep track of their weight, BMI and body fat. Aggregate data gathered for the employee population allow Campbell’s to review trends. As well, wellness challenges help to keep employees motivated and add an element of fun.

“They’ve seen a lot of good results over the years,” says Marsden, pointing out an unprecedented shift from unhealthy to healthy weights since 2007. Osteoporosis clinics and diabetes education have encouraged healthier dietary choices in the cafeteria, and in 2011, approximately 20 employees quit smoking.

Overwhelmingly positive employee feedback is gratifying, says Karolev, adding that she is pleased when employees tell her the program gave them the courage to change their lifestyle, especially to quit smoking. “Delivering wellness not only has a positive impact on employees,” she says. “It also has a wider impact because it affects families.”

The Strategic Partnership Award was sponsored by

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Communications professionals often stress the need to relay a message seven times in seven different ways to get a point across. It’s a best practice that Kate Tilsley, director, compensation and HRIS with Staples Canada Inc., took to heart this year when teaming up with the company’s internal communications department to design a new communications plan for benefits plan members.

“Overall, our premium rate increases are below the market trend, but we are still feeling pressure from rising benefits premiums, especially short-term disability (STD) and long-term disability (LTD),” Tilsley explains. “So we set out to find opportunities to be proactive in managing costs and to talk to our employees about how to become smarter shoppers.”

The annual open-enrollment period, during which employees can review and make changes to their flexible benefits coverage, presented a perfect opportunity for Staples to educate the company’s 15,000 employees on changes to the disability plan, including reasons for higher premiums. Messaging could also include reminders about smart shopping: buying generics, getting preventative dental cleanings and considering mail order for maintenance drugs. At the same time, Staples wanted to improve employees’ understanding and the perceived value of the total rewards package.

But getting the message out wasn’t as simple as putting it up on the intranet site and saying, “There you go,” says Tilsley. “We are very cognizant of the diversity of our workforce and the challenge that poses for communication.” With employees located at more than 330 locations across Canada in corporate offices, retail stores, contact centres and warehouses, Staples needed a multi-faceted approach that tapped into every single communications channel available.

The “100% homegrown” communications plan used a range of tactics, including a managers’ benefits briefing to help them answer employees’ questions; a Coming Soon and It’s Here poster campaign; town hall meetings; a quarterly company newsletter; a printed open-enrollment package sent to homes; an online open-enrollment tool (available at work and securely at home); biweekly TV podcasts to raise awareness; Brainshark technology to verbally communicate key messages; and a dedicated employee email for personal questions and issues.

“It was a daunting endeavour,” says Tilsley. “But the plan was supported by a business case and received strong support from Staples’ executive team. And because it wasn’t the first time that we’d talked to employees about how to be a smart shopper, we didn’t get a lot of pushback from them. They already understand that they pay part of the premiums and why it is important to keep costs down.”

Calls to the benefits department were notably lower than in previous years, and the communications team received positive manager and employee feedback. Despite significant changes to the STD package, there was minimal disruption to business in executing the strategy.

Information provided to Staples employees over the years has made a difference in keeping benefits premiums for everything, except STD and LTD, below the market trend, adds Tilsley. “Although plan design has an impact, at the end of the day, communications can play a significant role, and we are confident that our messages will continue to have a positive impact on all of our benefits costs.”

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Five years ago, Halifax Professional Firefighters took a big step with their benefits plan when they chose to begin actively managing the plan themselves. The change was risky, and the learning curve was huge for a bunch of firefighters thrown into the benefits world, but the results have been worth the effort, says Chris Camp, chair of the Halifax Professional Firefighters Benefits Trust.

The idea of dropping a fully insured plan seemed crazy to some members. “But as firefighters, we are stubborn and don’t give up on things—and, considering our occupation, that’s a good thing.” The group, which includes about 550 employees plus dependents, went ahead and hired a consultant, created a board of trustees and moved their drug plan to Managed Health Care Services Inc. (MHCSI), a pharmacy-owned and operated pharmacy benefits manager.

By moving their drug plan to MHCSI, Halifax Firefighters adopted a managed formulary process and a preferred provider solution for pay-direct drug benefits. With incentives built into the preferred provider program, participation now runs upwards of 90%, says Camp, explaining that members have a $10 co-pay on all prescriptions but can only use the pay-direct card at preferred providers. Otherwise, they have to wait for reimbursement. “It was a hard sell at first and there was a lot of confusion, but after a lot of communication, people understood, and it is better now,” he says. Another incentive is a financial reward the plan receives from MHCSI: every time someone uses a preferred provider to fill a prescription, money goes into a scholarship fund for the firefighters’ children and, over five years, more than $70,000 has been distributed as scholarships.

Every month, the plan’s board of trustees meets to monitor drug usage and claims, and to deal with administrative and governance issues. The group’s drug plan management strategy demonstrates consistent reductions in overall per-member drug claims utilization and costs. Improvements in generic fill rates, adherence to three-month supplies on maintenance drugs, the managed formulary process and optimization of co-ordination of benefits have contributed to the positive trend. Members receive medication reviews and disease state management services provided by the pharmacists.

Greater emphasis on wellness has helped lower costs, especially for cardiovascular and diabetes claim utilization. “We realized that an ounce of prevention goes a long way,” says Camp, noting that the firefighters now have annual health risk assessments, biometric screenings and nutrition education. “Our members and their spouses are healthier, and some of them got off cholesterol and blood pressure drugs because they are taking better care of themselves.”

Although changing mindsets isn’t easy, Camp says that after five years with no premium increases, people are now convinced and happy with the drug plan. “At times, it was a tough battle, and the board had to make unpopular decisions,” he says. “That’s why getting this award from Benefits Canada is so gratifying. This kind of recognition helps me to know we are doing a good job.”

The Drug Plan Management Award was sponsored by

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EMPLOYER AWARD (1,000+ EMPLOYEES): SHOPPERS DRUG MART

When Shoppers Drug Mart (SDM) set out to review its benefits program in 2009, it quickly became apparent that the company had a galvanizing opportunity to do something that had never been done before. The company realized that as Canada’s leading retail drugstore chain, it has a priceless resource in its existing pharmacy expertise—including formulary design, specialty pharmacy, reimbursement assistance, patient care and chronic conditions management—that could be harnessed for the health and wellness of its own employees.

Basil Rowe, vice-president, total rewards and shared services with SDM, was excited by the possibilities. “We wouldn’t have had that particular line of sight if not for being here at Shoppers Drug Mart,” he says. “But here, people understand the role of carriers, adjudicators, consultants and pharmacists, and we realized that we could use our strengths as a pharmacy business to design a leading-edge benefits plan to improve the health of our employees and their family members.” Approaching the idea from the perspective of a plan sponsor, SDM put together a cross-functional team within the organization—including input from pharmacy, HR, procurement, operations, marketing, analytics and finance—which built and designed the new plan that launched in January 2011.

The new plan integrates three components to better manage costs and improve health outcomes for employees: formulary solutions, wellness solutions and chronic care management solutions. After just four months, the impact was already apparent. Overall drug expenditures per claim fell by more than 10%, driven by improved generic penetration and restrictions on non-prescription products. Results for Ontario claims, where SDM was the primary payer, showed that the drug plan’s costs decreased by close to 15%, and generic penetration was up by 8% after just six months. The workplace wellness program’s early results are also impressive. More than 80% of employees completed the health risk assessment (HRA), and more than 300 people across the organization are participating in mentored and self-help programs. As well, about a dozen employees with diabetes enrolled in the diabetes management program.

“Reinvesting savings on the drug side into health and wellness is the cornerstone of the new plan,” Rowe says. “Our high participation rates with the HRA and the self-help programs show that our employees understand and that they are committed. As a large retailer, we are focused on customer loyalty and satisfaction. We were just as determined to make sure that our new benefits plan was a positive experience for our employees—we want them to be partners in maintaining and improving their health and wellness.”

Now that SDM has built its innovative and holistic plan, the Shoppers Drug Mart Health Solutions Team is working with other plan sponsors to demonstrate how pharmacy services can help improve the health and wellness of employees. “This isn’t just a plan design but a way to demonstrate and provide evidence that it works,” Rowe explains. “Behaviours are already changing in our organization, and we believe there are additional opportunities to incorporate more professional services at the pharmacy.”

The Employer Award (1,000+ employees) was sponsored by

Sun Life Financial
It seems reasonable to assume that people working in healthcare would be more health-conscious than others. But hectic schedules, long hours and working in a stressful environment can make it difficult for staff to focus on their personal health. “It’s definitely a challenge to get people to pay attention when they work 12-hour shifts and may have significant commute time on top of that,” says Alison Cocking, manager of workplace wellness at the University Health Network (UHN) in Toronto.

Luckily, Cocking was up for such a challenge in 2007 when she and her team designed and launched a new wellness department at the UHN, an organization that oversees three downtown hospital sites. Over the past four years, the UHN’s Oasis Wellness Centre’s team has worked diligently to spread the word that it is critical for staff to pay attention to their own health and safety. Today, 190 programs and 600 individual classes—on everything from yoga and relaxation techniques to fitness and nutrition—are helping to teach caregivers how to care for themselves.

The vision for creating a department focused on wellness came out of a health risk assessment survey done in 2006, and, right from the beginning, senior leadership supported the plan to make wellness a core value at the organization. “Our mandate the first year was to promote the program and get as many people in the door as possible,” says Cocking, noting that by the third year, about 5,500 people—50% of the UHN’s full-time and part-time staff—had participated, whether just by getting a massage or by coming in time and again for various programs.

To target the tough-to-reach front-line staff, Cocking developed the Nurses Toolbox, an eight-week program that goes directly to the clinical floors to allow busy nurses and clinical staff to take time during their shift to stretch, strengthen and practice relaxation. Offered in two 20-minute sessions, trainers have learned to be flexible if the situation on the floor is stressful or if staff are suddenly too busy to attend, says Cocking. Despite uncooperative schedules, more than 450 UHN staff take part in the Toolbox sessions.

Cocking admits that the hardest part of promoting wellness is keeping people engaged. But she and her team at Oasis Wellness Centre keep coming up with ideas to keep the approach fresh and ever-expanding to meet staff’s needs. The Inter-Hospital Challenge, for example, started as a month-long competition across the UHN’s three sites where participants were encouraged to increase and monitor physical activity levels, eating habits and the use of stress reduction techniques. More than 400 teams participated in the first year, and the challenge has since expanded to include all hospitals that belong to the Ontario Hospital Association.

Although the impact of wellness programs isn’t always measurable, one 12-month program targeted at front-line clinical staff with specific health risks did show savings of $583 per person per year based on absenteeism and benefits costs alone. “Knowing we are able to reach people and help them understand the importance of eating right, exercising and managing stress is exciting,” says Cocking. “Every day, we hear a good-news story about how our programs have affected someone’s life.”

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Making wellness a part of the team

EMPLOYER AWARD (<1,000 EMPLOYEES):
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When an employee passed away last year from leukemia, Marty Shaw, CEO of DOT Integrated Financial in Toronto, was glad that he had set up a wellness program for his 60-odd employees. “Not that you can out-walk or out-exercise a serious illness like leukemia,” he says. “But if we can make people more aware of their health, go to their doctor for regular checkups and adopt healthy habits, that’s a good thing.”

DOT Integrated Financial’s first-ever health and wellness program was implemented a year and a half ago with the goal of improving organizational health and embedding health and wellness into the company culture. It started with a customized Speak Out Wellness Survey to solicit employees’ feedback that could then be used to shape a wellness program to appeal to their needs and interests. Three risk factors were identified: stress, nutrition and exercise.

Senior leadership is always crucial to a successful program, and Shaw’s commitment to the process was apparent right from the beginning. When only 10 people showed up for the first health screening, the CEO personally rounded up another 25 employees to see the nurse. “One of those people found out that his cholesterol and blood pressure were through the ceiling,” Shaw recalls. “As a result, he changed his behaviour and habits. I think that’s a good outcome.”

With boosting physical activity as a major goal, the company launched the Step In & Step Out pedometer challenge, in which eight teams of employees competed on how many steps they averaged each day. About 62% of the workforce participated, and 90% of those achieved their challenge goals. Shaw also got employees to enter The Walk to End Women’s Cancers, with four participating the first year and 10 the next. Physical activity is now included as much as possible at company events—last year’s company picnic, for example, included volleyball and tug-of-war. By putting together a bowling evening and a road hockey team, DOT Integrated Financial’s employees not only burned off a few calories but also raised money for charity.

“Raising money is an important part of our wellness initiative,” says Shaw, adding that, although there was initially a separate wellness committee, it has since joined with the social committee and the charity committee to become The Committee. “We decided to merge them together since it is really all about the same goal,” he explains. “One of the best outcomes from our wellness activities is the money we’ve raised for charity. It’s also been great to see employees exercise together, get to know one another better and interact more at work.”

Shaw has now stepped back to let other leaders in the workplace keep up the wellness momentum, and he’s especially proud of the role that his children, David and Marni—who also work at the company—are playing in running the programs. “Everyone is working hard to keep the mental, physical and charitable aspects of the program front and centre,” he says. “We see this as a long-term initiative and have plans to expand as we go along, because it has real benefits for our employees.”
Corporate wellness initiatives have moved beyond simply providing discounts to gyms and offering healthy options in the cafeteria. While these changes are valuable, increasingly, employees expect more from their company’s wellness program. But how does an employer develop an offering that targets the needs of employees, motivates them and positively impacts the financials—all while winning the support of upper management? 

Benefits Canada sat down with industry experts to share experiences and new ways for companies to create meaningful and effective wellness programs.
launching wellness

When a company is considering initiatives to improve employee health, where is the best place to start? “To address an organization’s health, there must be a clear understanding of its current issues and trends,” says Kirk McIntyre, vice-president, group business, Ontario, with Medavie Blue Cross. “To do that, look at existing data for your organization. For example, the top 10 drugs prescribed under the organization’s drug benefits program may help to identify a leading health issue affecting employees.” These so-called loss drivers can help shape a program by identifying where the employees seem to need help with their health.

Health metrics—the vast amount of data on employees’ health issues—can be an overwhelming and intimidating place to start, says Lori Casselman, assistant vice-president, health and wellness, with Sun Life Financial. Annie Boulianne, director, pension and benefits, with Shoppers Drug Mart, says the challenge with metrics is gathering all of the data together from the different sources. “Getting the information relating to the different diseases, as the information typically comes from different sources, and managing the information together is tough. Most people don’t have the time to look at all of the data to do a full analysis,” she says. Casselman advises that employers that are looking to take the right steps start with at least one metric—such as the demographic profile of the company, the attendance rates or the engagement scores—and look at the trend into the future. “What is the cost of doing nothing as your population ages and the cost of providing support continues to increase? What are the key drivers from a risk perspective? Finding manageable pieces of data that will resonate with the organization may be more valuable than struggling with all of the metrics,” she says.

Knowing your organization’s numbers is important, but trying to understand the story they tell is of greater value, says Estelle Morrison, director of health management at Ceridian. “We are better at compiling metrics into one report, but I don’t know that we’re better at telling a story behind the data. When we see high use of medication for antidepressants, low STD [short term disability] for mental health and high EAP [employee assistance program] use, what does that mean? We need to get really good at telling a single, cohesive story,” she says.

Fanny Karolev, manager of worklife health and wellness with Campbell Company of Canada, says that once she’s armed with those valuable data, she surveys her employee population. “We ask them what they want, not just what they need. It might be a completely different thing. We try to marry those two things to create opportunities to attack the loss drivers and to improve their health overall,” she says.

Paula Fernandes, HR manager with DOT Integrated Financial, agrees that reviewing data and surveying employees is an ideal starting point. “Just sending out the survey asking what employees wanted was a big morale booster. It shows we’re listening to them and want to know how they feel,” she says. Another key piece for DOT Integrated Financial was creating a wellness committee comprised solely of employees, without management representation. “That’s really what’s driven the whole wellness program and why it’s been so successful. The committee does the research, puts together a strategy and a budget, and then it talks to their colleagues about it,” says Fernandes.

Wellness committees appear to be a critical part of starting a health strategy in an organization. Rhona Green, vice-president of HR with Marine
Atlantic Inc., says its program didn’t really take off until its committee got involved in the process. Jennifer Moore, director of HR and organizational development with Dufferin Child and Family Services, says her organization’s wellness committee is made up of employees in each department. “Whenever we have an initiative going on, we have someone in each department who is promoting it and starting the conversation with people who might not otherwise engage,” she says. Committees are a way to invite employees to co-create their wellness programs, as well as a strategy to boost participation and a way to hear valuable feedback about programs.

Another tool for collecting data about health issues and feedback from employees is the health risk assessment (HRA) form. Green says it was information from HRAs that helped to shape its wellness programming. “We started getting the actual feedback from the HRA about what the employees really wanted. Our planning wasn’t driven by the need to offer a ‘flavour of the day’ program,” she says. This type of approach helps employers to create programs that are employee needs-driven and will, ideally, increase participation rates.

**measuring wellness**

Tailoring an initiative to the needs of employees can help create a valuable and effective program, but if an HR team is not measuring the program, they won’t be able to report its success to senior management. Engagement rates, focus groups and program participation are all valuable tools for measurement.

“I think engagement scores are extremely critical and a good place to start,” says Leanne MacFarlane, senior director of business development with MHCSI. However, she adds, HR managers must also make sure the message of wellness inside the company is a credible one. Alison Cocking, manager, organizational wellness, with the University Health Network (UHN), agrees that engagement scores are hugely important to her organization. “It’s measured in our employee opinion survey every year in a composite of five questions that are all value-based. I think it’s probably the most important statistic that our CEO looks at. You can’t base any action plans on those specific questions, but it’s really a key indicator about how emotionally attached to the UHN the employees feel, whether they find personal meaning in their work and are motivated to commit the time and effort to help the organization,” she says.

Adrienne Sutton, director of operations with Tri Fit Inc., encourages clients to get employees talking as a way to measure a program’s success. “Often, on surveys, you get a lot of ticking the box, but not a lot of valuable comments. Getting a group of people in a room to ask questions and get really specific feedback around wellness initiatives provides you with things that you can actually take back and work on,” she says. Karolev knows her programs are working through engagement scores and participation rates, but also

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— ADRIENNE SUTTON, DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, TRI FIT INC.
through anecdotal evidence. At Campbell’s, the president or a vice-president has a soup lunch with about 15 different employees in different areas across the organization on a regular basis. “In looking at our wellness program, the feedback I’ve received through these lunches is that 100% of the people say the wellness initiative is what engages them. There is no measurement on that, but it is a really serious validation.”

Randy McGlynn, CEO of the Ontario Teachers Insurance Plan (OTIP), says participation in the wellness events is a measurement that his team uses. “We have a wellness month with different activities each day, and there is also a wellness fair. We monitor the attendance to see if the interest that we believe is there is reflected,” he says.

A strong culture of engagement is a benefit of a wellness program. But it can also be used to improve the wellness program itself. Basil Rowe, vice-president of total rewards and shared services with Shoppers Drug Mart, did just that with the company’s most recent wellness program. “When we rolled out the first stage of our new program, we did a pulse survey check at launch and six months post-launch to see how our program was being received,” he says. Rowe’s team also leveraged internal resources. It relied on its strong marketing team to help interpret the survey results and tweak the next stage based on employees’ feedback. This kept the wellness program relevant, which means the employees continue to participate.

**barriers to wellness**

To run a successful wellness program, HR teams must first overcome a number of challenges, including adequate resources, buy-in from senior management and how well a program matches company culture.

“Resources is the obvious challenge to a wellness initiative,” says Cocking. “I don’t think any of us feel that we’ve got enough resources.” To overcome challenges with funding, Fernandes says DOT Integrated Financial runs activities—such as paying $2 to dress down on a Friday—to raise funds for programs. Gord Croucher, associate director, private sector, with Pfizer, suggests that those with less funds reach out to colleges and universities to take on students in co-op placements to help run programs.

Securing senior management support was one of the main barriers the roundtable attendees raised. “The commitment of senior management to wellness programs is crucial. If an organization is going to invest in a wellness strategy, it needs to own it and live it,” says McIntyre. “For example, at Medavie Blue Cross, our CEO is a committed runner who often speaks about the importance exercise plays in overall wellness. While not every CEO has to be a runner, by leading through example, management can motivate employees by demonstrating the value and commitment that it places on wellness.”

Chris Camp is the chair of the board of trustees for the Halifax Firefighters Benefits Trust. He faces a unique challenge with getting senior management buy-in because his organization is separate from the municipal benefits plan. The board of trustees has been able to reduce dependence on heart-related prescriptions through an employee-run healthy heart program. “We are having difficulty getting middle and upper management buy-in because it’s not the plan of the city,” he explains. He says both sides could reap benefits from programs regardless of whose plan it is. Camp also chairs a health and wellness committee that participates in discussions concerning a peer critical incidence stress team to manage firefighters’ reaction to emergency

“**The commitment of senior management to wellness programs is crucial. If an organization is going to invest in a wellness strategy, it needs to own it and live it.**

– KIRK MCINTYRE, VICE-PRESIDENT, GROUP BUSINESS, ONTARIO, MEDAVIE BLUE CROSS.
situations. “It’s been extremely successful,” he says. “To date, we’ve had no LTD claims for mental health disability from traumatic emergency scenes, which is impressive considering our occupation.” However, because of its success, Camp is having a hard time convincing senior management that there are more issues that should be addressed. “We want to implement proactive health programs in our workplaces but have difficulty getting support from those we need to achieve this.”

Karen Seward, executive vice-president with Morneau Shepell, suggests that Camp show two costs for his benefits plan—disability and drugs—to the management team. “If that were any other expense line, the business people would pay attention to it. It’s a cost, and it becomes a business issue,” she says. Another option, says Morrison, is for Camp to consider what happens if the trust doesn’t continue with or launch new programs. “What is the cost of not doing something? Look at the trending for disease states and consider just letting everything go as is. People will get older and go through natural changes with the aging process. Then show what the associated health costs are for ‘doing nothing,’” she says. It’s also a good practice to support your employee data with public health research, says Casselman.

One of the barriers to creating an effective program is culture. Many of the roundtable attendees agreed that if the culture of the organization is not aligned with the program, it won’t work. “If you don’t have a culture that supports wellness, you may have to be a little more selective about your approach,” says Kim MacFarlane, product director with Manulife Financial. “It may require a gradual shift from the culture you have today to the culture you want. You probably need to evaluate where you are today, how the organization works and plan where you would like to be. You need to recognize how your organization works and what you need to do to remove any cultural barriers to achieving the goals of your wellness program,” she says.

After employers get through their own challenges, they must address the barriers that employees run into when trying to participate in a wellness program. “Commonly, what we hear from employees is that the biggest barriers are lack of time, lack of motivation and lack of energy,” says Sutton. “For employers, it’s about making those choices easier and available for employees, and that includes being flexible enough to accommodate employees.” But the biggest barrier for employees, says Seward, is that they do not know which programs to use. “When someone actually has a problem, they have no idea of the support that is available because we call the programs by their names. There is a huge opportunity to educate people for the right care at the right time and accessing the right service for the right issue,” she says.

It’s clear that despite the potential value corporate wellness programs create for both employees and companies, there are a number of challenges to creating a strategically planned initiative. To get through these challenges, programs need to be employee-centric. Those that are developed using a company’s own health metrics, data from their own employee HRAs and input from an employee wellness committee lead to positive results. If your company is looking for a place to start, look to your employees. 🍀
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