hen organizations focus on supporting their employees to be healthier, the health of the business improves, too. At Benefits Canada’s 2012 Healthy Outcomes Conference in Kelowna, B.C., 65 delegates from leading organizations dedicated to workplace wellness came together to share their challenges and successes. One message was clear: collaboration is the way forward. Whether pushing for executive buy-in, designing a wellness program, raising awareness about mental health or executing a workplace wellness initiative, our speakers and attendees learned that working closely with both colleagues and external stakeholders is the path to success.

Winning Partnerships

When Katherine Sheehan, assistant vice-president, HR, with Dalhousie University, started at the institution, she found there were a number of wellness initiatives across campus. “Our leaders, unions and employees have all contributed to initiatives in the workplace related to wellness. The problem was, we weren’t linking any of that together, and we were a little behind in our thinking about what contributes to a healthy workplace,” she recalled. Through a workplace survey, her team discovered that employees felt the university was not interested in their personal wellness and well-being.

Sheehan knew how she was going to address this challenge: through collaboration. “The HR and executive teams started by going out and listening to our employees. Then we moved on to more formal consultations. We created an HR forum at Dalhousie to hear from people who have HR functions in their unit, but who are not in a formal position, about what was actually happening,” she said. This allowed the HR staff to better understand what was working for the employees and what wasn’t.

Then HR created a healthy workplace
collaborative at Dalhousie, which involves faculty and staff across the campus, with the goal of creating a healthy workplace. “It’s helped us to share information, expertise and ideas, and it’s making us more effective in actually reaching our goals,” she explained.

The lesson Sheehan learned through the process was about authority. “It’s not really what collaboration is all about. If we’re truly talking about collaboration, HR needs to take a step back, and partner and be willing to work with the other parties around the table to hear their agendas. Give people who aren’t necessarily in positions of authority the opportunity to lead and have their voice heard.”

But collaboration isn’t easy. Kathy MacNeil, vice-president, people, and Dawn Burstall, director, healthy workplace and diversity, with Capital Health (a district health authority in Nova Scotia) know all about those challenges. Working closely with Carla Anglehart, director, organizational development, with Health Association Nova Scotia (a member-driven health organization that supports the district health authorities in the province), these two organizations have launched a number of initiatives aimed at improving employee health and learned some valuable lessons along the way.

The need to bring in outside experts was one lesson, said Burstall. When it came time for flu shots, her team launched a program called Know It Live It to make people more aware of their health numbers. “We partnered with the flu clinic and hired licensed practical nurses who confidentially measured the waists, blood pressure and blood sugar of employees,” she explained.

Another lesson was getting executive commitment, noted Anglehart. The CEOs from the nine district health authorities all recently signed a healthy healthcare leadership charter. “It’s a commitment to make quality work environments and organizational health a strategic imperative,” she explained. As a result of this, a provincial organizational health committee has been established, which is working with the Health Association to create meaningful indicators to produce a report card for the province that measures organizational health by examining a number of quality work/life indicators.

The foundation of successful collaboration is clarity in communication, added MacNeil. “Also, be prepared for some rocky roads and bumps in the process, and allow for that.”

For organizational health to truly succeed, co-operation between senior management and those in key wellness roles within the organization is critical. At a panel session at the conference, two representatives from three large corporations shared their examples of successful collaboration efforts.

Dr. Alain Sotto, chief physician, wellness division, and Scott Martin, vice-president, labour relations, safety, wellness and corporate security, with Ontario Power Generation (OPG), looked at the five major disease states that account for the vast majority of the organization’s health costs. “In 2011, the drug and absenteeism costs associated with those five disease states were $17.2 million,” said Martin. “There’s a very strong business case to put a framework in place and a corporate health strategy in place that tackles these things.” Sotto explained that OPG’s strategy was to focus on mental health because it was creating more than one-third of those costs. OPG partnered with MEDACA Health Group, a

“Our health strategy was developed to look at organizational-level health, team member health and individual health”

— Janet Crowe, TELUS Communications
workplace health consulting company, to ensure that employees were assessed by a psychiatrist within two weeks of going on leave, as well as launching other mental health programs. These collective programs reduced OPG’s absenteeism in days lost related to mental health by 16.2% from 2010.

At TELUS Communications, Janet Crowe, director, wellness and work life services, and Sandy Innes, vice-president, compensation and benefits, have developed a strategic intent aimed at building collaboration and health within their organization. “Our health strategy was developed to look at organizational-level health, team member health and individual health,” explained Crowe. TELUS worked together with its provider to get executive buy-in and launched programs to address chronic illnesses (such as diabetes and heart disease) that affect their employees, targeting those three levels.

Ana Lopez, director, HR, and Sandra Hentzen, executive vice-president, HR, with TransLink, had a different challenge to face as a publicly funded transportation organization in British Columbia. “Our people goal is to build an aligned, engaged, accountable and customer-focused team,” said Lopez. “Corporate wellness is a key initiative, because we need to have healthy employees in order to be productive and to deliver the service to our customers.” So Hentzen and Lopez launched a number of wellness initiatives, including wellness fairs, to engage employees in a dialogue about their health. They invited providers to share healthy lifestyle tips, used internal occupational health nurses to run blood pressure clinics and brought in organizations such as the Mental Health Association to talk about important issues. “The employee feedback we get is invaluable,” said Hentzen.

These partnerships highlight a key message from the conference: when organizations help their people, it also helps the business. It’s only through internal and external collaboration that wellness programs—and the employees using them—can thrive.

Karen Seward, workplace health specialist, believes that organizations must create a culture of engagement internally and then measure it to see any real results.

Doing this, she explained, involves developing a communication strategy around the health issues relevant to an organization’s employee population and using branding and marketing to create awareness. There is a great opportunity for social media and technology in this area. “In the workplace, only 12% of organizations use social media to promote the programs that they have. All the tools are out there for us, but how do we employ them in the organization?” Seward asked. She added that when it comes to mental health, for example, many individuals look online for counselling and stress management advice. Providing such tools—or even resource pages to direct individuals to these tools—is one step in creating awareness and engagement.

But simply having a strategy in place isn’t enough. “Monitoring is really important,” said Seward. “You need to have the ability to take a look at the programs that [you’ve] put in place and ask, ‘What is the return on investment? What have we actually done?’ [Then] look back and say, ‘Something didn’t work, and we need to change the process.’”

Social media, as part of an engagement strategy, offer a large number of tools to help organizations achieve their goals—but many are holding back because they don’t know where to start. Amber MacArthur, social media expert and owner of MGImedia, said companies first need to create a social media policy before they attempt to use sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Pinterest at an organizational level. “[The policy is] basically a guideline to talk to your organization about how it should communicate, how it should use social media tools. It’s not necessarily to restrict people but to give them rules,” she explained. Organizations that don’t know where to start can visit PolicyTool.net to answer a quick questionnaire that will

**“Corporate wellness is a key initiative, because we need to have healthy employees in order to be productive”**

— Ana Lopez, TransLink
generate a generic policy. With such a policy in place, MacArthur stressed that those within an organization who are working on a social media strategy should then get executive buy-in. Without it, she said, all efforts will fall flat. Enthusiastic support from the C-suite shows employees that the company is committed to engaging with them. MacArthur said one way to show this support is to have a senior executive participate in regular live blogs, where he or she would be available for a period of time once a month or so to answer questions directly from employees. From an employee health perspective, the CEO could take questions about a wellness program or a fitness challenge. After the executive team has agreed to be engaged in the social media strategy, the fun begins: deciding which tools your organization should use to engage employees. And which tools an organization chooses will depend on its goals. For internal communication about employee health, MacArthur said an employee-only blog is a great way to engage, as long as it’s compelling. “Everybody wants narrative in a blog post. So tell a story about a person or something that’s happening, and really put it in context for the audience reading it,” she suggested. Also use pictures to draw people in. “When you’re using photos and videos, you get more engagement from the audience. According to Facebook’s internal data, there was 120% more engagement when there was a photo attached to a post on the site,” MacArthur noted. If an internal blog isn’t the right fit, organizations can turn to LinkedIn Groups, which can keep membership controlled to employees only and allows for posts with pictures and comments to encourage dialogue. The key to using social media, said MacArthur, “is lending that human face to the social experience so that the technology isn’t so intimidating.”

Scotiabank has long seen the benefits of investing in employees’ health and well-being. Through the years, these investments have taken different forms in order to address new opportunities and challenges. Telena Oussoren, Scotiabank’s director of pension and benefits for Canada and the U.S., explained that with 36,000 employees in Canada and 75,000 worldwide, the bank needed to find creative ways to engage employees in health matters. Over the past few years, the bank has focused on an integrated approach to health and wellness. Understanding that wellness encompasses all areas of an employee’s life—home, health, work and wealth—Scotia Vitality, the bank’s new wellness website, provides practical resources, programs and tips for employees and their families.

Psoriasis—a chronic skin problem that affects about 3% of the Canadian population, or about a million people—can cost a company up to $2,200 per affected employee each year in lost productivity, said Dr. Chih-ho H. Hong, a clinical assistant professor with the University of British Columbia. Occurring when skin grows quickly and forms scaly patches, particularly on the head, elbows and knees, psoriasis most commonly starts when people are in their late teens, early 20s or late 40s. Beyond the dollar cost to employers, this chronic disease severely affects the quality of life for those who have to manage it, Hong explained. “Research has shown that the impact of this disease on the patient is the same as that of advanced cancer.” Managing psoriasis is psychologically, physically and emotionally draining for employees, and their social and physical activities are reduced or limited because of treatment and care.

Hong said new biologic drugs are healing patients in a matter of months, not only improving their work productivity and their personal lives but also possibly keeping them healthier overall. “What’s really interesting about some of the research that we’ve done in the last five years is that [psoriasis] patients are much more likely to have diabetes, to be overweight and to smoke cigarettes, and to have heart disease, heart attacks and strokes and die from these things. They’re also much more likely to be depressed. There’s emerging evidence that treating patients with these drugs not only fixes their psoriasis but also may reduce their risk of dying from a heart attack, stroke or untreated high blood pressure,” he added.

Psoriasis isn’t just a cosmetic issue; it’s a serious health challenge that is often related to other serious conditions, Hong explained. “These biologic drugs help patients achieve health—which is not just the absence of the disease—and it also improves their state of physical, mental and social well-being.”

Dr. Chih-ho H. Hong, University of British Columbia

Benefits of Biologics on Psoriasis

Dr. Chih-ho H. Hong, University of British Columbia
This integrated approach is also helpful in addressing disability management. As part of a disability claim, employees have access to an expanded Active Treatment Plan (ATP), giving them access to health and wellness programs and resources, and enabling them to make their health a priority. The ATP emphasizes participation and support, with the goal of building resilience and sustainable lifestyle change. Each ATP is multi-dimensional and tailored to the employee’s specific needs.

It’s a win-win scenario for both the employer and the employee. “Integration also allows for reporting and trends analysis. We have all of that data together—STD, LTD, EAP, drug and health,” Oussoren explained. “This provides us with the opportunity to look ahead to the next step. Using this robust data, Scotiabank uncovers correlations and connections. As a result, we are better able to direct our resources, time and effort toward addressing new opportunities. The integration of the wellness program is a major part of the program’s success—we believe that a lot of efficiency comes from integration. A major strength of our programs is how each element supports and connects to another. Scotia Vitality is yet another valuable tool to help us facilitate communication and gauge employee interest.”

**The Growing Value of Benefits**

When employee engagement in health succeeds—whether through social media or integrated programs—the outcomes are invaluable for both employers and employees. *The Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey*, now in its 15th year, speaks to the benefits of a healthy, engaged workforce. Tricia Benn, senior director, Rogers Connect Market Research, with Rogers Publishing Ltd., shared some of the trends and insights that have emerged over the years.

The value of the health benefits plan has increased over the course of the survey, said Benn. “We’ve seen a willingness to pay more for the health benefits plan and not to reduce anything that’s offered.” In fact, six in 10 employees would keep their benefits plan over a more generous pension plan, and the majority say they would choose the plan over $15,000 extra in their pockets.

“The tips and tactics from our advisory board discussions over the years focus on leveraging this value to motivate, educate and improve employee wellness,” Benn continued. “We don’t have to convince employees of the value of the plan—they know that it’s worth an awful lot to them. But member communication should be developed with the knowledge that the employee is thinking about the plan in terms of peace of mind.”

One major change over the past 15 years is employees’ willingness to have their employer involved in their personal health. “In 2001, we had a majority agree that their employer has no right to know anything about their personal health condition. By 2011, four in 10 say it would be appropriate for their employer to actively help them manage their health,” she said, adding that this is a significant invitation for employers to be more involved in their employees’ health.

**Linking Mental Health to Your Business Strategy**

Most organizations will see mental disorders as one of the top two categories on their drug utilization reports, and those conditions tend to be trending upwards, said Leanne MacFarlane, senior director, business development, with MHCSI, as part of a mental health panel at the conference. “Most plans do a pretty good job of covering the medications, but are they covering services that help make sure members are on the right therapy, are using the medications appropriately and are being treated early?”

Judith Plotkin, vice-president, strategic growth, with Homewood Human
Solutions, believes plan sponsors could be doing a better job. “There are no real standards, assessments or policies in place that address psychological health and mental illness in the workplace.” While the Mental Health Commission recently released workplace guidelines, more formal procedures are needed, she said, adding, “it’s critical to align a wellness strategy with a business strategy and also include mental health for employees to see the type of support available to them.”

“Part of aligning a wellness strategy is creating an integrated communication plan to support the various initiatives and engage employees,” said Chris MacDonald, assistant vice-president, health management services, with Manulife Financial Group Benefits. “Consider gathering insights from key stakeholders on how best to engage employees in your organization. Then use that information to map out communications for Year 1, Year 2, etc. Refine as it’s needed.”

Plotkin said that not aligning a mental health strategy with a communication plan and business case is a “kiss of death,” because it will be difficult to get executive buy-in. Part of planning to manage mental health is taking advantage of the services offered by providers, often in employee assistance programs. “Support programs are important to promote—especially around managing stress, because it’s a precursor to more serious mental health conditions.”

For a mental health strategy to succeed, Seward said organizations must start by de-stigmatizing the issue. “There are two factors to do this. One is getting executive buy-in around mental health, specifically; two is getting the lines of business talking about it and understanding their roles in managing it.”

Jamie Farrell, senior manager, benefit and investment programs, with Rogers Communications Inc., said managers are integral to the mental health dialogue. “It’s ironic that it’s common to talk about physical health in the workplace, but you typically don’t hear much discussion about mental health. There is an opportunity with people managers to educate them on how to create the right environment where stigmas around mental health can be removed.”

In order to get mental health to the top of the priority list, the panelists agreed that HR and benefits managers should look for “teachable moments” in meetings with senior executives to demonstrate the potential impact of proactively addressing this growing issue.

Whether the issue is tackling mental health in the workplace or launching an internal health collective, collaboration is the only way that workplace wellness initiatives will succeed. Through partnerships and working together, plan sponsors, providers and other industry stakeholders can deliver meaningful results for the health of employees—and the organization’s bottom line.

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