A $750 REASON TO QUIT

By Jann Lee

When Staples Canada Inc. moved to a smoke-free environment at its two Ontario corporate offices in January 2016, the company helped its employees prepare for the change by launching a six-month smoking-cessation program.

Staples introduced the program to help employees who smoked adapt to the new environment, says Kate Tilsley, director of North America stores, online compensation and Canadian benefits. Quitting smoking is the “No. 1 thing you can do as an individual to improve your health, and we think we have a responsibility to help our associates on their journey to become smoke-free.”

The program included resources for employees who wanted to quit smoking. Staples provided a book on quitting; telephone counselling; an online cessation module through its employee assistance program provider; and a free three-month gym membership. The company also enhanced its benefits plan by adding $500 coverage for prescription and non-prescription smoking-cessation aids and sent motivational e-mails to participants throughout the program.

But what set the company’s program apart was the $750 that was on the table if participants successfully kicked the habit. The incentive came with a caveat, however. Participants had to put down $50 of their own money and would only receive it back — plus $700 from the company — if they succeeded in quitting after six months, says Tilsley. Employees who didn’t want to put down their own money were free to join the program and only use the resources.

Productivity benefits

Many companies, especially large ones, provide smoking-cessation programs because they recognize the benefits, says Sara Marchese, clinical director of professional services at Morneau Shepell Ltd.

“The most important merit of a smoking-cessation program to employers is a reduction in loss of productivity and absenteeism,” says Marchese. “This means a reduction in the overall financial costs that companies bear due to smoking and its associated consequences, such as unsanctioned smoke breaks, sick days, short-term disability and long-term disability.”

Smoking-cessation programs also increase the chance that employees will comply if a company decides to mandate a smoke-free environment, Marchese notes.

Despite the benefits to employers, there hasn’t exactly been a trend towards smoking-cessation programs over the past two decades. A 2016 report by the Society for Human Resource Management showed the proportion of U.S. employers offering such programs declined to 41 per cent in 2016 from 45 per cent in 1996.

Many Canadian employers, however, do provide support for employees to quit smoking through their benefits plans. According to a 2013 Conference Board of Canada study on smoking cessation in the workplace, 78 per cent of Canadian organizations offered counselling through employee assistance programs and 73 per cent provided coverage for prescription drugs to stop smoking. However, only 40 per cent covered over-the-counter nicotine replacement therapies such as patches, gums and lozenges.

What makes a program effective?

While smoking-cessation programs could help employers reduce the number of smokers in the workplace, there’s no guarantee of success, says Terri Schneider, a senior co-ordinator for the Smokers’ Helpline at the Canadian Cancer Society.

It’s very difficult for people to quit smoking because it’s such a powerful addiction, says Schneider, noting relapse is common with some smokers attempting to quit up to 30 times before they kick the habit for good.

With withdrawals and cravings making the process difficult, an incentive certainly helps smokers succeed because it gives them “that extra push or drive,” says Schneider. In fact, the Canadian Cancer Society has held contests awarding the winners cars and money in the past, she notes. “Research has proven time and time again that an incentive, whether it’s small or large, is really helpful for a lot of people.”

A U.S. study on smoking cessation by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania confirmed that theory and inspired Staples to offer the financial incentive, says Tilsley.

The study looked at which factors increased the success rate among smokers who attempted to quit smoking.
aiming to quit. Researchers divided employees who smoked at least five cigarettes a day into groups. One group received smoking-cessation aids; the second received an $800 incentive along with the aids; and the third got the chance to win $650, but members had to put down a $150 non-refundable deposit they would only get back if they were successful in quitting smoking.

The study showed the third group had the highest success rate at 52 per cent. It was also three times more likely to succeed over the first group.

Staples put that theory into practice, adding the $700 incentive to its own program and requiring members to put down $50. Tilsley says the prize, along with promotional efforts through internal communications and posters, helped to create a buzz.

“In general, what we see is smoking-cessation programs really don’t always lead to significant results and the success rates are often quite low,” says Tilsley. “So the incentive really helped keep participants on track because they had skin in the game.”

Twenty-two employees joined Staples’ program, with 13 aiming for the cash prize and nine relying only on resources. As predicted, Staples’ incentive program had a high success rate, with 62 per cent of participants quitting smoking, as opposed to the 11 per cent who used only the smoking-cessation resources.

“I was surprised it ended up as well as it did and very pleased,” says Tilsley. She says that while only 22 people participated out of 1,000 employees, the program was still successful because it helped those who needed the extra support to quit smoking.

“In general, when you’re asking people to participate in this, you’re going to find some people who are not willing to entertain the topic,” says Tilsley. “But for those who are, if we have the ability and means to support even one person to stop smoking, it’s time well spent, without a doubt.”

And while the incentive was certainly a factor in increasing the success rate, the program wouldn’t have been as successful if it wasn’t comprehensive, says Tilsley, referring to the resources that Staples offered.

“If you’re going to approach a stop-smoking program with only one tool in your tool kit, I don’t think you’re going to ultimately be successful,” she says.

Schneider agrees but she suggests employers should also ensure they have a long-term approach to smoking cessation. “It’s wonderful to offer a challenge once a year, but we know quitting is a process,” she says. “You need to allow employees to access support as often as they need, so offering challenges throughout the whole year would help to remove those barriers of that chronic relapsing condition. . . . Also, looking at some of the other healthy behaviours, like physical activity, healthy eating . . . all work hand-in-hand to help someone quit.”

When it comes to followup and accountability with employees, Tilsley says Staples has so far relied on trusting its staff but she says it will be looking to see how they’ve done this year.

“We are not aware of anybody who was successful relapsing. But we didn’t do a test yet,” she says, noting plans to do so are in the works.

In the meantime, the company moved to introduce the program at another corporate office at the end of 2016.

“‘We’ve taken testimonials from those who were successful and put them up in posters to encourage people to participate,” says Tilsley. 

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