

By *Michael Chen*

WHY YOU SHOULD HIRE . . . *a wellness champion*



What if you could play childhood games at work and be a better employee because of it? Nicole Cairns, health and wellness director at Thorpe Benefits, has run into that exact situation. “Simon was a wellness champion, especially in terms of physical fitness. . . . He took it upon himself to enhance what we were doing by creating what he called Simon Says,” says Cairns, referring to an employee at a company she had worked with. “Every day for 30 days, he created a quick, two-minute video of himself doing a physical exercise that people would do at their desks or wherever they were.”

Simon was essentially acting as a wellness champion, and Cairns says the videos were an effective and fun way of encouraging employees to participate. So what is a wellness champion and what’s the benefit to employers?

Championing a cause

Jennifer Dimoff, an assistant professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Portland State University in Oregon, defines wellness champions as “people who not only speak about health promotion and psychological safety in the workplace but who also act out those behaviours at work and outside of work.”

When implementing the role of a wellness champion, Cairns recommends connecting it to other programs. “There is merit in [making these individuals visible], but you’re still not educating the masses or providing a venue for people to change their own habits. While I think it’s great to highlight wellness champions that are in your office, I think that in order to create change in the people around them, you need to have some other things in place.”

Dimoff, who has done research on wellness champions in a safety context, says most companies can benefit from having one. “When there are safety champions in a workplace, safety behaviours go up within those workplaces among co-workers of those champions. So just the presence of someone . . .

leads to improved safety within that unit,” she says, adding the same holds true for other health-related behaviours.

As for who to choose, Dimoff stresses the people selected should want to take on the role and should genuinely believe in the cause they’re promoting. She also admits that a “little dash of popularity” can be important in obtaining greater workplace acceptance.

But that doesn’t mean that the champion must be an outgoing person.

Dimoff describes an employee she trained who began putting up homemade magnets in the office’s shared kitchen that advertised employee assistance programs. “She mentioned to me she’s not really an outgoing individual; she tends to be more introverted. So for her, this was an authentic way of championing wellness without having to be centre stage.”

The digital impact

While Alex Boucher, total health management leader at Mercer, says wellness champions aren’t an expensive proposition for companies, he believes the role is “likely to be supplanted” by new digital tools and apps that provide more data. “My sense is that while they’re still effective, there’s lots of new tools and devices and applications that are going to be coming out to really either significantly enhance what a wellness champion does . . . or in some cases eliminate the need for them all together,” he says, adding that wellness champions may also no longer be necessary once cultural shifts have occurred across an organization.

Dimoff admits that with the trend towards gamification and mindfulness apps, interactions may take place via web-based platforms in the future. “But we still don’t have enough data to be able to say that technology is going to be able to replace human interaction,” she says. “People are still people. The data still supports that we like to be able to put a face to a name and a face to a promotion.” **BC**

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HOW ARE COMPANIES DOING ON WELLNESS?

53%

of plan members agree that the corporate culture in their organization encourages health and wellness, down from **62%** in 2012

64%

of plan sponsors feel their corporate culture encourages wellness, down from **90%** in 2012

51%

of plan sponsors offer wellness programs or policies, up from **47%** in 2012

31%

of plan sponsors intend to invest more in wellness programs or health education in the next year, down from **51%** in 2012

Source: 2017 Sanofi Canada health-care survey