

By *Ryan Murphy*

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Citigroup takes a proactive approach to wellness through a workplace gym that includes an eight-week orientation program with a trainer

Getting his daily exercise in at his workplace's fitness centre did more than help Citigroup Inc. employee Jag Singh shrink his waist by a full pant size. It also helped bring a sense of clarity and freshness to his workday.

"That's really what's changed for me," said Singh, who works as a senior application programmer analyst at the company's office in Mississauga. "Oftentimes, people who have gym memberships will incorporate their workouts at the end of the day or after work hours, and what I found is being able to either work out in the morning prior to work or work out during the lunch hour, I found that I was able to have more concentration, more focus and I actually enjoyed my work a lot more as well."

The office, which is home to the bulk of the company's Canadian workforce, includes a fitness centre that's available to employees for \$25 per month.

The low-cost membership has led to a high overall utilization rate of 30 per cent, says Christine Discola, head of human resources for Citigroup in Canada. And 75 per cent of gym members actually use their memberships, well above the 50 per cent average for other Citigroup fitness centres.

A unique facet of the Mississauga centre is the offering to all new members of an eight-week orientation program provided by on-site trainers.

"Their methodology is a really holistic one, and so they look at the whole person — mind, body, the whole thing — and

their objective is high touch points, very personalized interaction with our employees. And so there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It is very customized, which is really unique," says Discola.

A proactive approach

As Discola notes, the trainers take a proactive approach to encouraging participation. "They will do everything to reach out to make sure that there is engagement, whether that means personal visits to their desks, sending them an instant message through their computer. There are group emails that get sent out over the eight-week period, but if they're not seeing any response, they actively go out and seek participation. But most of it is coaching," she says, noting employees can see a trainer as often as needed.

During his initial eight-week program, trainers introduced Singh to a range of fitness options tailored to his goals.

"I'm a person who enjoys running and strength training. The combination of practical exercises that I could do on my own complemented with the programs that were offered in the classes with the instructors, that's what really helped me overcome some of my limitations in the past," he says.

"And I'll be honest with you: I wasn't very motivated to go to some of these classes because . . . for males anyways, it's not necessarily part of the fitness routine, so to speak. I was apprehensive about that. But now, for instance, the spin class and some of the other aerobic classes, I can't live without. And I realize it was attending those classes that helped me reach my physical and personal goals."

To work on his running, trainers gave Singh instruction on how to maintain a cadence, monitor his breathing and recover during a run.

"Those were all new concepts to me, and I never would have learned any of that had it not been for the staff."

During the eight weeks, trainers also discussed his diet and how to incorporate proper sleep into his routine.

"There's a lot of discussion in the world currently about mental health and things that help support a very balanced mental-health lifestyle. I feel that the gym really helps me in that capacity, and I also go there not just for fitness but also for the happiness as well."

Impacts on engagement

Discola says having a robust wellness program has helped to boost employee engagement and create a positive work environment.

"It's created a lot more connectivity with our employees themselves. It gives them a meeting space. And it also, really importantly, promotes wellness — physical and mental — which is aligned with our global live-well strategy," she says. "Overall, happy, fit employees, healthy employees, are going to be hopefully more engaged employees that will

continue to remain with us," she says.

A workplace fitness centre also helps to remove barriers preventing people from engaging in physical activity, says Linda Lewis-Daly, owner of Lewis-Daly & Associates Workplace Wellness Solutions. She refers to a Canadian health survey that listed the key barriers as motivation, lack of time and financial constraints. Having an on-site fitness facility helps with all three of those barriers, she says, noting employees tend to have more motivation to do something if their co-workers are participating.

BRINGING EXERCISE TO THE OFFICE

With trainers and coaches present in the workplace, Citigroup sometimes has them come up to the office to lead stretching breaks and mindfulness activities with groups of employees.

The trainers schedule the breaks with departments in advance. The goal is to get people up and moving from their desks and encourage them to interact with co-workers and learn techniques that they can use every day at the office, says Citigroup's Christine Discola.

"And we've often actually brought them in when we've had long meetings during the day. I've certainly done that with my team, and I know others have as well. Whether it's an off-site or a long meeting during the day that you want to break it up and get people to stand up and stretch, we call the [trainers] in and they get everyone to stand up and go through a series of exercises that they can go back to their meeting more refreshed and more alert and feeling great."

Citigroup's Jag Singh says he and his colleagues take stretch breaks three times per week. "And you'd be surprised how many people after that stretch say, 'I feel so good,' or, 'I really needed that.'"

Having an orientation program for the gym is also beneficial, she adds, as it helps employees to understand how to use the equipment safely and effectively.

"As an employer, you don't want to invest in an on-site gym if no one is using it because they don't know how to, got hurt using a piece of equipment or get discouraged because their self-driven workouts are not giving them the results they seek," she says.

On-site facilities also allow an employer to keep track of participation, notes Lewis-Daly.

"There's a lot of tracking mechanisms that you can do, which would help the wellness programmer, the wellness team or human resources report back to management about the utilization of their investment."

Employers should be aware, however, that just because they build a facility, it doesn't mean employees will use it, says Lewis-Daly.

"I think the biggest worry that employers would have would be the field of dreams — build it and they will come. Don't go in with that strategy."

What's key, she suggests, is making employees aware that the gym is part of their entire compensation package and is there for them to use.

"When you've got an on-site fitness facility, it's in the employer's best interest to build a culture . . . where employees are supported to take advantage of it. And that's a huge win for the organization if the managers can be part of that endorsement to use the fitness facility."

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