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Globe Advisor

Good health = better productivity

By: Dyane Jermyn (October 15th, 2010)

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Many of Canada's top 100 employers are at the forefront of the movement to encourage employees to stay fit and healthy. Generous perks offered by current winners include free or subsidized memberships to onsite gyms, games areas equipped with Wii, luxurious lounges where employees can unwind, secure bike lockups and cafeterias featuring healthy menu options.

Richard Yerema, managing editor of Canada's Top 100 Employers for Mediacorp Canada, sees promoting healthier lifestyles as a long-term trend evolving among companies within the project, ranging from the introduction of flexible health benefits to more formal programs.

While studies are still in the works, common sense says a healthier work force is a cheaper, more productive one. With employers increasingly on the hook for medical and dental costs, the intent is that wellness and fitness initiatives will help them manage their health-benefits expenses.

BioWare, an electronic games company and one of Canada's Top 100 Employers, showers staff with healthful perks. Besides a free onsite gym, the Edmonton facility provides a complimentary continental breakfast - low-fat bran muffins, fresh fruit, juice, cereal, yogurt, bagels - delivered every morning. Aaryn Flynn, the studio general manager for BioWare in Edmonton and Montreal, says the firm is a great place to work. "Conservatively, I'd say at least half participate in the breakfast," Mr. Flynn says.

Founded in 1995 by medical doctors who were passionate about computer games, the whole attitude of taking care of people permeates BioWare's corporate culture, Mr. Flynn says.

"They encapsulated healthy living into one of their core values, which they call quality in the workplace," Mr. Flynn says. "We've put a number of initiatives and programs in place to help employees do that."

Optional onsite yoga is one of them. Employees pay for the classes but are encouraged to take time off from work to attend. While Mr. Flynn estimates only about 5 per cent of staff actually do yoga, the company offers other healthy lifestyle choices such as dragon boat racing, a running club, mountain biking and ski trips that are popular with employees.

"These programs are critical to employee engagement," Mr. Flynn says. "They help build long-term relationships and engagement between team members and the company as well."

Bruce Powell, managing partner and co-founder of IQ Partners Inc., a human resources firm headquartered in Toronto, takes a different view on the value of such initiatives. While healthy lifestyle perks are "nice-to-haves," he believes they're relatively minor compared to maintaining employee engagement.

"A strong corporate culture, a good relationship with the boss, feeling valued and opportunities for learning and personal growth are far more important," Mr. Powell says.

"Granted, these are relatively intangible, but if a company was going to allocate any budget at all to perks, they're far better off investing in areas that generate real and



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emotional satisfaction for their employees. Most companies we know that have onsite gyms find they are rarely used."

He suggests that lifestyle perks that save employees time, make their lives easier or improve their quality of life go a long way to entrench loyalty and focus productivity. Free food idea is a winner.

"Onsite healthy food options, especially breakfast, have huge appeal for singles," Mr. Powell says. "Pre-prepared take-home meals or on-call daycare are a boon to time-starved employees with young families and committed time off for personal development is attractive for both."

BioWare's standard time off is three weeks vacation a year, and on top of that, it provides as much time as it can around the Christmas holidays, Mr. Flynn says. Regular, full-time employees have a \$400 health account for approved expenses - medical costs not covered under their extended health care such as dental services, prescription eyewear and massage - plus an active living benefit of \$200 a year for fitness-related memberships and equipment.

Such perks don't help recruitment efforts at the executive level, however, Mr. Powell says.

"Most executives we deal with don't even consider these things when evaluating a new opportunity," Mr. Powell says.

"If a new role includes healthy lifestyle perks, they might be appreciated, but they are rarely core to a candidate's evaluation or decision on a new role. However, I admire companies that offer things like free personal time for charity work, extra time off for personal needs and free onsite food. I spoke at Google a few weeks ago and despite being located on top of multiple fast food options, their onsite kitchen and free supply of food allowed people to focus on their work and be more productive. Being Google, I'm sure they've calculated the [return on investment] on that investment."