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Globe & Mail

## Why helping employees choose sweat over sugar is good for the bottom line

By: Tracy Tjaden (December 7th, 2010)

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Like many people working in the financial industry these days, Adrian Lochan needs his mid-afternoon pick-me-up.

But rather than reaching for chocolate or a soda, he'll head up to the second floor workout room at Vancouver City Savings Credit Union's downtown office building to take in a free kickboxing class.

"When I'm finished, my mind is clearer and I'm more focused on work," says the 50-year-old human resources consultant. "I'm not what you would call a health nut, but I think this has a really big impact on my productivity."

Workplace health experts agree, and they say Mr. Lochan's ability to easily choose sweat over sugar has a direct impact on VanCity's financial well being.

"This is not just feel-good stuff," says Keri Alletson, a senior consultant with Towers Watson, a global human resources consultancy that specializes in employee wellness programs.

In fact, Ms. Alletson says, the latest research in this field shows that for employers, the return on investment in employee wellness is up to six times. "If lots of employees are less than well, the company spends more time on health care costs. Employees don't come to work, or they come to work unwell because they are concerned about job security."

Companies that made the list of Canada's Top 100 Employers this year have figured out the link between well workers and healthy bottom lines. Ms. Alletson says they'll be rewarded, not just with kudos in the media but by the edge they'll have when it comes to recruiting and maintaining talent.

"One of the top reasons people switch jobs is their quest for work/life balance," she notes. "It's not about the money – they want more control and more autonomy."

Ellen Pekeles, VanCity's vice president of human resources, says that using regular employee surveys, the credit union discovers what its labour force needs to get and stay healthy. "If you're committed to wellness, staff are more productive, you have less sick time and that all translates to their work," she says. "No matter how financially challenged you are, if you don't invest in your employees you're never going to do well."

Case in point: During the fallout of the recent global financial crisis, VanCity made the decision to start topping up maternity and paternity benefits for employees — which normally hover around 40 per cent — to 85 per cent of their normal salaries. It cost the credit union about \$1-million last year.

"I used to work in health care and it would always happen that when you're trying to save money, you cut all these things that just seem nice to have," says Ms. Pekeles. "But it's during those times you actually need them more."

Over at Toronto's Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, another of Canada's Top Employers, vice-president of human resources and organizational development Marilyn Reddick says health-promoting perks don't have to be a drain on an organization's budget.



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“Our budget is minuscule,” she says, noting that employees certified to teach yoga or lead choir groups do so for free at work, and Sunnybrook’s staff golf tournaments are sponsored. The budget for the hospital’s wellness program is \$300,000, which is considerably lean considering Sunnybrook has 10,000 employees. “We know that if our staff work hard together and play hard together, they’ll be happier and more productive. That means less absenteeism.”

The other evil for employers is “presenteeism,” in which workers come to the office when they’re sick. According to Ms. Alletson, the cost of absence is only one third of lost productivity. The remaining two thirds is due to people going to work sick. “Workplace health is not just the absence of illness, but the presence of physical energy and mental and social health,” she notes.

Her advice to employers who want to up their wellness game: Go to the source. Find out how your labour force prefers to work and deliver the goods. “There’s no magic bullet — you have to know your people, understand the issues they’re facing and figure out what to do about it,” Ms. Alletson says.

Taken a step further, she recommends that employers go to their insurance companies to gather aggregate data on their employees’ health care needs. An individual’s private information won’t be revealed, but firms could determine the top 10 health issues, or top five prescription drugs being used, and tackle those ailments directly.

VanCity’s Mr. Lochan says he has started to bike to work from his home in Coquitlam — which can take up to an hour and a half each way — since the credit union installed showers and free bike storage facilities. Even if another bank tried to lure him away from VanCity by offering a higher salary, he’d decline.

“It would be a deal breaker for me if they didn’t offer the same kind of programs and support for well-being,” he says. “It’s not just about the money.”

#### **Checklist**

- Ways to offer employees wellness perks:
- Free flu clinics
- Free yoga and other workout classes
- Bike racks and shower facilities
- Support for employees using public transit
- Maternity/paternity top-ups
- Tuition subsidies for family members of employees
- Fertility drug treatment coverage
- Meditation or religious observance rooms