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## Five ways to encourage healthy choices

Donald Chu | March 18, 2013



An unhealthy workforce contributes to an employer's bottom line through lost productivity and higher health premiums, just to name a few ways. Realizing this, Canadian workplaces are looking more at wellness programs and health promotion.

For example, a Vancouver company in the digital media industry with 50 employees rented four bikes last year from April to September. The company allowed staff to sign them out for one to two hour time slots over the course of spring and summer.

Employees would go in groups and bike to a park to have their lunch together, while others use it to run a quick errand by bike instead of driving. According to the company's HR co-ordinator the bikes were used at full capacity and the company plans to extent the program this year by renting eight bikes.

### Read more

- [A healthy workplace: a strategic approach](#)
- [Simplifying the case for investing in workplace health](#)

### American trends

In the U.S., where the cost of health benefits is high, many employers have started to provide financial incentives when employees participate in wellness activities. U.S.-based studies have shown that when real dollars and cents are involved, employees participation rate increase, on average, to about 70%.

Canada is still behind our U.S. neighbours in terms of employee participation rate in workplace wellness programs. Research reports on wellness in the workplace from Medisys and Corrections Canada about found that participation rates here range between 23% to 33%.

As healthcare cost increase, particularly with the increase of high cost drugs, aging demographics and multiple cost drivers in healthcare, employers would be wise to start to explore economical ways to motivate their employees to make healthy choices.

Healthy habits can be developed over time, and it is best to start early. With warmer weather and sunny days just around

the corner, here are five ways to kick-start health habits in your workplace—even if investing in a full-fledged wellness strategy isn't an option right now.

### **1. Set up a healthy snacks fund**

Many companies have a petty cash account for the staff kitchen, or have staff contribute to a coffee pot fund. If the company already has such a budget, allocate it to stock healthy snacks such as fruit and vegetable plates, as an alternative to coffee, pop and chips.

### **2. Negotiate gym/yoga membership discounts**

If your organization doesn't have the capacity of an on-site fitness area (it doesn't have to be a full-fledged gym) but there is a gym or yoga studio near the office, employers may want to consider approaching the facility and negotiating a corporate discount. If your staff size is not significant enough, consider joining an association who has negotiated those perks on behalf of their members.

### **3. Choose a wellness champion**

This person should be someone who takes on the lead role in creating awareness and organizing activities and contests on wellness. This person is usually nominated or naturally arises from the crowd. The main role is to communicate and encourage the fun factor in being healthy, such as distributing health quotes and facts, or organizing walking groups over breaks.

### **4. Make it easy for staff to make healthy choices**

Provide dedicated bike spots and have a shower facility on site. This gives employees the option to make healthier commuting choices—be it biking, running or power walking to work. Once staff see that such an alternative is available, more will be inclined to undertake these options when possible if they know they can freshen up. And if they live too far to commute via self-powered modes of transportation, they may use their breaks to get active.

### **5. Conduct a personal health risk assessment survey**

This is typically available from your benefits provider. If not, your benefits consultant can certainly arrange for an online survey to be done. What it allows the employer to do is to assess the health risk of your organization. Since your staff will get a score at the end of the test, they will be more aware and be motivated to make more healthy choices, particularly when employers make it assessable.

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