
Getting fit on the job

Firms that focus on employee wellness are reaping the benefits of healthier, happier workers, VIRGINIA GALT finds

By VIRGINIA GALT

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It's break time at Home & Park Motorhomes, and health and safety director Jerry Bannister is doling out nicotine patches to members of the plant's Kick Ash Club.

Meanwhile, employees at the Vancouver International Airport Authority are receiving "incentive points" from their employer for undergoing mammograms or prostate exams.

And the Big Steel men -- and women -- at Dofasco Inc. in Hamilton are getting a little smaller as a result of their participation in a Weight Watchers At Work program.

At Pazmac Enterprises Ltd., a small specialty machine shop in Langley, B.C., employees have an on-site swimming pool, a gym and personal trainers.

These may sound exceptional, but the Conference Board of Canada reported last week that 67 per cent of Canadian employers now offer some sort of wellness program.

And a handful, such as Dofasco, Pazmac, the Vancouver airport authority and Home & Park Motorhomes, have taken concern about wellness to new extremes, with full employee endorsement.

At all four places, participation is voluntary and the programs are designed to preserve privacy as much as possible. Employers are finding it's a fine line, however, between being intrusive and being helpful when influencing the personal lifestyle choices of their employees.

The Vancouver airport authority, for instance, does not expect employees to march in and announce, "Hey boss, I've just had a mammogram."

An outside organization keeps track of employees' self-reported healthy-lifestyle activities, for which they receive credit through the "fitness and balance incentive program," Michele Mawhinney, the airport authority's director of human resources, said in an interview.

Ms. Mawhinney said employees earn points for taking care of their health and for broader social involvement, such as volunteer work.

Blood pressure checks, prostate exams, mammograms, weight loss, physical activity and environmentally responsible commuting -- such as car-pooling, cycling and walking -- all count, as does perfect attendance at work. Incentive points accumulated over a 12-month period may be redeemed for awards such as watches, binoculars and portable CD players.

"It is important to us that the program is voluntary, and it is important to the employees, in terms of their comfort level," Ms. Mawhinney said. Roughly one-third of the airport authority's 300 employees now participate in the two-year-old "wellness program," which is already paying off in terms of fewer accidents and reduced absenteeism, she said.

The Ottawa-based Canadian Labour and Business Centre, which recently showcased the Vancouver International Airport, Dofasco, Pazmac and nine other organizations in a research project on healthy workplaces, reported that the Vancouver airport's program was introduced in response to a crisis: "Accident rates were growing and . . . those working on health and safety were experiencing burnout."

Dofasco introduced its healthy lifestyles program after an employee health audit in 1993 found that 80 per cent of its employees were overweight and 35 per cent smoked.

The company plans to conduct another employee health audit, and a cost analysis, in 2003.

Pazmac Enterprises, which provides highly specialized machinery to various industries, including aerospace and telecommunications, has only 30 employees -- but they're 30 highly skilled employees whom the company does not want to lose.

Clarence Lochhead, a senior researcher with the Canadian Labour and Business Centre, said Pazmac owner Steve Scarlett operates on the philosophy that employees, customers and suppliers should be treated the way he himself would like to be treated -- hence the on-site swimming pool, personal trainers, weekend hiking outings for employees and their families, weekly yoga classes and professional counselling services for employees who want them.

Mr. Scarlett also believes that, with 300 competitors in the area, "Pazmac's healthy workplace practices contribute to his goal of building a dedicated and highly qualified team focused on product quality, and keeping them over the long term," Mr. Lochhead wrote in the Pazmac case study, which is posted on the centre's Web site (<http://www.clbc.ca>) .

Home & Park Motorhomes, a Kitchener, Ont.-based company that converts vans into Roadtrek motor homes, has implemented a number of new programs, which have led to "a radical improvement in health and safety," Pete Mateja, president and chief executive officer, said in a recent interview.

"We preach it. Health and safety is right up there, next to making profits," said Mr. Mateja, who holds an MBA from the University of Windsor and was once a goalie in the farm system of the Boston Bruins hockey team.

At Dofasco, occupational health nurse Bonnie Topic said the next employee health audit is bound to be better. In addition to the Weight Watchers program, the company sponsors regular walks around the plant and provides smoking cessation programs, noon-hour aerobics sessions, shift-work survival tips and stress-reduction advice.

The Weight Watchers organization conducts four sessions a week at Dofasco -- one of 1,000 Canadian employers for which it has conducted work-based weight-loss programs. Dofasco reimburses employees 50 per cent of the cost, so long as they attend at least 90 per cent of the sessions.

Each session starts with a weigh-in -- the steel workers slip out of their steel-toed boots before stepping on the scales -- and only the individual participants and the Weight Watchers leader are privy to the results.

Marguerite Neri, a general manager with Weight Watchers, has found that men are far less sensitive than women when it comes to weight gain.

Indeed, during a recent noon-hour session at Dofasco, quality assurance specialist John Millar cheerfully reported that he was up a few pounds after Thanksgiving, having indulged himself at a Hamilton Tiger-Cats tailgate party that involved turkey, ham, pizza and "beer, beer, beer, beer."

"But it's okay," he added, "I'm still within my target range . . . between 200 and 210 pounds is a good weight

for me."

In 18 months with the program, Mr. Millar says he has lost more than 120 pounds. "I walk at least four miles a day, sometimes six miles, sometimes eight. Let's face it, when I was 328 pounds, I couldn't exercise very much."

Home & Park Motorhomes also sponsored a weight-loss program -- called the Fat Cat Club -- and when Mr. Bannister conducted the final weigh-in on Oct. 23, participants not only removed their steel-toed boots: They took off belts, eye-glasses, wallets, keys and heavy workshirts -- anything to tip the scales in their favour.

In six months, the 40 Fat Cats "lost 948 pounds," said Mr. Bannister, who also participated in the program. Quite apart from the pride he has in his co-workers, Mr. Bannister said the fact that the work force is fitter has made his job as health and safety director easier.

"We're not seeing the back injuries and shoulder strains that we used to see," Mr. Bannister said.

The Kick Ash program started on Sept. 30 -- the day that smoking was entirely banned from the plant -- and the company provides nicotine patches and nicotine gum to those who want them.

Lincoln Mason, 27, has decided to quit his 10-year smoking habit cold turkey.

He has authorized his employer to deduct the amount he spent on cigarettes every week -- \$50 -- from his paycheque, and will be reimbursed \$500 at the end of the 10-week program.

In Langley, Pazmac controller George Pacheco said the on-site fitness facilities are convenient and rank as a definite retention factor with the staff.

"I don't use the pool as much as I used to, but I work out three times a week . . . All of these things attracted me here in the first place," says Mr. Pacheco, who has been with the company for six years.

"You want people to stay and you want to attract people."

Dofasco's Ms. Topic said her job has also become far more satisfying now that her role is more preventive than reactive.

"For my first 15 years at Dofasco, I was on the reactive side -- I'd see the same 10 to 15 per cent of people over and over again. Now I'm getting to see the other 85 per cent out there," she said.

Ms. Topic said Dofasco found in its 1993 employee health audit that there were some hard costs associated with the smoking and overeating habits of its work force. Smokers and overweight employees lost more time at work than employees who were non-smokers and were not overweight.

Obese smokers lost an average of 106 hours a year, non-obese smokers lost an average of 96 hours a year, obese non-smokers lost an average of 72 hours and year and non-obese non-smokers lost an average of 53 hours a year, according to the 1993 audit. "And we were seeing a lot of strains and sprains," Ms. Topic added.

Economist Prem Benimadhu, a compensation specialist with the Conference Board of Canada, said at a seminar in Toronto last week that non-monetary benefits such as wellness programs are gaining in popularity -- both from an employee-retention standpoint and an organizational health standpoint.

As employees age, "it makes good business sense" to keep them in good working trim, Mr. Benimadhu said.

At Home & Park Motorhomes, Pete Mateja uses a hockey analogy: "We can't afford to lose people. It's

much like a sports team. If you lose a Mats Sundin [the Toronto Maple Leafs' captain], I don't care who you put out there, you are not going to replace him."

His company paid employees \$2 a pound for the weight they lost, but human resources director Violet Bradley said some of those -- like herself -- who recently quit smoking are having trouble keeping their weight under control again.

At the final weigh-in of the Fat Cats, she asked colleague Leo Haire how he managed to keep losing weight and curb the nicotine cravings.

"I eat candies," Mr. Haire said. "Low-fat candies," he added, noting Ms. Bradley's surprise.

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The workplace paradox

While Canada's health care system is under intense scrutiny, little attention has been paid to the role of workplace culture on employee health, says a national health education group.

"Paradoxically, the workplace has become an environment that both contributes to employee ill health, while simultaneously offering the most potential for improving overall employee health and well-being," the Canadian Council on Integrated Health Care said in a recently released discussion paper on workplace health.

Employee absences cost Canadian employers an estimated \$8.6-billion a year, the group reported, and "work-related mental and nervous disorders are rapidly becoming a major health concern, with serious cost implications."

John Yardley, a member of the council and director of the workplace health research unit at Brock University, said in an interview last week that "there is an opportunity for good employers to make a difference, and I think some strategic leaders are already walking the talk."

But there are still some employers "who don't give a damn and couldn't care less" about creating healthier work environments, Mr. Yardley said.

The discussion paper argues that employees, employers and governments should become far more active in promoting initiatives that go beyond the minimum occupational health and safety standards. These initiatives should focus on mental health as well as physical health, the discussion paper said.

"Interestingly, most employers do not consider their support of health programs as a core or strategic offering, one that protects their business viability. They also generally avoid any health-related practices or programs that may intrude on the privacy of an employee or their family members."

Healthy lifestyle programs are most effective when they have been jointly designed by employee and employer representatives and are supported by senior management, the discussion paper said.

"A set of workplace health programs is likely to have only limited impact unless the organization has supportive policies, an enabling culture, and the initiatives are nurtured by organizational leaders as part of their strategic plan."

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