

Article for the October Issue of the Update Magazine.

Building Healthier Workplaces

Over 100 human resources practitioners, representing employers throughout the Ottawa region, attended the Second Annual Wellness Conference on September 26th, 2007.

The conference was sponsored by The Royal Ottawa Health Care Group, Warren Shepell, Manulife Financial and Mercer Human Resources Consulting and Allegro 168 Communications + Design. In keeping with last year inaugural Wellness Conference, all proceeds from the event are returned to the Royal Ottawa Health Care Foundation for use in patient care. Tim Kluge, President and CEO of the Royal Ottawa Health Care Foundation expressed his gratitude to all of the organizers and presenters for their efforts in bringing this conference together.

Information booths set up by Warren Shepell, a national provider of employee assistance programs, the National Quality Institute, a non-profit organization offering training and certification programs in the field of organizational quality and wellness; Chapters/Indigo who brought along many interesting books for purchase, and The Royal Ottawa Hospital Foundation who provided information about their mental health initiatives throughout the Ottawa region.

Bruce Swan, President and CEO of the ROHCG and former OHRPA board member and Vision Award winner Catherine Thomas, VP of People and Learning, with ROH. Catherine made opening remarks. This year the conference is being held in advance of National Healthy Workplace Week, October 23 to 29, 2006, information about which can be found at: www.healthyworkplaceweek.ca.

Employer interest in organizational wellness continues to increase, as organizations deal with the financial, human and organizational costs of poor employee health. We all intuitively understand that good individual health will result in a better working environment and reduced benefits cost. Employers have long responded to their legal responsibilities for providing employees with a safe and healthy workplace by implementing programs such as health care benefits that supplement provincial systems. The cost of these supplemental benefits continues to escalate, drawing raised eyebrows from those individuals charged with maintaining a healthy financial bottom line.

This year's theme "Building Healthier Workplaces" looked at the "How To" aspect of implementing a Wellness Program in the workplace – that is, how to be a culture change agent and bring about those changes necessary for achieving wellness within your organization. The first presenter was Gerry Smith, Vice President of Warren Shepell. From Gerry's perspective, although we have been hearing about healthy workplaces for some time now and the healthy workplace has increasingly become a trendy subject with

many organizations jumping on the bandwagon, few companies can demonstrate high levels of success in reaping results from what they implement.

Gerry explained that in order for a wellness program to succeed, the organization needs to have a philosophical approach, which incorporates employee wellness as a primary organizational value. While doing brown bag lunches, or handing out stickers, lapel pins and apples may temporarily raise awareness, it does not truly address the way in which wellness needs to be done. You can't just buy everyone gym memberships and hope for the best. Unless a philosophy underlies all of our organization's rules and processes, all of the ways in which we interact with our people, the program is simply window dressing.

Gerry recommends taking a data-driven approach to wellness management. Determine where you are now. Look at your organization's demographics, gather data on STD, LTD, OHS claims, look at the impact in areas of weak leadership. Project where you will be in one, three or five years from now. The senior management, who make decisions as to corporate-wide initiatives, are often removed from the day-to-day management of employees. They need this data to help them make decisions.

The second speaker, Fernand Ouillette, Director of Compensation and Benefits from NB Power Corporation spoke about his experiences over the past few years in implementing a wellness initiative program. NB Power Corp. is a provincial crown corporation, which has gone through significant changes over the past 10 years, including a decrease of 700 positions. The average employee age is 46, predominantly male, and the impact of workplace stress was showing in significant cost overruns for benefits coverage.

In 1999, the corporation was paying \$8.6 million dollars annually in benefits costs. At the then current rate of increase, they were anticipating a fee in 2010 of \$33.3 million dollars. This was simply not acceptable, yet employee surveys indicated that 87% of employees wanted no erosion of their benefits coverage. In 2001, the corporation introduced a flexible benefits program. With some additional modifications a few years later, the results are astounding. LTD claims have reduced by 26% since 1999. The LTD fund has gone from a deficit to a surplus situation. During a time when many employers were facing a 15% increase in premiums, NB Power LTD rates decreased by 15%. As a result of the changes, that projection of \$33.3 million in 2010 is now down to \$19.3 million. Fernand suggests that it takes about five years to see the results of an integrated HR strategy.

The third and final speaker was Judy Middlemiss, Manager of Occupational Health Programs with Canada Post Corporation. Judy talked about the experiences Canada Post has had during the first two years of a ten year initiative to implement their wellness program. Canada Post is Canada's seventh largest employer and has over 71,000 employees located in every nook and cranny of our vast country. Wellness is an integral part of Canada Post's business strategy and has been championed by the new CEO. Employee wellness is integral to Canada Post's stated business objectives and the comprehensive nature of the organization's wellness program was impressive. Canada

Post's program includes everything from alcohol hand gel at work stations, ergonomic assessments, employees gyms right up to emergency plans for pandemic outbreaks.

Judy described a healthy workplace as one that promotes and supports health and well-being by encouraging the meaningful participation of employees in the process of creating and maintaining healthier working conditions. These conditions include a respectful and balanced social environment; a supportive and resourceful work environment that fosters healthy lifestyle habits; and, a clean, orderly, and safe physical environment.

In essence, the employer cannot take over responsibility for the health of its employees. The employee is the one making the choices and will always remain responsible for his or her physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological health. The employer can offer opportunity for healthy choices and provide education to assist the employee in making the best choice. Employers can help employees take responsibility for their own health by providing information and choice; by providing the delivery of innovative health and wellness services; and, by providing an opportunity for life style changes.

A challenge for the initiative lay in how best to get employees engaged. A process model was designed to measure the effort that employees were willing to give in order to help the corporation achieve it's goals. Research showed that employees needed a strong connection with their managers, that credibility and consistent communication were responsible for encouraging the development of employee commitment and contribution. Ultimately, it is the employee who is responsible for his or her lifestyle at work and on personal time.

The conference organizers practiced what they preached by providing a healthful, nutritious snack at break time and some on-the-spot stretching exercises between speakers. The morning wrapped up with an interactive information response session, with participants keying answers into tabletop remotes. The responses to eleven questions were instantly tabulated and projected onto screen in graph form. If you are curious about the results, or would like to review the speaker's notes, this information will be posted on the Royal Ottawa Health Care Group web site. Click on the learning development portal – educational events.