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Culture of health emerging

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Employers are coming around to the idea of improved productivity through healthy employees healthy—so much so that it is emerging as the top business objective for employer-sponsored wellness programs around the world, according to a poll.

Buck Consultants' third annual *Working Well: A Global Survey of Health Promotion and Workplace Wellness Strategies* poll of more than 1,100 organizations from over 45 countries finds that the most powerful drivers for wellness strategies among Canadian employers are mental health issues: stress, work/life balance, and depression.

“The heightened global focus on improving productivity is a significant trend,” says Barry Hall, a Buck principal who directed the survey. “Business leaders around the world are increasingly recognizing the financial value of healthier workers and the need to better engage employees in reducing their health risks.”

Culture of health

The survey has identified what refers to as an emerging “culture of health”; defined as an organizational climate that promotes healthy lifestyle choices.

Fifty-four percent of Canadian respondents indicated that they have a strong or fairly strong “culture of health” in the workplace while 40% are actively pursuing one. However, while 77% of North American respondents indicated they have successfully implemented a wellness strategy, only 12% of Canadian employers have a wellness strategy in place, indicating that, although the focus on wellness is in its infancy, a culture of health is clearly valued as an important business priority to be pursued.

Stress was identified as the most powerful driver behind Canadian wellness strategies, cited by 45% of respondents as the top workplace health risk. Work/life issues (39%) and depression (31%) are also cause for concern.

“We have seen dramatic increases in absence due to stress, depression and anxiety” said Michele Bossi, Buck’s health & productivity practice leader in Canada. “In working with clients I’ve found that mental health issues are more powerful drivers of wellness strategy than physical health issues.”

However, aspects of wellness programs that address employee stress—such as caregiver support, personal health/lifestyle coaching, and work/life balance support—are provided by fewer than half of Canadian respondents. Other than employee assistance programs, the most common program components deal more directly address physical health, such as influenza shots.

The survey found that incentive rewards are only offered by 24% of Canadian respondents, due in part to the fact that many of the most popular program components don’t readily lend themselves to incentive rewards. However, 24% of respondents plan to offer incentive rewards in the future, the most popular forms being employer-subsidized gym memberships (38%), raffles (33%) and gifts and merchandize (25%).

But what good is a wellness program if you can’t measure it? In Canada, only 8% have measured financial outcomes.

“The fact that organizations continue to expand wellness programs, despite this lack of measurement, suggests that the intuitive value of improved employee health remains a major motivator for employers,” says Hall. “Employers may recognize that health outcomes and behavior changes inspired by wellness programs are likely to take multiple years to fully manifest themselves in the form of measurable savings.”

More than half of those who do measure the impact of their wellness programs report improvements in the image of the organization and in workforce morale and engagement.

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