

Employees key to corporate health

End of provincial premiums heralds new approach to wellness

Derek Sankey

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John Seto had no reason to think he had any health problems. He felt great, ran two marathons and was generally in good health.

It wasn't until his employer, Calgary-based engineering firm Bantrel Co., launched a program recently in conjunction with a health services provider to run standard health tests on all of its employees that he learned he had type 2 diabetes.

"It's one of those things that never really shows up during the day or evening, but amazingly the numbers were high and I would never have figured that out," he says.

Seto is currently taking part in the company's Fitness Challenge that runs until June and has modified his health and fitness routine. When talking to colleagues in the industry, he's noticed a big shift in the approach companies are taking toward health.

"It's no longer a work-till-you-drop attitude," he says. "Now you can spend time enjoying life on top of doing a job where you feel very productive."

It appears many Alberta companies could be set to boost the number of health and wellness programs available to employees since the Alberta government announced it will eliminate health-care premiums, which many companies currently cover for employees.

The elimination of health-care premiums in Alberta represents a "financial windfall to companies with Alberta employees," according to a research report by Hewitt Associates, which estimates a company with 100 Alberta employees could save \$100,000 annually.

Organizational health consultants predict companies will use the windfall as an opportunity to reallocate money toward new health programs.

The benefits are numerous. Not only could companies reduce absenteeism and improve the health of employees, but also productivity and morale will rise with a healthier workforce and it can be used as an effective attraction and retention tool.

"Here is an opportunity to turn this into a potential positive, so an opportunity to innovate," says Rob Crooks, an organizational health consultant. "Employers are part of the health care equation."

However, many companies are not fully realizing the value of the health and wellness initiatives they currently have because they don't measure the return on investment or the effectiveness of those programs.

Crooks cites several studies, including the one conducted in 2006, which show that about 30 per cent of employers with health programs actually measure them effectively,

while fewer than 10 per cent are currently marketing their health strategies to potential employees as an attraction and retention tool.

The Canadian Healthy Workplace Council and the Graham Lowe Group released a study recently that found companies who invest in "multi-component workplace health promotion programs" enjoy an average reduction in sick leaves, health plan costs, workers' compensation claims and disability costs of more than 25 per cent.

Back at Bantrel, executive vice-president Greg Schneider says the elimination of health care premiums by the province translates into an opportunity to boost what has already been an aggressive strategy to improve the health and wellness of its employees.

"It's a win-win. If I can keep people and not have to pay sick leave, it's self-funding," says Schneider.

"It's good for us and it's good for the employees."

Bantrel, one of many companies now re-examining their health and wellness strategies in light of the forthcoming changes to health care premiums, has already increased its investment in such programs over the past two years.

In 2001, the company began to overhaul its entire health, safety and environment policy starting with improved safety measures for employees working in the field.

It then began to branch out by taking a broader health and wellness approach by giving employees the resources and programs they needed to ensure good health at home or at work.

It launched its Know Your Numbers campaign to provide standard health assessments to employees and its Fitness Challenge, open to all employees.

Out of the one third of its workforce that took part in the health screening, about 10 per cent were at "serious risk," which was then followed up with additional support to help those employees address their health concerns.

Schneider says the benefits are two-fold: employees get healthier and it's a way to make your company more attractive to prospective employees.

"Then it really becomes crystal clear that you're putting your money and time where your mouth is," says Schneider.

derek.sankey@telus.net

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