



Don't Follow the Leader

CANADIAN PLAN SPONSORS NEED TO LOOK BEYOND THE U.S. EXAMPLE TO MAXIMIZE THEIR WELLNESS ROI. BY MICHELE BOSSI

For years, U.S. companies stood virtually alone in their focus on wellness. But recently, there has been a global surge in workplace wellness programs as companies around the world struggle to compete. And while the U.S. may be ahead of the rest of us in implementing these programs, it's important that we don't blindly follow their lead.

Buck Consultants' third annual global wellness survey reveals important regional differences in the goals and expected outcomes of wellness strategies. In the U.S., the primary drivers of wellness programs are physical health and cost reduction. However, for the other countries surveyed, stress and mental health issues top the list of concerns, and the overwhelming drivers for wellness are improved productivity and morale.

well-being, aiming to reduce absence and improve productivity. Since stress is a key contributor to productivity loss, absenteeism and presenteeism, it should be a primary focus.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association's *Sources of Workplace Stress*, "Employees who start to feel the 'pressure to perform' can get caught in a downward spiral of increasing effort to meet rising expectations with no increase in job satisfaction. The relentless requirement to work at optimum performance takes its toll in job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced efficiency, illness and even death."

The good news is, unlike physical health issues, mental health and stress are directly affected by the work environment. And since employers control that environment, they can have a significant impact on the mental well-being of a workforce by creating a workplace culture that engages employees.

Many companies claim to promote the values that support employee well-being: respect, integrity, teamwork, open communication, meaningful work, good working relationships, recognition and balance. But to what extent do employees actually *live* these values in their day-to-day experience? Do employers even know if these values define their corporate cultures?

Companies that successfully incorporate such values into the workplace know they are successful because their employees tell them so. These companies, typically labelled as the best places to work, seek regular feedback on how employees feel about their jobs and their environment—and they act on this information.

Some may argue that promoting workplace culture has more to do with attracting the best talent than with wellness, but that view is shortsighted. In Canada, employee wellness has to go beyond fitness memberships and weight management programs. It's about emotionally healthy employees who are engaged in their work and committed to making a difference. Employers that achieve this objective can expect a significant improvement to the bottom line. **BC**

To maximize their wellness ROI, Canadian employers should consider employee mental health and well-being, aiming to reduce absence and improve productivity.

Canadian employers often look to the U.S. for the newest and latest in wellness initiatives, but they need to recognize this distinction when developing wellness strategies. The types of investments made in the U.S. toward disease management and tools such as biometric screenings may yield a healthy return on investment (ROI) in a country where employers pay almost all of the healthcare costs and have access to a wealth of data regarding the health of their employees, but that focus may not be appropriate for Canadian employers.

It is estimated that 40% of worker turnover is due to stress, that lost work time due to stress costs Canadian companies \$12 billion each year and that high levels of workplace stress can lead to serious consequences for employers. To maximize their wellness ROI, Canadian employers should consider employee mental health and

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