

Good Health = Good Productivity

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Special to Globe and Mail Update

Published Thursday, Oct. 14, 2010 6:15PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Oct. 15, 2010 6:17AM EDT

Richard Yerema, managing editor of Canada's top 100 employers for Mediacorp Canada, sees promoting healthier lifestyles as a long-term trend evolving among companies within the project, ranging from the introduction of flexible health benefits to more formal programs.

While studies are still in the works, common sense says a healthier workforce is a cheaper, more productive workforce. With employers increasingly on the hook for medical and dental costs, the intent is that wellness and fitness initiatives will help them manage their health-benefits expenses. Those fresh fruit or veggie platters delivered to the office may be an investment that not only saves on cavities, but reduces sick days as well.

BioWare, an electronic games company and one of Canada's top 100 employers, showers staff with a variety of healthy lifestyle perks. Besides a free onsite gym, their Edmonton facility provides a complimentary continental breakfast - low-fat bran muffins, fresh fruit, juice, cereal, yogurt, bagels - delivered at 8:30 every morning. Aaryn Flynn, the studio general manager for BioWare in Edmonton and Montreal, says the company is a great place to work. "Conservatively, I'd say at least half participate in the breakfast," Mr. Flynn says. "One of the side benefits is that it encourages people to get into work nice and early."

Founded in 1995 by medical doctors who were passionate about computer games, the whole attitude of taking care of people permeates BioWare's corporate culture, Mr. Flynn says.

"They encapsulated healthy living into one of their core values, which they call quality in the workplace," Mr. Flynn says. "To us, that means ensuring we're balancing the stresses of game development with the need to take care of and support people. We've put a number of initiatives and programs in place to help employees do that."

Optional onsite yoga is one of them. Employees pay for the classes but are encouraged to take time off from work to attend. While Mr. Flynn estimates only about 5 per cent of staff actually do yoga, the company offers other healthy lifestyle choices such as dragon boat racing, a running club, mountain biking and ski trips that are popular with employees.

"These programs are critical to employee engagement," Mr. Flynn says. "They help build long-term relationships and engagement between team members and the company as well. Employees organize them, even if they're paying for them themselves, so they're part of the BioWare culture."

Bruce Powell, managing partner and co-founder of IQ Partners Inc., a human resources firm headquartered in Toronto, takes a different view on the value of such initiatives. While healthy lifestyle perks are "nice-to-haves," he believes they're relatively minor compared to maintaining employee engagement.

"A strong corporate culture, a good relationship with the boss, feeling valued and opportunities for learning and personal growth are far more important," Mr. Powell says. "Granted, these are relatively intangible, but if a company was going to allocate any budget at all to perks, they're far better off investing in areas that generate real and emotional satisfaction for their employees. Most companies we know that have onsite gyms find they are rarely used."

He suggests that lifestyle perks that save employees time, make their lives easier or improve their quality of life go a long way to entrench loyalty and focus productivity. The free food idea is a winner, allowing people to focus on their work and be more productive.

"Onsite healthy food options, especially breakfast, have huge appeal for singles," Mr. Powell says. "Pre-prepared take-home meals or on-call daycare are a boon to time-starved employees with young families and committed time off for personal development is attractive for both."

BioWare's standard time off is three weeks vacation a year, and on top of that, it provides as much time as it can around the Christmas holidays, Mr. Flynn says. Regular, full-time employees have a \$400 health account for approved expenses - medical costs not covered under their extended health care such as dental services, prescription eyewear and massage - plus an active living benefit of \$200 a year for fitness-related memberships and equipment. All add up to a healthier, happier workforce and important perks when it comes to recruiting in a competitive industry like theirs.

"Employees have a lot of choice out there," Mr. Flynn says. "They look at a whole basket of things that an organization offers them, from compensation, location of the studio down to these lifestyle benefits. More and more, employees are making choices around where and who they want to work for based on those additional benefits."

But recruitment at the executive level is a different matter, Mr. Powell says.

"Most executives we deal with don't even consider these things when evaluating a new opportunity," Mr. Powell says. "If a new role includes healthy lifestyle perks, they might be appreciated, but they are rarely core to a candidate's evaluation or decision on a new role. However, I admire companies that offer things like free personal time for charity work, extra time off for personal needs and free onsite food. I spoke at Google a few weeks ago and despite being located on top of multiple fast food options, their onsite kitchen and free supply of food allowed people to focus on their work and be more productive. Being Google, I'm sure they've calculated the [return on investment] on that investment."