THE HEALTHY WORKPLACE:
Just Good Business
Creating a Healthier Bottom Line

Everyone knows the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. You can live longer and live better. But can the same be said of a workplace? Do healthier people make a healthier business?

You bet.

According to evidence gathered by the NQI (National Quality Institute), Canada’s national authority on Healthy Workplace, healthier workplaces make for healthier bottom lines. Lower turnover. Less absenteeism. Fewer and less severe workplace injuries.

These are hard cost savings that can easily be quantified. But there are many other business advantages too.

“It’s really about being an employer of choice,” says Geri McKeeown, an associate of NQI, who has been engaged in writing, research, training and consulting in the Canadian healthy workplace movement since the early 1990s. “With employee shortages looming, organizations that can recruit and retain the best people have a competitive advantage.”

What’s more, research shows a link between satisfied employees and satisfied customers. “When people are satisfied with their workplace,” explains McKeeown, “you get the performance you can’t mandate into a job description—creativity, innovation and motivation to go the extra mile for the organization and the customer.”

A healthy workplace can even create shareholder value, as investors scrutinize how organizations fulfill their responsibility to society. All of which makes for a win-win scenario for both employees and the organizations they work for.

“There is a growing body of evidence that organizations that have prepared for the future, through investing in organizational excellence, build shareholder and stakeholder value through sustainable performance,” says Dan Corbett, president of NQI. “Leaders in these organizations see a commitment to organizational excellence as an investment in the future rather than a cost. The case for a healthy workplace must be positioned within the context of achieving excellence and as an investment in not just the health of employees but in the long-term health of the organization.”

Healthy Workplace Check-Up: On the Road to Excellence

“Our goal is to help the corporation become a place where people want to work, with a reputation as an excellent employer in the community,” states André Ouellet, president and CEO of Canada Post.

Last year, Canada Post introduced a healthy workplace strategy to its more than 60,000 employees across the country. By defining a healthy workplace as “the quality of the working environment … one that fosters respect, support and dignity,” he has set the organization along a path of process improvement, job redesign, training, rewards and recognition programs aimed at protecting and improving the well-being of employees and their families.

If that sounds far removed from basic occupational health and safety, that’s exactly the point. In pursuing excellence, enlightened leaders are embracing holistic workplace health systems that provide support on many levels—physical, social, personal and developmental—to improve quality of life for employees both within and outside the workplace. It need not be an expensive proposition.

“Many people equate wellness with expensive fitness facilities and daycare centres,” notes Norm Williams, vice-president of human resources programs at AT&T Canada, a company that has attained Level 3 for Business Excellence in the NQI PEP (Progressive Excellence Program).
“We’re building the concept of healthy workplace into our everyday management practices, and that does not require a lot of financial resources.”

What it does require is commitment from the top and plenty of communication. “We’ve embedded healthy workplace into our strategic plans,” adds Williams. “It shows up in our flexible benefits, employee assistance program, employee surveys ... We look at things that can benefit both the company and the employee.”

One example is a pilot project that enables some employees to work at home. The savings in office space alone offers a payback to the company, but the longer-term benefits of having happier, more productive and committed employees may be even greater.

The win-win approach is reflected in AT&T Canada’s bundling of its practices under one umbrella, internally branded as Total Rewards—A World of Opportunity. It began as a framework for compensation and benefits, but has since evolved to include the whole value proposition of being an AT&T Canada employee.

It seems fitting, given the serious needs emerging in Canada’s workplaces.

Sobering statistics
A study by the Canadian Policy Research Network, for instance, shows that high stress levels are a significant factor in absenteeism. In the study, employees who reported high levels of work-life conflict missed an average of 13.2 days versus 5.9 days for those with low conflict levels.

A recent Statistics Canada report on employee absenteeism confirms these results. It indicates that health care and social assistance workers—jobs with a high level of stress—missed on average 12.5 days at work compared with the average of eight days for all industries.

Another recent study, sponsored by Health Canada and conducted by Linda Duxbury of Carleton University and Chris Higgins of the University of Western Ontario, concludes that in any tradeoff in the work-life balance, work is typically the winner. The study, which involved 31,000 people, concludes that job stress is up from 10 years ago, job satisfaction is down, and that workers are less pleased with their life in general and more likely to say they are depressed.

It all adds up to an enormous toll, for employees and their organizations. “We know now that the workplace environment is a major determinant of health; you can’t separate it from the individual,” says Geri McKeown, an associate of NQI. “During the past decade, workload has become overwhelming for people. Many organizations have focused on the needs of the client at the expense of their own employees, and that’s not a model for sustainability.”

Serious-minded solution
To reduce the ill effects of stress, organizations need to distribute workload reasonably and fairly; give employees a say in decisions that affect their work; structure work so as not to create exhaustion or excess stress; and make rewards and recognition part of the culture.

Canada Life terms these measures a “constructive culture” and rates its progress accordingly. Although the company has long recognized the importance of its people, management decided a more structured approach to addressing wellness was required.

NQI PEP, based on the Canadian Healthy Workplace Criteria, was selected as the tool of choice. “Not only does NQI PEP provide a roadmap with specific criteria, but we can also use it as a stepping stone, as a way to visually show our progress,” says Sharon Amorth of the Quality Services Office (QSO).
at Canada Life’s Western headquarters in Regina. Adds Karen Mariani of Canada Life’s QSO in Toronto: “NQI PEP®’s strong emphasis on continuous improvement highlighted our need to regularly review our people-focused programs and policies to ensure a sustained focus on the health and well-being of our people.”

Like AT&T Canada, Canada Life has achieved NQI PEP®’s Level 1 and is pursuing Level 2. But even for organizations that have reached the pinnacle, the Canada Award for Excellence, the journey never ends.

Best practices

NCR Canada, a 2002 Canada Award for Excellence winner, offers programs that address the physical, mental and financial well-being of its employees. For example, they can choose benefits from a flexible package. They can obtain cash credit towards “healthy living” expenses such as fitness class fees, fitness equipment purchases and nutritional counselling. NCR’s Health First program helps employees return and re-engage in the workplace following injury or illness. Since its introduction, absentee days lost per employee has declined 30%, resulting in significant cost savings for the company.

Using consolidated data from its employee assistance program (EAP) provider and insurance carrier, NCR spots trends and responds with appropriate services and communication. As a result, EAP data from the past four years show a reduction of calls related to work stress and conflict.

Dofasco, another 2002 Canada Award for Excellence recipient, practises its core values, the first of which is: “Nothing is more important than the health and safety of our people.”

With support at the highest levels of the company, employees are encouraged to identify opportunities for improvement. Participation is high and growing in such programs as fitness appraisals, weight control, walk-and-stretch sessions, “back power” sessions, aerobics classes and health screening for cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure counts.

These programs have led to a decrease of more than 60% in lost-time injury frequency over the past eight years. The rate of occupational injury cases returning to work by the eighth week has increased by more than 40% in the past four years, while work days lost per claim have shown a 37% drop. The company has benefited financially from these improvements, as WSIB...
costs have declined dramatically.

“To meet global challenges takes an organization of great innovation, creativity and responsiveness, and that takes people who are happy, healthy and focused on performance,” states John Macnamara, Dofasco’s general manager of health and safety.

His advice on workplace health? “Just do it. It doesn’t have to be an enormous investment.”

Healthy Workplace: How to Get Started

Many organizations are improving the health of their workplaces, achieving momentum through progress towards goals and recognition of successes along the way.

What should those goals be? The Canadian Healthy Workplace Criteria, developed by NQI in partnership with Health Canada and in association with professionals from the health and safety sector, serve as a roadmap for organizations—big or small, in any sector—that wish to develop and sustain a healthy workplace.

Essential drivers for a healthy workplace include leadership, planning, people focus and process management. All of these have an impact on the elements of a healthy workplace, which encompass the physical environment, health practices, social environment and personal resources.

But the commitment to put in place a strategic management system focused on excellence can take several years to pay off. To help organizations stay on track and receive incremental recognition, NQI developed the NQI PEP’s, a goal-driven, practical roadmap to excellence.

NQI PEP® features four levels of achievement and recognition, in addition to the Canada Awards for Excellence. NQI offers related workshops and other pragmatic tools that help organizations reach their goals and achieve higher standards.

Excellence is a work in progress and it’s not an easy journey. By taking advantage of NQI’s knowledge and experience, you can increase your speed and avoid unnecessary obstacles.

Making the Case

The business case for a Healthy Workplace may be easier to make than you may think.

Unless you are a very small organization, the project is best tackled by a team of people from various departments and areas of responsibility. But this doesn’t have to be an onerous task. Indeed, many organizations rely on existing cross-functional groups such as occupational health and safety or wellness committees.

To build the business case, you will need to identify the benefits to your organization, predict the cost savings, develop a healthy workplace plan with estimated costs, and calculate the predicted return on investment.

You can walk through these steps in A Four Step Guide to Building the Business Case for a Healthy Workplace, published by NQI. The guide contains sample calculations, practical tools and resources, the Canadian Healthy Workplace Criteria, descriptions of best practices and results, and a hypothetical business case that applies the four steps.

To order a copy, or to find out more about how your organization can “go healthy,” visit www.nqi.ca, call (416) 251-7600 or e-mail info@nqi.ca.