

SITTING IS LETHAL! GET UP FROM YOUR DESK

Contributed by Kim Snider, President, Health Systems Group. The following article was published in the November Issue of Benefits Live Magazine. Benefits Live Magazine is a compilation publication which includes: Corporate Wellness Magazine, Voluntary Benefits Magazine, Self-Funding Magazine, and Healthcare Reform Magazine.

How Workplace Wellness Programs can, with small steps, address the crisis of inactivity



We sit. And we sit a lot. We sit in front of the TV. We sit at our desks. We sit in the car. And that's not good. In fact, it's really bad. The World Health Organization (WHO) currently ranks physical inactivity fourth in the list of major risk factors for chronic disease after high blood pressure, tobacco use and high cholesterol.

We spend most of our waking hours in the workplace—9.2 hours per day for the average North American. And many of us spend a lot of that time on our rear ends. According to a number of research reports, we are quite literally putting our lives at risk.

A 2012 study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine found that adults who sat for more than 11 hours a day increased their risk of dying within 3 years by 40 percent compared to those who sat for less than 4 hours per day. The number was 15 percent for those who sat between 8 and 11 hours per day.

And if you're a marathoner or extremely active outside the workplace, don't go being all smug. Even if you make every lunch time Zumba class or go home from work and train for an Ironman, your risks are just as high if you sit for extended periods during the day.

According to Dr. James Levine, Professor of Medicine at the Mayo Clinic and an expert on the dangers of sitting, we need to get up and move more often. "We know that as soon as somebody gets out of their chair, their blood sugar improves, their blood cholesterol and triglycerides improve, and that's very

consistent,” explains Dr. Levine. “Every time you get up it gets better. Every time you sit down it gets worse.”

It’s clear that workplace wellness programs are needed to get employees moving and to get them moving regularly throughout the day. But how do you do that without impacting productivity or completely changing your physical and cultural environment. With small steps, that’s how.

Health Systems Group works with our clients to recommend small changes on both the physical and cultural environments. These changes don’t take employees away from their work but help them to do it more actively. For example, making stairwells brighter and more appealing helps encourage people to take the stairs. Encouraging walking meetings or providing headsets so people can move around when they are on the phone, are small things that can make a big difference.

These sorts of small changes are helpful but we saw a need for something else, something that would encourage the behavior changes necessary to make use of the physical and cultural changes being implemented. It’s great to make the stairwells bright and cheery but you need something to motivate employees to choose the stairs.

Our search for a highly engaging resource led us to Tractivity. It’s a very simple but powerful tool that we combined with our own communications and program strategies to create amazing results.



Tractivity is a simple, reliable, sensor-based activity monitoring system combined with a web application called Tractivity Online that tracks and displays activity in a motivational and very engaging way. Using this system we were able to easily implement a number of activity challenges.

Tractivity allows administrators – to create Challenges—like walking Route 66 or The Appalachian Trail—or individuals can design their very own and invite their friends to join. These Challenges motivate employees to increase their activity levels to support their team, reach a shared goal or win an individual race.

In fact it is quite amazing to watch the lengths people will go to in order to get more steps and help their teams win a challenge.

We’ve rolled out our “Steps” programs using a comprehensive array of communications, engagement and promotional strategies in a highly targeted way in order to achieve a variety of outcomes including

engaging the non-active individual, supporting those already active, achieving high levels of participation and creating team spirit.

One of greatest success stories is with our client PCL Construction Inc., Canada's largest construction contractor. Our first program for PCL was the Tractivity Great Steps Challenge, organized for all the Toronto District offices. We had an astounding 65 percent of employees engaged in 51 teams, including the entire senior management group. "At PCL, building a healthy workforce is extremely important to us because our people are our most valuable resource," says PCL Constructors HR Advisor Gillian MacLean. "The Great Steps Challenge offered our employees the flexibility to be involved in a workplace wellness program while still accommodating demanding work schedules and busy personal lives."

We realize that in order for our data to be meaningful and fully represent the success of our programs we'll need more time. But the anecdotal evidence is in and tells a very good story.

A senior manager in one organization shared the story of the change in her gardening habits in order to get more steps. She no longer brings all her materials out to the garden and sits but purposely makes trips back and forth to the shed.

An introverted IT tech lost 20 pounds in the first 5 weeks, started walking 4 miles every night and, for the first time, was moving around the office regularly and engaging with his colleagues – a win for not only his physical well-being but for his emotional health in a big way.

We saw teams of employees taking a stroll on their breaks or a power walk at lunch.

We are definitely seeing these types of change in behaviour across the board and healthy habits developed at work benefit not only the employer, but also extend beyond the work day and the individual employee to their family, friends and even the community. So our programs to support small steps to impact workplace inactivity can have a significant broader impact.

Kim Snider is President at Health Systems Group, a company that has been providing wellness consulting and program management services for 35 years. HSG provides a wide range of programs and services to our corporate clients, but the most important ingredient is our ability to engage employees so that regular activity becomes a joy and healthy living is fun. When this happens, companies truly become healthy workplaces.

If you are interested in additional information on HSG's Tailored Wellness Programs and how we can help you further develop an overall Wellness Strategy please contact us at gsimmons@healthsystemsgroup.com

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