

The Conference Board of Canada  
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Roundtable on Socio-Economic Determinants of Health

**Case Study Series • No. 6**

**The Halifax Chamber of Commerce:  
Promoting Workplace Wellness  
in Nova Scotia**

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## Overview

Nova Scotia faces a health crisis. With a “significantly higher” rate of obesity than the national average, the province suffers from the second highest incidence of diabetes and cancer and the third highest rate of high blood pressure in Canada.<sup>1</sup> To exacerbate matters, the province’s healthcare costs are rising at upwards of 7 per cent a year and its elderly population is rapidly increasing.<sup>2</sup> Combined, these factors have led to the projection that by 2026, healthcare costs will consume 83 per cent of Nova Scotia’s total revenue.<sup>3</sup>

To avert such a future, the Halifax Chamber of Commerce—a member services and business advocacy centre for almost 2000 companies—has worked vigorously to increase the number and breadth of workplace wellness programs throughout the maritime province. The Chamber’s efforts have included raising corporate awareness of the benefits of workplace wellness, helping companies implement sustainable programs, and tracking provincial progress. In recent years, the Chamber has also hosted an awards ceremony to recognize successful wellness initiatives.

The Chamber’s campaign works to improve the physical and mental health of Nova Scotians in several ways. 1) It directly enhances health by encouraging healthy behaviour and assisting in the development of healthy work environments. 2) By enhancing the health of Nova Scotians, the program should lower (or stabilize) provincial healthcare costs, freeing up funds for such other determinants of health as education and housing. For these reasons, the Halifax Chamber of Commerce’s workplace wellness campaign has

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Payn, “Workplace Health Case Study: Halifax Chamber of Commerce,” *Workplace Health 2008: The Battle for Mental Well-being*. Conference held at Toronto, April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Coldwell, “The Business Case for Workplace Wellness,” *Roundtable on the Socio-Economic Determinants of Health*. Conference held at Halifax, October 24 - 25, 2007.

\* Note: Nova Scotia’s dependency ratio (the ratio of people over 65 and under 15 to the working population) is expected to reach 62.3 by 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

been honoured by the Canadian Medical Association and should serve as a model to businesses and organizations looking to promote health in Canada.

## Activities

Since its establishment in 2003, the Chamber’s workplace wellness campaign has incorporated a broad array of activities to promote the “three sides of the wellness triangle”: physical environment (e.g., safety, air quality, ergonomics), health and lifestyle (e.g. physical activity, nutrition, smoking), and workplace culture/supportive environment.<sup>4</sup>

The campaign’s earliest action involved the assembly and dissemination of toolkits to assist local businesses in developing wellness programs. It soon became apparent, however, that businesses needed a stronger incentive to invest in comprehensive workplace wellness. This inspired the Chamber, in collaboration with various foundations and government agencies, to create “HealthWorks”—a project aimed at showcasing the *business* case for workplace wellness using local companies as models. Three companies were selected to participate in the project: one small (Trampoline), one medium (Rideau Construction), and one large (Secunda Marine Services). With strong endorsement and financial commitment from the management teams of all three companies, the Chamber and its partners officially launched the HealthWorks project in March 2003.

The project’s first stage involved assessing the health status of all participating employees via a survey, personal health screening, and fitness testing. Results were used to calculate each employee’s wellness score and physical age, which were later conveyed to the employee in a confidential report. Individual data was also compiled to produce *company* profiles. In the ensuing months, these profiles enabled the Chamber and its partners to develop workplace wellness programs tailored to each company’s specific needs. The customized programs then underwent a four month phased implementation. While outcome evaluation continues to this day, the projects’ early results were so compelling that many Chamber members promptly

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

established wellness initiatives in their own workplaces.

In response to the explosion in wellness programs, the Chamber decided to host a “Healthy Business Awards” ceremony. In addition to recognizing successful wellness initiatives, the ceremony has served as a useful forum for companies to discuss the challenges they face and to share successful techniques. The Chamber has also expanded its health promotion campaign to include lobbying the Nova Scotia government. In 2006, the Chamber’s lobbying efforts were rewarded when the provincial government implemented a 100 per cent smoking ban in public places, then the “toughest ban in Canada.”<sup>5</sup>

## Innovations

Workplace wellness has long been promoted by health organizations and government agencies. What makes the Halifax campaign unique is that it was developed and delivered by a chamber of commerce, founded to promote local commercial and industrial interests. Valerie Payn, President of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, agrees that workplace wellness “sounds a little unusual for a chamber of commerce to get involved in.”<sup>6</sup> She explains, however, that health has always been a priority at the Chamber and that the campaign works to fulfill the Chamber’s missions to “make Halifax a better place in which to live, *work* and play.”

The Chamber’s journey towards the creation of the workplace wellness campaign began in 2001 with the initiation of the Healthy Meals Program, in which all meals served at Chamber events were made to adhere to strict caloric and fat content guidelines. Pleased with the program’s success and hoping to launch a more “systematic and high level work in the area of health,” the Chamber founded the Healthcare Task Force to

<sup>5</sup> Government of Nova Scotia (13 October 2005). *Canada’s Toughest Smoke-free Legislations Introduced*. Press release. <<http://www.gov.ns.ca/news/details.asp?id=20051013006>>.

<sup>6</sup> Valerie Payn, “Workplace Health Case Study: Halifax Chamber of Commerce,” *Workplace Health 2008: The Battle for Mental Well-being*. Conference held at Toronto, April 2008.

### **Secunda Marine Service’s “Ship Shape” Program: A Success Story**

Secunda Marine Services is a Nova Scotia-based firm providing offshore vessel services to international energy companies. With 14 multi-functional, harsh weather vessels scattered across the world, the company’s 350 employees frequently remain at sea for weeks at a time. Looking to promote employee wellbeing during these extended tours of duty, Secunda sought and gained inclusion in the “HealthWorks” pilot project.

The project began with health assessments of all participating employees to gauge wellness and to identify areas of concern. Individual data was then compiled, revealing an average wellness score of 39/100. In response to this “shocking” statistic, Secunda’s president called for the creation of “Ship Shape”, a comprehensive workplace wellness program incorporating exercise, nutrition, smoking cessation and chronic disease prevention.

Over the ensuing months, on the advice of the HealthWorks partners, Secunda outfitted its ships with new exercise equipment and distributed pedometers to staff. Nutritionists were employed to advise ships’ cooks, smoking counseling programs were introduced, and “Health and Wellness Corners” were established. Health information was also disseminated via quarterly newsletters, paycheque inserts and staff meetings.

As participation in the Ship Shape program grew, its impact became increasingly evident. By 2007, time lost to injury was down 80 per cent (from 2000 levels), employee retention had risen to 97 per cent, and workers’ compensation claims had dropped to zero. Moreover, in the last three years, the company has won four awards for leadership in employee health promotion and has been named one of Atlantic Canada’s “Best Employers” by Atlantic Progress Magazine.

Source: Steve Widmeyer, Manager of Human Resources, Secunda Marine Services.

determine “what, if any, role there was for the Halifax Chamber of Commerce in healthcare.”<sup>7</sup>

The task force concluded that Nova Scotia did not face a *healthcare* crisis but rather a *health* crisis and that the Chamber should, therefore, devote its resource to promoting workplace wellness in the Halifax business community. To this end, the Chamber created the Health Action Committee, a standing committee composed of Chamber staff and members from various business sizes and industries. The Health Action Committee went on to develop the start-up toolkits for businesses, the HealthWorks project, and the Healthy Business Awards. Today, the Committee’s work has been absorbed into the Chamber’s day-to-day operations.

“Nova Scotia does not face a *healthcare* crisis, we face a *health* crisis”.

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce  
Healthcare Task Force

## Keys to Success

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce’s workplace wellness campaign has made significant inroads in recent years. The proportion of member businesses reporting workplace wellness programs, for instance, has jumped from 43 per cent in 2006 to 57 per cent in 2007. The Chamber attributes such accomplishments to several key factors:

- *Partnerships with Businesses:* Businesses have been vital to the success of the Chamber’s campaign, as they have been responsible for funding, running and promoting wellness programs in their workplaces. At the same time, however, businesses have profited from the guidance and support of the Chamber, particularly during the development stage of their programs.
- *Emphasis on the Business Case:* By highlighting the positive impacts of workplace wellness on businesses’ bottom-line, and demonstrating these

impacts through HealthWork’s three pilot projects, the Chamber has attracted greater interest in their campaign and inspired more businesses to act.

Businesses that have initiated workplace wellness programs at the encouragement of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce have also identified the following keys to their success:

- *Leadership:* Once a business appreciates the economic case for workplace wellness, an enthusiastic leader is often needed to initiate a program and ensure its sustained funding. In the case of Secunda Marine, this leader came in the form of the company’s president, who “strongly encouraged” Steve Widmeyer, Manager of Human Resources, to pursue Secunda’s involvement in the HealthWorks project.<sup>8</sup>
- *Focus:* Widmeyer acknowledges that there are many ways for a business to improve employee health. He advises businesses starting wellness programs to “not get overwhelmed”<sup>9</sup> and to, instead, select 3 or 4 key areas on which to focus their activities (e.g., exercise, nutrition, smoking cessation). By taking decisive action in a few strategic areas, businesses can concentrate their resources and produce more measurable results.
- *Patience and Persistence:* Widmeyer adds that the development of a successful workplace wellness program “takes time.” Employees will not simply “change their behaviour overnight” and businesses will inevitably make mistakes along the way.<sup>10</sup> Firms must be prepared to revisit areas where errors have been made and to experiment with new approaches.
- *Communication:* Frequent communication—via staff meetings, email exchanges, etc.—allows businesses to gather feedback from staff members. It also affords businesses an opportunity to highlight the benefits of

<sup>8</sup> Steve Widmeyer, “Ship Shape at Secunda Marine,” *Workplace Health 2008: The Battle for Mental Well-being*. Conference held at Toronto, April 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

workplace wellness and thereby encourage greater staff participation in their programs.

wellness, the company saves upwards of \$200,000.

## Impact and Benefits

### *Benefits to Employers*

Employers have much to gain from wellness programs in their workplace. Research indicates that regular participants in such programs take 22 per cent fewer sick days and 14-25 per cent fewer disability days than their non-participating counterparts.<sup>11</sup> As a result, these employees incur 34 per cent fewer costs, between insurance, benefits, workers compensation and lost productivity costs.<sup>12</sup> In eliminating productivity costs alone, Nova Scotia businesses stand to save a total of \$1.185 billion (or \$39,000 each) per year.<sup>13</sup>

Wellness programs further benefit employers by fostering workplace camaraderie, as employees strive together to meet health-related goals. They also signal to employees that their wellbeing is important to the company. These factors contribute to heightened employee morale and, by extension, lower employee turnover. Secunda Marine, for instance, has reported a 97 per cent employee retention rate over the first three years of its wellness program.<sup>14</sup>

When all variables are considered, the return on investment of workplace wellness programs is strong. Canadian studies estimate that for every dollar businesses invest in these programs, there is a \$4 to \$8 return.<sup>15</sup> Secunda Marine data lends credibility to this estimate: for an annual investment of \$30,000 to \$35,000 in workplace

### *Benefits to Employees*

The principle benefit (and driving goal) of workplace wellness programs is improved physical and mental health for participating employees. This can manifest itself in several ways, depending on the individual employee. Physical improvements can include weight loss (leading to a decreased chance of cardiovascular disease and diabetes) and increased muscle tone and flexibility (reducing the employee's chance of injury). Mental improvements can include reduced stress, greater alertness, and the reinforcement of 'healthy behaviours' (a key determinant of health). As employees begin to see the effects of their efforts, they may also experience a greater sense of self-esteem and accomplishment.

Improved health could benefit employees professionally as well. With fewer sick/injury days, enhanced mood and greater productivity at work, healthy employees may increase their prospects for career advancement.

### *Benefits to Government*

Workplace wellness programs have the potential to alleviate the burden on Nova Scotia's healthcare system and, by extension, to reduce the demands of healthcare on the provincial budget. With fewer funds tied up in healthcare, the government could invest more heavily in other important areas (e.g., education and housing). Wellness programs are also likely to increase the aggregate productivity of Nova Scotia, enhancing the economic outlook of the province.

According to Stephanie Coldwell, a Director of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, governments that want to capture these gains might explore the development and publication of "a comprehensive plan for healthcare, including human resources, capital requirement and information systems." Governments might also consider increasing investment in health promotion via incentives for employers and reduced or eliminated taxes on health-based goods and services.

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Coldwell, "The Business Case for Workplace Wellness," *Roundtable on the Socio-Economic Determinants of Health*. Conference held at Halifax, October 24 - 25, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Widmeyer, "Ship Shape at Secunda Marine," *Workplace Health 2008: The Battle for Mental Well-being*. Conference held at Toronto, April 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Coldwell, "The Business Case for Workplace Wellness," *Roundtable on the Socio-Economic Determinants of Health*. Conference held at Halifax, October 24 - 25, 2007.

## Outstanding Challenges

Time and money constraints remain significant obstacles for many businesses looking to create workplace wellness programs. Small businesses with modest budgets, in particular, find it difficult to devote resources to wellness initiatives whose returns may be further “down the road.”<sup>16</sup>

But dedicating time and money to workplace wellness initiatives does not guarantee their success. Since employers cannot mandate participation in workplace wellness programs, the onus falls on employees to engage in the programs and commit to the recommended lifestyle changes. In the words of Coldwell, “We shouldn’t fall into the trap of thinking [that] individuals are powerless to act. In fact...it is only at the individual level that change can come.”<sup>17</sup> The Chamber notes, however, that businesses can encourage individual action by reminding employees of potential health benefits and creating a facilitating environment (e.g., showers at work).

“We shouldn’t fall into the trap of thinking [that] individuals are powerless to act. In fact...it is only at the individual level that change can come”.

Stephanie Coldwell, Director, Halifax Chamber of Commerce

Once a workplace wellness program is established and elicits broad participation, the major challenge then becomes *sustaining* the program and its success. This task is often complicated by a gradual drop in employee enthusiasm for the program, as well as by changes in company leadership and staff. Companies can work to maintain program momentum through frequent check-ups and ongoing discourse with participating staff

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Payn, “Workplace Health Case Study: Halifax Chamber of Commerce,” *Workplace Health 2008: The Battle for Mental Well-being*. Conference held at Toronto, April 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Coldwell, “The Business Case for Workplace Wellness,” *Roundtable on the Socio-Economic Determinants of Health*. Conference held at Halifax, October 24 - 25, 2007.

members, as well as regular reward and recognition programs.

## Use as a Model

While the Chamber’s campaign has focused on promoting workplace wellness across the province of Nova Scotia, Payn notes that “there is a lot that you can take away that’s applicable wherever you are in Canada, in fact, perhaps anywhere you are in North America.”<sup>18</sup> This includes important lessons on how to encourage corporate investment in workplace wellness, as well as useful mechanisms for showcasing the impact of wellness programs (e.g., pilot projects and awards ceremonies).

The Chamber expects that as news of their program and its impact on the bottom-line spreads, more businesses and organizations will take up the cause of workplace wellness. In doing so, these parties will help ensure greater long-term health—and thus, prosperity—for both Nova Scotia and Canada as a whole.

<sup>18</sup> Valerie Payn, “Workplace Health Case Study: Halifax Chamber of Commerce,” *Workplace Health 2008: The Battle for Mental Well-being*. Conference held at Toronto, April 2008.

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