

## Simple math: Healthy employees equal healthy companies

June 28, 2006

A shift is taking place in today's business world towards a better work-life balance as many companies come to realize that healthy employees make for a healthy bottom line.

"Companies and corporations are more in tune now with health and wellness and to have a more productive employee they should typically be healthy, fit and eat properly," says Bruce Walker, vice-president of sales for the Ottawa Athletic Club. "With a more balanced person, they can work harder and lose less time at work due to illness or injury."

As one of the longest running health clubs in town, the Ottawa Athletic Club has been working with local businesses for more than 28 years in what Mr. Walker describes as a mutually beneficial arrangement. The club offers corporate employee memberships, lifestyle counseling, special corporate classes and health and wellness awareness seminars both on-site and in the workplace.

"For example, more than 100 of Giant Tiger's employees are members here because the company sees the value of team building and they subsidize a portion of the memberships as a perk," says Mr. Walker. "We also have recently signed up 20 employees from Grandor Lumber and we also work with IBM, the Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance and the Canada Revenue Agency, who has an office close by."

He says many people are surprised to learn that a recent study showed more than 63 per cent of the adults in Ontario are not active enough to achieve optimal health benefits. Mr. Walker says statistics like these are helping companies recognize the value an investment in employee health and fitness makes because not only is it the right thing to do, but it's becoming necessary thanks to today's couch-potato tendencies.

The idea of preventing health problems and taking a pro-active approach is fundamental at ExecHealth Inc., a local health management company that specializes in comprehensive health assessments. These assessments are designed for the busy corporate professional and are offered as an executive benefit by many companies. The punctual, unhurried assessments take four to five hours to complete and include diagnostic and laboratory testing on site, as well as a written health report and action plan. A CD containing a travel record of the client's personal medical report is also available.

While similar health management firms have operated in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and the U.S. for many years, most Ottawa-based executives weren't using this benefit or they had to travel to other cities to find these services before ExecHealth opened last May, says president **Sanjay Shah**.

He says corporations, such as Ogilvy Renault, SC Stormont and Eagle Professional Resources, as well as smaller firms, are willing to pay for their executives to be away from the office for a full half-day because a few hours of prevention will pay dividends down the road.

"We're focused on healthy people and keeping them healthy, so this service doesn't replace your family doctor and works in parallel to the OHIP system," adds Mr. Shah. "Most of our clients are Type A personalities and real go-getters, but at the end of the day when it comes time to retire or just enjoy the fruits of their labour, the only thing that really matters is their health."

Prevention is also top of mind at Ottawa's Mitel Networks where employees are encouraged to use the full-service gym for a small monthly fee and try the healthy meal alternatives at the on-site cafeteria.

Corporate health and wellness is an important topic that helps ensure employee productivity and makes life more comfortable, says Brenda DiNardo, the company's occupational health and safety nurse.

"We're lucky because our on-site gym, which is called Phased Fit and open 24/7, has everything we need from cardio to weights and we also have a full-time fitness provider who offers fitness classes from spinning and yoga to kick boxing and Tai Chi," she says.

The gym has about 400 people, or half of the firm's employees, as members. "We've also organized some five-kilometre fundraisers that are fun and encourage people to get active and participate."

As with most corporations, Mitel's employees spend a large part of their days at their computers, so Ms. DiNardo says ergonomics has become a vital component of keeping employees healthy.

"We've actually been complimented by the Workplace Safety and Compensation Board because we have so few repetitive strain reports," she points out. "When a new employee starts, I meet with them and make an assessment of how they're going to interface with their computer. So, I make sure the work station fits the employee and we'll raise or lower the desk, monitor or keyboard."

The company also has a number of other resources to ensure convenience, such as blood pressure checks, an on-site physician once a week, flu shots and a massage therapist who conducts chair massages once every two weeks.

"Health and wellness deserves a lot of attention at Mitel and all companies because let's face it, if you don't have a happy and healthy employee you're not going to get much work done," says Ms. DiNardo.