



Case Study August 2012

Wellness Metrics in Action Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec: Promoting Health

The Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ) is a provincial government corporation with approximately 3,500 employees.¹ It was established in 1978 to protect individuals against the risks associated with road use.

The SAAQ's activities include conducting road safety promotion and prevention campaigns, determining the amount of insurance contributions and managing its insurance fund, controlling access to the road network through drivers' licences and vehicle registration,

monitoring and controlling highway transportation of persons and property, and compensating road accident victims and facilitating their rehabilitation.²

HEALTH AND WELLNESS FOCUS

The SAAQ has a long history of helping its employees take responsibility for their health. Since 1986, the corporation has promoted occupational health and worked to resolve problems for employees in difficulty. Although it started small, the wellness program has progressively become more comprehensive and integrated

¹ This case study is based on information from Louise Des Trois Maisons (Team Leader, Health, SAAQ). Interview by Louise Chénier and Elyse Lamontagne, February 14, 2012.

² Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec, *About Us—Mission and Mandates*.

About This Series

The Conference Board of Canada recently published a report, *Making the Business Case for Investments in Workplace Health and Wellness*,¹ that provides small, medium-sized, and large organizations with advice on how to measure the impact of their workplace health and wellness programs. The report identifies practical, research-backed approaches to measurement, as well as a variety of tools and metrics, that employers can use to demonstrate the return on investment of their health and wellness initiatives.

Research for the report, which included an in-depth review of the literature, identified several employers that are currently evaluating the impact of wellness programs on their organizations. These leaders have invaluable information and guidance to offer to other employers that are trying to measure the impact of their own health and wellness initiatives. This briefing is the ninth in a series of case studies that profile these organizations, their wellness programs, and the methods they use to evaluate their initiatives.

1 Chénier, Hoganson, and Thorpe, *Making the Business Case for Investments in Workplace Health and Wellness*.

into the organization's strategic goals. Exhibit 1 illustrates the steps taken since 1986 to develop the comprehensive wellness program at the SAAQ.

In 2008, the SAAQ documented the main challenges motivating it to set up its health and wellness initiatives. These challenges, set out in its occupational health strategy for 2008–11, included:

- ◆ psychological health and stress;
- ◆ management practices and work design;
- ◆ lifestyle choices; and
- ◆ absenteeism, presenteeism, and turnover.³

In order to improve employees' health and wellness, the SAAQ decided to use the Take Care of Your Health program from ACTI-MENU's Workplace Health division.⁴ ACTI-MENU is a Quebec-based organization dedicated to disease prevention and health promotion. It is owned

3 Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec, *Occupational Health Strategy 2008–2011*.

4 ACTI-MENU, *ACTI-MENU Workplace Program 2008–2012*.

by three hospital foundations. Over a span of three years, the Take Care of Your Health program generated excellent results for the SAAQ, producing a marked improvement in lifestyle choices among employees who participated in all elements of the program.

These improvements included:

- ◆ a 14 per cent increase in employees' overall health score;
- ◆ a 14 per cent improvement in the number of active and very active employees;
- ◆ a 57 per cent improvement in nutritional habits;
- ◆ a 5 per cent reduction in the number of smokers; and
- ◆ a 4 per cent reduction in the number of employees who were very stressed at work.⁵

The SAAQ's health strategy aimed first to reconcile organizational productivity and employee health and wellness, and then to focus on attraction and retention.

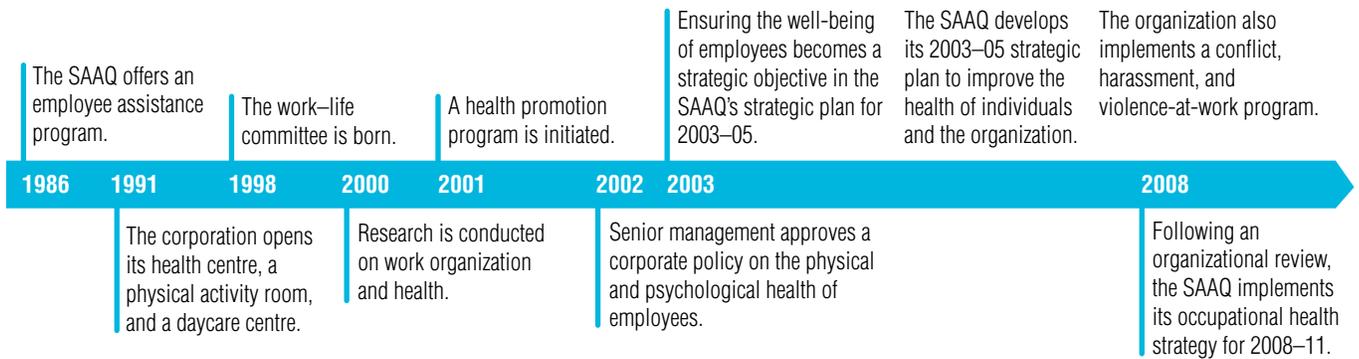
The SAAQ's occupational health strategy for 2008 to 2011 aimed to reconcile organizational productivity and employee health and wellness. The next health strategy (which will run from 2012 to 2015) will focus, among other things, on employee attraction and retention as well as the reduction and management of risks related to health, safety, and the working environment.

MEASUREMENT, EVALUATION, AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Early in the development of its wellness program, the SAAQ commissioned an analysis of the impact of its wellness initiatives on the physical and psychological health of the workforce. This research—a collaborative effort between the Quebec public service and Université Laval from 2000 to 2007—found that progress had been made at the SAAQ.⁶ Although the study did not measure financial impact, it did demonstrate that the wellness

5 Ibid.

6 Brisson, Vézina, and Bourbonnais, *Recherche intervention évaluative*.

Exhibit 1**The SAAQ Journey: Toward a More Comprehensive Workplace Wellness Program**

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

program positively affected the health of the workforce and the work climate at the corporate headquarters. The results showed that, between 2002 and 2005, there was:

- ◆ a significant decrease in psychological stress;
- ◆ an increase in social support;
- ◆ a 14 per cent increase in employee satisfaction with recognition, respect, and esteem; and
- ◆ a 9 per cent increase in employee satisfaction with the support given to them and their work.⁷

Three health indicators also improved:

- ◆ psychological stress (by 18 per cent);
- ◆ musculoskeletal problems (by 10 per cent); and
- ◆ blood pressure.⁸

CHALLENGES

Although it was able to demonstrate the physical and psychological impacts of its wellness program, the SAAQ faced a number of barriers when it attempted, with an external partner, to measure the program's financial impact. These challenges led the SAAQ to abandon the project in 2009, a year after inception.

Among the challenges were:

- ◆ the high development costs of assessment tools;
- ◆ government budget cuts;
- ◆ priority given to other projects;
- ◆ difficulties the external partner had in providing the required data;
- ◆ challenges in collecting information within a large organization with offices in many regions;
- ◆ the existence of eight distinct group insurance plans that were significantly different; and
- ◆ the fears of some stakeholders regarding the privacy and confidentiality of information.

Additionally, the wellness team within the organization did not have the knowledge needed to evaluate its programs effectively. It was also a challenge to secure internal support (from internal audit and actuarial departments, for example) or extra funding for external expertise.

Finally, few service providers evaluate corporate health and wellness programs. The SAAQ is currently trying to gain the support of its insurer to assess its benefits costs and, in turn, the costs of its wellness programs. Thus far, the SAAQ has encountered more resistance (due to privacy concerns) than support for the evaluation of its corporate wellness program.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brisson and others, *Évolution des contraintes psychosociales*.

ADVICE FOR OTHERS

Louise Des Trois Maisons, Team Leader, Health, at the SAAQ, firmly believes that it is imperative to evaluate continuously the results of health and wellness programming. Measures can include, among other things, employee participation rates in and satisfaction with the program. The program evaluation can also include the intangible or behavioural factors that provide invaluable information to organizations.

This qualitative and quantitative assessment can help to:

- ♦ take stock and identify problems and causes of illness; and
- ♦ clarify program objectives, solutions, and evaluation components.

It can also enable the wellness team to make the necessary adjustments to the wellness program.

Finally, Louise Des Trois Maisons advises other organizations to search for evaluation tools, even if these are imperfect. She suggests that wellness leaders define the main parameters of the evaluation before implementing a health and wellness program and incorporate the measurement of return on investment into the work plan. Through its experience with these programs, the team at the SAAQ has noted the importance of continuously evaluating the results of health and wellness programming and making the necessary adjustments to improve health throughout the organization.

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by Louise Chénier

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