



## Case Study August 2012

# Wellness Metrics in Action Marine Atlantic: Employee-Driven Programs

**M**arine Atlantic is a ferry transportation company that provides a vital link between the island of Newfoundland and the province of Nova Scotia.<sup>1</sup> The corporation is an integral component of Atlantic Canada's economy, particularly that of Newfoundland and Labrador, transporting goods (such as food, medical supplies, and retail products) and people (including local travellers and tourists). A federal Crown corporation with more than 1,400 employees, Marine Atlantic is mandated to provide its ferry service year-round to both passenger and commercial traffic.

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<sup>1</sup> This case study is based on information from Rhona Green (Vice-President, Human Resources, Marine Atlantic) and Marisa MacDonald (Talent Management Officer, Marine Atlantic). Interview by Crystal Hoganson and Louise Chénier, January 12, 2012.

### HEALTH AND WELLNESS FOCUS

In 1999, Marine Atlantic began promoting wellness by launching flu clinics. Then, in 2005, the human resources (HR) department decided to turn over direction of its health and wellness program to an employee-based committee. By 2008, the first wellness challenge (Medavie Blue Cross' @live@ program) had been initiated. Linked to one of the organization's goals (revitalizing the workforce by engaging, motivating, and developing employees), this program now consists of a number of components, including flu clinics, biometric screening, an employee assistance program and work-life services, and social, physical, and community-based activities. One of the main components of the @live challenge is the online health risk assessments (HRAs).

### About This Series

The Conference Board of Canada recently published a report, *Making the Business Case for Investments in Workplace Health and Wellness*,<sup>1</sup> 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 first 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*.

## MEASUREMENT, EVALUATION, AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Marine Atlantic believes that a healthier workforce positively affects the organization as a whole—it increases employee morale, provides cohesion, and increases engagement. As a result, the company is adamant about the need to evaluate the outcomes of workplace wellness programs. Data for these evaluations are collected by Marine Atlantic’s benefits plan provider, Medavie Blue Cross, which also helped to develop the metrics. Each year, Medavie Blue Cross meets with Marine Atlantic to present the overall drug claim trend analysis. Marine Atlantic then uses this information to monitor prescription drug use, measure the percentage change from the year before, and compare it with the industry average change. Marine Atlantic maintains that use of the @live program from 2006 to 2009 reduced the annual net increase in per capita employee drug claims, which fell from just over 9 per cent to 0 per cent.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, Marine Atlantic

2 John Richmond (Program Manager, Health Management Solutions, Medavie Blue Cross), e-mail to Marisa MacDonald (Talent Management Officer, Marine Atlantic), May 11, 2012.

saw an increase of 16 per cent in prescription drug claims. However, the organization is convinced that this increase was driven by non-lifestyle-related conditions that are difficult to change through a wellness program. In 2011, Marine Atlantic was happy to see that drug claims had stabilized.

Marine Atlantic also collects biometric data at various intervals during the year to determine changes in health risk levels. For example, in 2006, 18 per cent of employees were in the “high risk” category, 30 per cent were in the “medium risk” category, and 52 per cent were in the “low risk” category. By 2011, Marine Atlantic could see a shift in the health of its workforce: 13 per cent were in the high-risk category, 25 per cent were in the medium-risk category, and 63 per cent were in the low-risk category.

Finally, Marine Atlantic looks at participation rates in the health risk assessment. In 2008, fewer than 30 per cent of employees completed the health risk assessment. However, in 2011, more than 50 per cent completed the assessment, and 230 employees re-enrolled in the program from the previous year.

*Recognize what you can measure, and measure it.*

—Rhona Green, Vice-President,  
Human Resources, Marine Atlantic

## CHALLENGES

One of the greatest challenges Marine Atlantic has faced during the course of its wellness program has been assuring employees that health risk assessment information will remain confidential. Concerns over confidentiality tend to deter employees from participating in HRAs, and the company wanted as many as possible to complete the health risk assessment in order to get the best picture of the overall health of its workforce. To encourage participation in the HRAs, employees who complete the assessment are automatically entered into a draw for a prize.

Other challenges have related to keeping the wellness program “new and fresh” each year (to ensure employees remain engaged and interested) and to running a company-wide health and wellness program in an organization dispersed over 8 worksites, including a number of vessels and locations.

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**A wellness program should start slowly, focusing on engaging employees and demonstrating that the organization is truly committed to their health and wellness.**

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Quantifying success in financial terms has also been a challenge for Marine Atlantic. For example, the company has a large seasonal workforce and, when operations require employees to exceed their regular hours, employees are generally able to bank these hours, taking days off in lieu of overtime. This poses a problem for the company when trying to accurately measure absenteeism.

## ADVICE FOR OTHERS

Marine Atlantic has a number of suggestions for other organizations that are trying to implement a workplace health and wellness program. First, it suggests that a program has to be “bottom up.” It is imperative that employees buy into the program, support it, and drive it.

A wellness program also needs to be tailored to the workforce. Marine Atlantic has employees who are on a vessel for lengthy periods. These employees have limited

physical space and resources for exercise, so Marine Atlantic designed a program specifically for this workforce. For instance, the company has improved onboard gym equipment and developed additional activities customized for these employees. For example, after gaining employees’ views, Marine Atlantic developed “The Walk” challenge—a 1-kilometre walk around the vessel that includes stairs. At certain points, employees stop and do squats, lunges, and other exercises. Another initiative was the development of four exercise routines that involve stretching, yoga, and light weights and that can be safely completed in the small space of the employee cabins.

A program needs to start slowly. Marine Atlantic recommends focusing on engaging employees and demonstrating that the organization is truly committed to their health and wellness.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chénier, Louise, Crystal Hoganson, and Karla Thorpe. *Making the Business Case for Investments in Workplace Health and Wellness*. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2012.

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## Marine Atlantic: Employee-Driven Programs by Crystal Hoganson

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255 Smyth Road, Ottawa ON K1H 8M7 Canada

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The Conference Board, Inc. 845 Third Avenue, New York NY 10022-6679 USA Tel. 212-759-0900 • Fax 212-980-7014 • www.conference-board.org

The Conference Board Europe Chaussée de La Hulpe 130, Box 11, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium Tel. +32 2 675 54 05 • Fax +32 2 675 03 95

The Conference Board Asia-Pacific 2802 Admiralty Centre, Tower 1, 18 Harcourt Road, Admiralty Hong Kong SAR Tel. +852 2511 1630 • Fax +852 2869 1403

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