

# SPORT AND WORKPLACE HEALTH: THE CASE OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

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## Context

The health benefits of physical activity represent a vast literature. Promoting the relationship between activity and physical, emotional, and mental well-being is a consistent message of governments, researchers, and health promotion expert's worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004; Rosenberger, Sneh, Phipps, & Gurvitch, 2005). Health can be defined broadly, inclusive of physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, and social domains (Bennett, Cook, & Pelletier, 2003). Sport and health is an important area of focus given the relationship's role in preventing certain aspects of ill health like heart disease and cancer, and the accrual of health benefits such as controlled body weight, improved self-esteem, and the avoidance of habits such as tobacco use (Rosenberger, 2005). Of considerable importance, as well, is that the relationship of sport and health extends across the lifespan, with benefits cited for children, youth, and through adulthood (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004).

Given that work and life outside work are not separate phenomena, but rather "spillover" into one another (Danna & Griffin, 1999), the workplace is an important unit of analysis for health promotion. Individuals spend a significant amount of time at work (Ausubel & Grubler, 1995; International Labour Organization, 2004). The hours alone are substantial, but circumstances of working such as significant stress and issues of pace and pressure, are also contributors to potential ill health. It is suggested if employees and organizations value health and wellness initiatives, that these initiatives will, over the long term, serve to increase the health and productivity of employees while decreasing the health care costs currently burdening organizations (Goetzel et al, 2001). While individual employee attitudes and organizational policies more generally play an important role in workplace health, it may be that subunits of the organization play the pivotal role.

The main subunits within organizations are based on function (department) or division (collection of departments), with functional subunits comprising individuals sharing common skills working together to perform jobs, and divisional subunits consisting of entire departments sharing responsibility for producing a particular good or service (Jones, 2004). Functional subunits may be further subdivided in larger organizations, delineated by functions such as support, production, maintenance, adaptation, and management (Jones, 2004). As an example, a university has faculty members engaged in teaching (*production*); a student affairs department in *support* of student experience; physical plant for building *maintenance*; institutional analyses for knowledge acquisition related to *adapting* to trends; and offices of Vice-Presidents and Deans with members in roles of leadership and *management*.

It is possible that organizational subunits impact workplace health differentially, on a context-specific basis. It is also suggested that while subunit involvement in workplace health promotion in an organization may vary based on unique environment and organizational culture, that the emphasis on sport, physical activity, and workplace health may be uniquely championed by some subunits and individual constituents. In the example above of the University as organization, should we expect specific subunits to crusade the sport-health message, and drive the agenda of workplace health? The purpose of this study was to investigate the case of universities, sport, and workplace health on Canadian campuses in order to establish (a) the current state of workplace health promotion within the university context, (b) the existence of a link between sport and health, and (c) the subunit impetus for the promotion of the healthier workplace.

## Methods

This research used a qualitative, case study approach to examine sport and workplace health in Canadian universities. Data were collected via document analyses of web pages, university documents, mission and vision statements, and programming information for 50 Canadian universities. Follow-up, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 employees in Athletics, Recreation, and Human Resources departments of one institution. The interview guide was developed on the basis of Bennett's framework for workplace health, and was attentive to both "thematic and dynamic dimensions" of the interview process (Kvale, 1996:129).

## Results

Results indicated that an extensive range of workplace health promotion initiatives existed in Canadian universities. A database matrix defining how universities are officially and operationally articulating health-related goals resulted in the following categories: university initiatives in positioning workplace health; strategies; structure; personnel; service streams; program type(s); program delivery; logo/phrase; website navigation; campus recreation/athletics. Top performing institutions illustrated a commitment to personnel, integrative strategies, extensive service and programming, and communication of initiatives. All institutions made mention of the importance of workplace health, and the link between sport and health was uncovered in 44 (88%) of the institutions. The interview data further supported the sport-health connection in which the impetus for programming in workplace health was initiated through sport and physical activity subunits of the organization.

## Discussion/Implications

The results indicate that health is considered a multi-dimensional, holistic component perceived to be important in the organization. Concurring with Bennett et al (2003), workplace health was endorsed through health promotion programming and strategies, and multiple subunits advocated the link between sport and health in promoting overall workplace health. University athletic and recreation subunits appeared to have a significant role to play in the overall workplace health promotion. Athletic and recreation subunits embraced the importance of translating a commitment for healthy living and working to student participants. The implication is impressive. Instilling positive health habits, along with belief in the importance of health, in future members and leaders of society may have extensive positive reach.

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