Wellness and Work/Life Balance at the City of North St. Paul

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Team 4:
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Employee Development – HRIR 8034
North St. Paul – Resilient Communities Project
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Wellness and Work/Life Balance are two closely related issues that are receiving greater attention in modern organizations. The positive effects of good employee health and well-being on factors such as productivity, attendance, and overall work behavior has been well documented (Chenoweth, 2011), and it is possible to design organizational programs and policies that promote the development of healthy and balanced employees in order to maximize their potential and communicate the quality of the organization. Therefore, our group has created a number of recommendations for the City of North St. Paul that address the health and wellness of its employees and their ability to balance their work and personal lives.

**Recommendation 1: Creating a Wellness Incentive Program**

Rising health care costs is one of the most pressing current issues for many employers. In order to ensure the sustainability of employer-provided health benefits, many organizations are constructing programs that incentivize employees to take health actions that are rewarded with discounts and benefits through their insurance provider (Wells, 2012). These programs have the dual benefit of controlling the bottom-line impact of health care expenses as well as promoting a wellness-conscious workforce that is rewarded for taking an active role in their health. Our recommendation for the City of North St. Paul is to collaborate with your medical provider, PreferredOne, to create an incentive program. We will outline a number of components that may be considered for the program and discuss some additional considerations.

1. **Overall Design of the Incentive Program**

Our recommendation for the overall design of this program is to tie certain wellness activities with a number of points tracked by PreferredOne. Employees who earn enough points through various wellness activities will qualify for a discount in their annual medical premium costs. A wide variety of different activities should be available in order to earn these points. For example, North St. Paul might establish a threshold of 150 points, and employees may complete three different activities worth 50 points each to qualify.
2. Sample Wellness Activities

In this section, we will describe a variety of activities that could be considered for inclusion in the incentive program. An overview of these activities may be found in Appendix A. Many of these actions could be tracked directly through PreferredOne, though the City may also need to implement a reporting system for others.

- **Health Goals – 50 points.** The employee completes a brief assessment, evaluating their personal health and identifying areas to improve on.
- **Physical Fitness Tracking – 50 points.** On a monthly basis, the employee provides a brief record of their physical activities. If the employee has exercised at least 8 times in a given month for 6 months, they qualify for the points.
- **Biometric Screening – 50 points.** The employee undergoes a medical screening that checks such factors as Body Mass Index, blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol, and others. This provides a snapshot of the employee’s current health levels. This screening could be performed at a clinic, by the employee’s personal doctor, or at a work-site screening event.
- **Health and Wellness Classes – 50 points.** The employee attends a class or informational session relating to wellness topic such as healthy eating or stress management. These classes could be arranged using PreferredOne’s wellness resources and through outside vendors.
- **Flu Shot Pledge – 50 points.** Employees who pledge to receive a flu shot during the next flu season receive credit.
- **Fitness Event – 50 points.** Employees who participate in a major fitness event such as a 5K Walk/Run or Triathlon receive points. A major candidate could be the Tour de North St. Paul 5K.

This is by no means a complete list of the potential health activities that could be included in the program. We believe that these options are most applicable to a wide variety of employees and more specific options –such as a tobacco cessation program—could be pursued depending on resources available and employee interest.
3. Implementation and Evaluation

We recommend implementing this program very gradually. Such a program will be a major change for employees used to thinking about health insurance as a static obligation instead of an active process. Therefore, a communication plan will be essential to explain the nature of the program, the different activities employees can do, the resources and support offered by the City and PreferredOne, as well as the overall non-monetary benefits the program provides. Additionally, we recommend setting the threshold for completing the program very low and keeping the activities simple during the first few years, so as to make the transition easy for employees. Once employees are familiar with the program, the point threshold may be set higher and additional activities may be added based on employee participation and interest. Evaluation of the program will need to be performed annually to identify where employees are engaging most and where there is room to expand activity offerings.

Additionally, we have constructed the other recommendations in this report to be designed in such a way that they may be either integrated into this incentive program or established independently. While this program provides a useful framework for encouraging a variety of wellness activities, the inclusion of particular items should be based on a deeper analysis of practicality and employee interest.

4. Potential Concerns

In order to ensure that this program is legally viable, the City and PreferredOne must take care that the program in no way discriminates against any employees who may have difficulty participating due to disabilities or medical conditions. Therefore, there are several essential elements of this program that we need to stress. First, the program must reward taking action, not reaching specific accomplishments. For example, the program should reward an employee who identifies weight loss as a personal health concern rather than an employee who loses a specific weight loss target. This ensures that every person in every range of healthiness has the opportunity to participate and earn points. Additionally, a wide variety of activities must be available so that employees may choose actions that apply to them. For example, an employee who cannot walk
and therefore cannot participate in a Fitness Event such as a 5K must be provided with alternatives so that they may earn their points.

Another potential barrier is resistance from employees. This program requires commitment and action from employees to earn their rewards, and employees who are hesitant to take action may see this program as punishing them for not participating. It will be crucial, therefore, for the City to communicate the benefits and rationale for the program in order to ensure employee buy-in. Ensure that both paper and electronic versions of any documents are made available to guarantee accessibility. Making the case for the incentive program will be particularly important when presenting to the unions, but we are confident that these programs do work and that they do provide tangible benefits to both the organization and the employees.

**Recommendation 2: Utilizing the Work-site Gym**

North St. Paul has been very progressive by providing a gym on-site for employees. In order to best make use of this asset, the next step is to re-evaluate how the gym is currently being used and see if there are areas for improvement. We believe there are two different areas that North St. Paul can capitalize on in order to utilize the gym to its full potential: onsite classes and health insurance breaks.

**1. On-site Classes**

First, North St. Paul should consider offering on-site classes that make use of this gym. The gym is being used by at least one person at all hours of the day, but having the entire workplace interested in utilizing the gym should be our goal due to the mental and physical benefits for participants.

We believe offering onsite classes will encourage more employees to utilize the onsite gym (and terminate their membership to external gyms, should they have one) and encourage a healthier workplace. We believe the onsite classes will also offer an environment where employees can meet and socialize outside of their direct work projects (Noelcke 2013). Employees will be able to meet the people they work with in a fun and casual environment.
Onsite classes will be 30 minutes long and held over the lunch hour. A schedule will be maintained by an on-site wellness coach and posted in conspicuous places throughout North St. Paul offices to encourage attendance. The classes will be taught by offerings either through PreferredOne or trained employees. These employees will likely need certification to teach classes in order to mitigate risk for North St. Paul. If neither of these are an option, North St. Paul should consider finding an outside vendor to teach daily classes. If choosing to outsource, North St. Paul should look for an organization, or person, located within the North St. Paul area to encourage community involvement. Although this is an added cost, it is likely to have higher benefits associated with it.

Finally, we believe that North St. Paul should also offer Lunch n’ Learn classes. PreferredOne or employee volunteers will facilitate these classroom-based classes. These courses will be offered intermittently and cover topics like healthy eating, tobacco cessation, and understanding biometric screening results. We suggest these courses occur bi-monthly. Communications in regards to these classes will be conspicuously posted and have a spotlight in the employee newsletter (See Appendix C).

2. Health Insurance Breaks

North St. Paul should offer a tracking system about the utilization of the gym. This could be as simple as a sign-in sheet or entering an employee ID into an Excel spreadsheet for a particular day (see Appendix B). PreferredOne may also have a tracking service they can offer North St. Paul. Tracking would be done so that employees can gain monetary relief for their efforts. This monetary relief would come through health insurance breaks. Since the opening of the gym, multiple employees have ended their memberships with external gyms. By offering the health insurance breaks that they were receiving from those external gyms, employees are more willing to use the gym even more. Employees who also did not have external memberships may be more enticed by the health insurance break and are apt to use the gym because of the location. By combining the on-site gym along with the health insurance breaks, North St. Paul might even see that this helps them attract potential employees. These
breaks could be considered an element of the proposed wellness incentive program of the previous section or stand alone as a separate initiative.

3. Employer Benefits

There are also benefits for North St. Paul continuing to develop the offerings available at the on-site gym. We believe the more you put into the gym, the more you are going to get out. Healthy and fit employees will help to decrease health risks at North St. Paul. North St. Paul is also likely to have employees utilizing less sick days by maintaining a healthy lifestyle. By having healthy and fit employees, North St. Paul is likely to see a decrease in the premiums they pay for health insurance (Noelcke, 2013).

Productivity is tied to healthier employees as well. North St. Paul will see an increase in the productivity of their employees who frequently utilize the gym. Along with this boost in productivity, boosts in self-confidence and morale can occur (Shellenbarger, 2011). The boosts in productivity, self-confidence, and morale will profit North St. Paul by employees feeling more engaged in their work and wanting to improve their output.

4. Logistics

Up-keep for the onsite gym must be a priority. Maintenance is key in order for the gym to remain functional and safe. Manuals for the equipment should be reviewed to learn the guidelines for maintenance. These should be strictly followed in order to retain employee participation in the gym. This also mitigates risk for North St. Paul. By ensuring the equipment is safe and fully functional, North St. Paul should be able to avoid costly liabilities associated with the gym. Also, North St. Paul should continue to have all employees sign off on a waiver, approved by the City legal authority, that will ensure that North St. Paul is not liable should an employee hurt themselves while in the gym. Training for the equipment is also encouraged. We believe that an onsite wellness coach should spearhead this project. They should be experienced with the operation of the equipment and hold a monthly training for all new gym members. Doing this will help mitigate risk for North St. Paul and ensure that employees are using the gym properly to avoid harmful injuries.
North St. Paul should consider offering amenities that external gyms do. Supplying water, or having a drinking fountain near, will keep employees hydrated while in the gym, further mitigating risk for North St. Paul. Establish a cleaning station where employees are supplied with the proper cleaning tools to return the equipment disinfected and ready for the next employee to use. Make sure to have an automated external defibrillator (AED) onsite, in addition to first aid kits. By having these amenities, the gym will likely see an increase in use and the City will be protected from avoidable liability.

5. Evaluation

Ultimately, we believe the on-site gym is a huge benefit that North St. Paul offers. We believe that capitalizing on its potential will increase employee morale and productivity and decrease the impact of health care costs. North St. Paul should consider sending an annual survey to employees that utilize the gym to consider capitalizing on further improvements that are identified by employees. Also, the onsite lunch n’ learns will be an added bonus to the gym. Learning from both the gym and the classes will support each other and offer robust knowledge to employees about their health and wellness.

Recommendation 3: Creating a Wellness Culture

In order to successfully implement an organization-wide wellness initiative, you must first instill a culture of wellness. Doing so will further encourage employee buy-in as programs are introduced. The first step to instill a wellness culture is to support this change from the top down. The City Manager will need to fully support this change along with the heads of all the other departments. Once top management has full buy-in, the culture will begin to transform. It is also important to note that changing the culture of an organization is not a one-step process. It is a long-term process that should be completed systematically (Chenoweth 2011). It is important that the goal is to make wellness a part of the day-to-day routine for employees.

Another important aspect for the City Manager and department heads to consider is that employees should be allowed to provide ideas and feedback as programs are
introduced. Employees will be much more willing to change the culture if they have a say in the decision making process. The ideas we have outlined are only a guideline for cultural change; if employees have their own ideas then they should be fully considered.

1. Healthy Eating

A suggested first step in instilling this wellness culture is to begin introducing healthy options in the soda and vending machines. This would entail increasing the sugar free options such as bottled water, flavored water or sparkling water. Since the soda machine is provided by the Fire department, employees would still have the option to pick their favorite soda drink, but they would also have the option to pick something healthier. Displaying the non-soda options at eye level would further encourage employees to consider something healthier. If the feedback is positive over time, more healthy options could be phased in. The goal here is not to eliminate employees’ favorite options, but to provide and encourage healthy alternatives.

A healthy snack club is another viable option that is of no cost to the city of North Saint Paul. This could be implemented departmentally or by location of the employees. The interested healthy snack club participants could take turns bringing in a snack every Friday afternoon, for example. The healthy snack club will allow employees who have dietary restrictions to enjoy snacks that meet their health requirements such as vegetarian and gluten free. This is also a great way for employees to share healthy recipes with one another and engage in a conversation about healthy eating.

The next implementable change could be healthy options at work related events and meetings. If meals are brought in during a meeting, healthy options should also be available. This would mean picking restaurants that have a variety of healthy options, as well as options for gluten free and vegetarian. If treats are brought in for birthdays or any other special occasion, it should be customary to offer a healthier version to give employees an option. By offering healthy choices, you aren’t forcing employees to change; you are giving them the option to make better choices on their own.
2. Communication

In order to communicate the City’s effort towards cultural changes, a healthy tip of the month section should be added to the monthly newsletter. This section can be used to highlight a wellness tip every month (See Appendix C). The tips can be relevant to the month they come out, such as winter weather activities for winter months and ways to stay hydrated in the summer. The section can also highlight the new wellness offerings being implemented, such as who to contact to get started in the healthy snack club and some of the new healthier options in the soda machine.

These small adjustments are all important in order to change the wellness culture of North St. Paul. The ideas presented are simple, easily implementable, and have little to no cost. The changes are also unobtrusive to the employees, as the ultimate decision to make changes is up to them. By slowly introducing the healthier options, the culture in North St. Paul will evolve into a healthier environment.

Recommendation 4: Work/Life Balance Policies

Research has shown what common sense dictates regarding work/life balance. People are not machines and have interests and commitments beyond the workspace. These other interests can conflict with the work demands and lead to low morale and poor engagement. Employers who recognize these conflicts and embrace the various needs of employees gain advantages in not only engagement but also retention, improved ability to hire and higher productivity (Bourne, Wilson, Lester & Kickul, 2009).

1. Analysis

North St. Paul appears to be in a good position in regards to work life balance, especially compared to other initiatives that have been addressed by the HRIR 8034 teams. North St. Paul has a robust vacation policy that awards employees 10 days off per year, as well as an additional 12 days of sick time. North St. Paul also has 10 paid holidays with 2 floating holidays. This is in comparison to national averages of 10 paid holidays per year, 8 vacation days and 8 sick days (Van Giezen, 2013). The city has also provided leave policies for funerals and bone marrow donations. Finally, the city has also instituted policies that allow employees to take unpaid time off for school functions as well as personal leaves for up to 90 days if given approval. The different
types of leave, as well as a healthy amount of time allotted to each type, give employees the opportunity to take part in activities outside of work. This is substantiated by employees in both the retreats and conversations held by the HRIR 8034 class. There is little to no complaint from the staff or administration about spending too much time at work or employees being able to meet the needs of their personal lives.

North St. Paul also contributes to work/life balance by recognizing that employees have other interests and goals, and that the employees are part of a community. This is reflected in the city’s policy for making it easy for employees to donate to United Way through payroll deductions. Another example is the city’s reimbursement program for education. This policy is very broad and only requires employees to present their degree plan and allows for reimbursement based upon their performance in the class. This program goes beyond job-specific training and “encourages employees to be life-long learners,” which reflects the city’s recognition of employee goals beyond their current career path.

2. Ideas and Implementation

While North St. Paul is in an excellent position for Work/Life Balance, we believe there are a few improvements that can be made. The first would be to add time off for employees to use for volunteer purposes. This could be unpaid, similar to the leave offered for school functions, or paid if the city has the resources. This policy would further recognize that the employees are part of a community and have interests and skills that they could put to use helping others. Employees would have to get approval from their supervisor for the time being used and would have to indicate what volunteer work they would be doing. The city is encouraged to take this a step further by having employees share what they accomplished with their volunteer work. Employee success stories could be communicated with the newsletter and other communications. We believe this would improve relations among the employees as they could share part of their outside work interests or even use their time off as a team to help with one large project similar to what is offered by Habitat for Humanity.

A potential obstacle to this initiative would be the ambiguity in defining what would qualify as volunteer time. Could employees volunteer at their local church or
school? Are there certain activities that would not be considered volunteering? Is it possible to give paid time off based on available city resources? It is important to note that more freedom should be given to employees regarding what organization they volunteer with and the activity they pursue if they are not being compensated. However, compensating employees will lead to increased participation in volunteering. These questions along with the city’s available resources, the culture of the organization, and the input of employees will be necessary to consider when developing a volunteer leave policy. While the creation of the policy will take some effort, we believe that, overall, this will lead to improved employee engagement, better work/life balance, and improved relations with the community. To aid in the creation of this policy, multiple examples have been included in Appendix D.

When making policy changes, it is important to align all parts of the organization to reinforce behaviors and achieve desired outcomes. We are suggesting improvements in this paper to improve the wellness of employees as well. With improvements to employees’ physical health and a robust work/life balance policy, we would expect the employees to have reduced stress which would lead to reduced sick time. A popular trend in organizations is to convert vacation and sick balances into one block of time called Paid Time Off (PTO). This has several benefits to the organization and employees. PTO provides employees with greater flexibility and control of their time off. PTO rewards employees for being healthy and reduces employee absenteeism since employees will use their time for a vacation in advance and not to take a “planned” sick day on short notice. North St. Paul also encourages ethical behavior and truthfulness in the employee handbook (“Examining paid leave,” 2009). We do not wish to insinuate that employees at North St. Paul are violating the policy, but separating sick and vacation time incentivizes healthy employees to engage in dishonest behavior. By creating PTO, managers do not have to question whether an employee was “really” sick or ask for a doctor’s note. Finally, combining the policies reduces administrative effort and costs since employees only have one form of leave.

There are some difficulties associated with PTO. The first difficulty would be conflicts with the handbook and tradeoffs that would need to be made. Since sick and vacation would be counted as the same, the city would need to pay out all PTO rather
than just vacation as stated in the handbook. Employers who use PTO typically reduce the amount of carryover an employee is allowed, but employees could be resistant to this since they get to carry over 1,000 hours of sick time which would not be feasible given a PTO structure. Another complication is that employees may not manage their time off appropriately. Employees will treat PTO as vacation time and not use PTO for sick time. This leads to employees coming into work when they are sick, which can lead to customers and other employees becoming ill. Further, employees will use all their PTO for vacation and should they become ill later in the year, they will not have the leave necessary to recover from their illness.

We are not recommending a conversion to PTO at this time due to the complication of the conversion and the effects it would have on employees. We are suggesting that as changes are made to the wellness of the employees, there will be less need for sick time. Further, as employees retire and the organization gets younger, the employee population will have less use of sick time. An alternative to PTO would be to create a buyout system for sick time. Employees could convert sick time at a 2:1 ratio similar to what is used by Astron Solutions (SHRM). This allows employees to keep sick time and use it if they have a need, but also rewards those who stay healthy. To properly incent employees to engage in healthy behaviors aligning time off will lead to better outcomes. Overall, we want to draw attention to the possibility of such systems as avenues for flexibility in the future.

As previously discussed, North St. Paul has already instituted a tuition reimbursement policy. The policy is quite broad and allows for $5,000 of reimbursement annually. However, only one employee is currently taking advantage of the program. We believe that there is not enough awareness around the program which, combined with the lack of employee development, is causing an underutilization of the program. We also believe that tuition reimbursement not only ties into employee development but it could also be tied into wellness as well by allowing employees to take classes on nutrition, health and fitness.

We recommend an awareness campaign that ties in with the initial launch of the IDPs discussed in a previous report. Managers should be reminded of the program and advise employees on how they could go about getting reimbursement if their
developmental goals could be achieved through education. When IDPs are announced, it will be important to highlight the educational offerings. We recommend that reminders for the reimbursement program be sent out bi-annually prior in March and September so that any employee who is interested in returning to school would have time to get approval and enrolled in a program. Finally, tuition reimbursement needs to be tied into orientation and on-boarding so that all new employees are made aware of the program. We also recommend that the city determines what kind of gaps they are missing that could be filled with education and compile suggestions for employees to pursue those goals. For example, Jason has commented that there is little HR knowledge in the administration and that would be an area for improvement. The city has identified a need and would then communicate it out to the employees. The city can also tie the program to its wellness initiatives by allowing employees to take classes on nutrition, healthy cooking, and physical fitness that are offered by universities. These classes can be found at community colleges as well as large universities. Employees should be encouraged to share their learning with others and successful events like graduation or bringing a wellness initiative to the city council or management should be acknowledged and supported. By tying education into a variety of events and communications, employees will be made aware of the opportunity and hopefully take advantage of the offering. By creating a list of needs for the city and connecting that with IDPs, employees will have an incentive through goals to pursue educational offerings as well.

**Conclusion**

We would like to end by saying that city of North St. Paul is well on track for weaving wellness and work life balance into its employee offerings. The onsite gym, educational reimbursement program, ties to charities and community events, and robust vacation policy allow employees to come to work and be their best. Most of the hard work needed to implement these suggested activities is already in place. The suggestions offered in this report are to push the city to the next level by improving engagement, development, wellness, and community relations by increasing awareness and opportunities for employees.
## Appendix A – Sample Wellness Incentive Program Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Point Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Goals</td>
<td>Complete a brief assessment, evaluating their personal health and identifying areas for improvement.</td>
<td>50 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Fitness Tracking</td>
<td>Provides a brief record of their monthly physical activities. Exercise at least 8 times in a given month for 6 months to qualify.</td>
<td>50 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biometric Screening</td>
<td>A medical screening that checks such factors as Body Mass Index, blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol, and others.</td>
<td>50 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health and Wellness Classes</td>
<td>Attend a class or informational session relating to wellness topics such as healthy eating or stress management</td>
<td>50 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flu Shot Pledge</td>
<td>Pledge to receive a flu shot during the next flu season.</td>
<td>50 points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fitness Event</td>
<td>Participate in a major fitness event such as a 5K Walk/Run or Triathlon.</td>
<td>50 points</td>
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Appendix B – Sample Gym Sign-In Sheet

<table>
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<tr>
<th>CITY OF NORTH ST PAUL GYM SIGN IN</th>
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Healthy Tip of the Month:
It is recommended that adults have six to eight 8-ounce glasses of water per day. Have you had your daily intake today? Check out the new options in the soda machine to increase your water intake.
Appendix D – Work/Life Balance Resources

This link directs you to Vanguard's Volunteer Time Off policy and uses a Q&A to discuss how its program works.

This hyperlink directs you to a Word document created by Entrepreneurs of North Texas and provides a sample of a VTO.

References


