

Nurturing spirituality in the workplace

“Awakening in workplaces' is less about formal religion than about helping people find worth in work they do”

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Lack of job security, disillusionment and the ceaseless demand to do more with less, have triggered the collective angst of an entire workforce. To cope, many workers are looking inward for new meaning and purpose in their lives. Some employees looking for solace in these troubling times are turning to their employers, who have taken initiatives to raise spirituality in the workplace.



While companies have long addressed the physical and emotional needs of workers, they have been traditionally hesitant to deal with the spiritual side, fearing it treads too close to religion, says Vince Brewerton, executive director of the Centre for Spirituality and the Workplace at St. Mary's University in Halifax.

Salman Aslam, an IT software developer at Telus in Toronto, faces east for noon prayer in a room that has been set aside for employees.
Peter Power/The Globe and Mail

In fact, spirituality means different things to different people, but in the workplace it's less about formal religion and more about helping people to explore how they can find worth in the work they do and lead a more meaningful life aligned with their values, says Linda Lewis-Daly, principal of workplace wellness consultancy Lewis-Daly and Associates in Toronto.

In the last six months, she says, she's seen an uptick in requests from companies to find ways to make spiritually helpful moves, such as bringing programs on site for meditation, yoga and tai chi.

“There is an awakening in workplaces,” she says.

“The turbulence that the economic times have created has required that they go deeper because people are searching for meaning.”

“There's a huge hunger among workers to get in touch with what they honour in their lives, and to strengthen the connection between who they are and what they do,” Mr. Brewerton says.

Those companies taking a holistic approach to the spirit are finding that soothing employees' collective angst and helping them feel connected to a larger community can boost satisfaction, loyalty, resiliency, retention and recruitment, and, ultimately, the company's sustainability, Ms. Lewis-Daly says.

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CLOSE-UP

TELUS CORP.

Employees: 35,000

Initiatives: Telus takes a mind, body and spirit approach when it comes to employee wellness, says Andrea Goertz, vice-president of enterprise services and strategic initiatives in Calgary.

That includes providing quiet rooms where employees can slip away and decompress, meditate or pray, offering seminars on topics such as nutrition, parenting and work/life balance, and stocking its lending library with books and CDs on spirituality. Popular on-site fitness classes include meditative pursuits, like yoga and tai chi.

Every employee gets three personal days off a year to use at their discretion, and, if they're feeling particularly frazzled, can work from home, Ms. Goertz adds.

Participation: Almost all of Telus's employees use at least one program during the year. As the economy has tumbled, there's been a definite uptick in the number of staff using the programs, Ms. Goertz says.

Benefits: While it's hard to quantify all of the company's spirituality initiatives, it's clear from growing employee participation rates and the company's annual employee engagement surveys that the programs are contributing to a steady increase in employee engagement as well as reduced absenteeism, Ms. Goertz says.

BANK OF MONTREAL

Employees : 37,000

Initiatives: All BMO offices in major urban centres have "multipurpose" rooms, where employees can spend quiet time or pray. And at the branch level, managers will set aside office space to allow for spiritual reflection, says Yasmin Meralli, vice-president of diversity and workplace equity in Toronto.

Recognizing that many staff find value in giving back to both local and global communities, BMO also hosts an annual on-site volunteer day, encouraging employees to learn about volunteering options, and allows employees time off with pay to do volunteer work.

To increase awareness and advocate for diversity and inclusiveness, the firm has established 25 employee-driven diversity and affinity councils across the country. It also promotes open dialogue by coaching managers on how to talk with and support employees who may be stressed, worried or overwhelmed, because of issues inside or outside the workplace.

Participation: While the company doesn't track the use of its multipurpose rooms, Ms. Meralli says that with more of a focus on reflection in today's troubled times, rooms are used regularly.

Benefits: "People are starting to step back and ask themselves, 'What's important to me?'" Employers who recognize and support that and allow for that will be the companies of choice for talented people," Ms. Meralli says. Despite a rough year, both the firm's overall employee engagement numbers and its diversity index, which measures the bank's success at creating a workplace that is inclusive, supportive and equitable, increased last year. That's due in part to its efforts to help staff manage their lives more effectively, she says.

RBC DEXIA

Employees: 2,000

Initiatives: On each of the 10 floors of the company's new Toronto office building, there's an "oasis room," with enclosed seating and tables for employee quiet time. RBC Dexia has also partnered with GoodLife Fitness to offer lunch-and-learn sessions on nutrition and naturopathy, as well as yoga classes. In January, the company plans to add facilitated meditation classes. While currently available only to Toronto staff, the program is now being rolled out across the country, says Kristina Albion, manager of pension and benefits, who is spearheading the program.

Participation: The company has just run its pilot yoga class with 20 participants. There was a waiting list and the next session will offer two classes, says Ms. Albion, who hopes to add more programs in the New Year. "We're just taking baby steps."

Benefits: "It's something that we can offer our employees just so they feel better at work – what we can do as an employer to help out," Ms. Albion says. "I take part and I feel refreshed and re-energized when I get back to my desk. It's an outlet and I am hoping employees benefit from it."

FOUR EASY WAYS TO BRING SPIRITUALITY TO THE WORKPLACE

- Give people a "serenity" space, a physical place to get away from the noise of the workplace.
- Provide opportunities for employees to volunteer in their community.
- Offer staff meditative activities, such as massage or yoga, which can help ease stress and quiet the mind.
- Allow people to have a voice through feedback or conversations to let them feel more authentic and honour their value.

Source: Linda-Lewis Daly

BY THE NUMBERS

- 53 - Percentage of Canadians who say they participate in a spiritual practice, such as prayer or meditation, at least monthly
- 32 - Percentage of Canadians who attend religious services at least once a month
- 60 - Percentage of Canadians who feel they are moderately or highly religious

Source: Statistics Canada 2006