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Acknowledging the unique needs of your organization's aging workforce through targeted programs that encourage physical activity and chronic disease prevention can positively affect your benefit costs and productivity. The authors examine successful well-being strategies to engage employees, potentially leading to significant reductions in health risks.



# NAVIGATING THE AGE WAVE:

## Reimagining Workplace Well-Being for Our Aging Workforce

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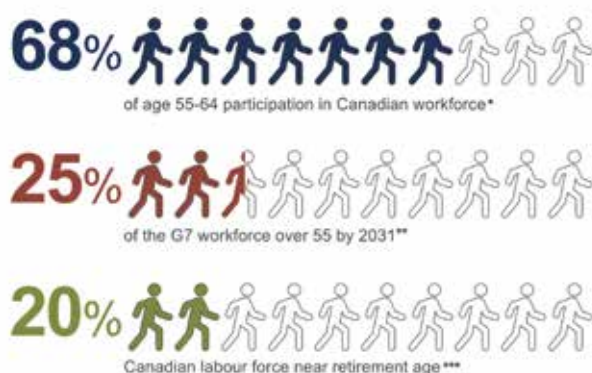
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**A**cross the workforce, many employees are rewriting the script for retirement. Instead of sailing into retirement, they are charting a different course. They are choosing to stay on the job, driven by passion, experience and the need to keep earning. Has your workplace wellness strategy evolved to navigate this wave of change?

Our Canadian population age distribution is growing increasingly unbalanced, with the number of older adults rising six times faster than the number of children being born. At the same time, we're not only living longer, we are also staying in the workforce longer. In 1996, workers aged 55 and older accounted for just 10% of our workforce; by 2023, this had more than doubled (22%).<sup>1</sup> By 2031, it is estimated that 25% of workers in all the G7 countries will be over 55.<sup>2</sup>

**FIGURE 1**

### Labour Force Characteristics



Sources: \*Statistics Canada, \*\*Bain & Company, \*\*\*Statistics Canada.

Although one in five Canadians is now close to retirement age,<sup>3</sup> as of 2023, nearly 70% of those aged 55 to 64 are still working.<sup>4</sup> More than one in four (28%) between ages 65 and 69 are now in the workforce, a significant increase from one in seven two decades ago.<sup>5</sup>

### Why Are We Working Longer?

For many, it's a personal choice. The removal of mandatory retirement over a decade ago offers more flexibility in choosing when to retire, especially when living longer means 65 does not seem as "old" today.

For many more Canadians, it's a necessity. Factors such as inflation, interest rates and market volatility, coupled with

fewer defined-benefit pension plans, are making retirement less financially viable. A 2023 survey found nearly half of respondents had not set aside money for retirement the previous year, and three-quarters of those aged 55 to 64 had less than \$100,000 in savings.<sup>6</sup>

### Employer Hesitancy

Older workers seem a valuable talent solution when our pool of younger workers is shrinking. However, many employers are concerned about the rising costs of benefits and absence associated with an aging workforce. A key driver is the prevalence of chronic disease as we age.

### The Challenge

In *Benefits Canada's* annual survey of plan members, more than half have been diagnosed with a chronic condition.<sup>7</sup> Insurers report that chronic disease drug costs have increased nearly 25% since 2019,<sup>8</sup> accounting for two-thirds of total spend.<sup>9</sup>

*Statistics Canada* data shows the incidence of arthritis and high blood pressure (chronic conditions driving health, drug and disability costs) doubles from ages 35-49 to 50-64, and then again for ages 65+.<sup>10</sup> Over the past five years, the cost per claimant for diabetes has increased by 50% while the number of claimants has doubled, making it the top drug category in terms of the amount paid.<sup>11</sup> The impact on health and disability costs is compounded given that employees with chronic conditions (such as arthritis, obesity or chronic pain) are significantly more likely to report poor mental health.<sup>12</sup>

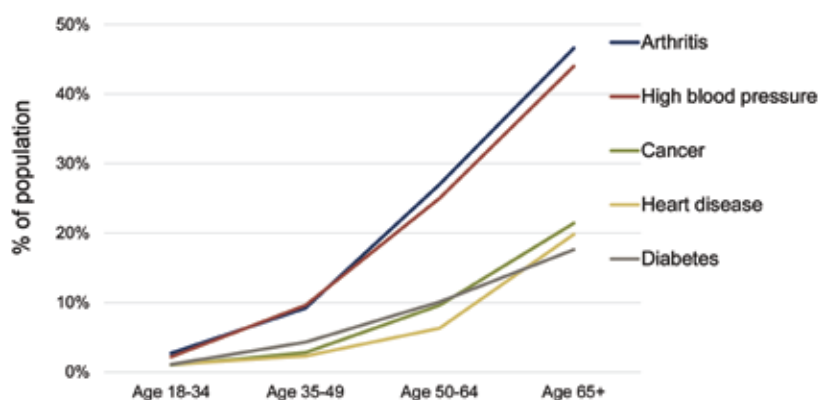
### The Good News

While chronic diseases are among the most common and costly health conditions, they are also among the most preventable. Focusing on the modifiable risk factors contributing to chronic disease provides an evidence-based framework for prevention and improving overall health. Proactive and strategic employers can find a huge opportunity in targeted well-being programs that reach younger, midlife and older employees across the lifespan.

### Chronic Disease Prevention

Many workplace well-being programs encourage healthier lifestyle choices, such as reducing tobacco use, promoting a healthy diet and limiting alcohol consumption. However, focusing on employees' physical activity levels is one of the

FIGURE 2

**Chronic Conditions Increasing With Age<sup>10</sup>**

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2020 and 2021.

most impactful ways to promote better health.

The *Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines* (150 minutes of physical activity, bone and muscle strengthening twice weekly, and reducing sitting time) provide an evidence-based strategy to significantly lower the risk of chronic diseases.<sup>13</sup> Studies have also shown that regular exercise improves bone health, cognition and mental health.

“Activity snacks” are one simple yet effective and sustainable tactic to encourage employees to move more: integrating small amounts of movement throughout the day with short walks, taking the stairs or even doing squats while waiting for the microwave.

An age-inclusive physical activity strategy will consider your midlife and older workers’ unique needs, particularly related to bone health. At least one in three women and one in five men will break a bone due to osteoporosis in their lifetime. Fragility fractures (a fracture from a fall at a standing height or less) represent 80% of all fractures in

menopausal women over the age of 50. Fractures from osteoporosis are more common than heart attack, stroke and breast cancer combined.<sup>14</sup>

### Strategies Before Programs

Although chronic disease prevention efforts provide significant benefits, many wellness programs are still defined by a calendar of events and a library of wellness apps. While these may be popular among your employees, measuring their effectiveness and impact on behaviour change and disease prevention is challenging.

Achieving quantifiable outcomes requires more than programs and activities. It requires an evidence-based well-being strategy to identify and measure current health risks and costs to design a targeted plan and track results.

Building this foundation starts with choosing a wellness partner to deliver insights into your employees’ demographics, current health conditions and chronic disease risk factors. Surveying your employees can uncover their motivations and barriers to healthier lifestyles (at home and in the workplace). This holistic view of employee health and habits can reveal which conditions and health risks to focus on first and most.

Then, use this rich data to critically examine which elements of your current wellness program will drive high-impact behaviour change, and which elements are “nice to have” or “checkmarks.”

A targeted and outcome-focused well-being program should be inclusive and accessible to all employees, regardless of their fitness level or age group. For example, it should include education on how nutrition, activity and sleep needs change with age; maintaining physical and cognitive strength throughout the lifespan; and the importance of early health risk detection and disease prevention.

### Takeaways

- With the massive shift in age demographics and trend toward later retirement, Canada’s population age distribution is growing increasingly unbalanced.
- Benefits and well-being programs must adapt to address the unique health needs of midlife and older employees.
- Chronic disease is a key driver of benefit and absence costs, increasing as the workforce ages. Fortunately, chronic diseases are also largely preventable through targeted well-being programs.
- Adopting an age-friendly and inclusive lens in designing your well-being program will draw in those employees who will benefit most.
- While workplace aging issues can be complex, small changes can build to a lasting impact.

## BIOS

**Valerie Travis** is the founder of Bespoke Benefit Solutions, an independent Canadian firm specializing in tailored and outcome-driven employee benefits consulting for unique organizations. For over 25 years, Travis has guided employers to sustainable benefits strategies that align with who they are—or aspire to be—in supporting employee well-being.



**Kate Milne** is a healthy aging specialist, health promoter, clinical exercise physiologist (CEP) and workplace health consultant. Milne has co-authored multiple peer-reviewed publications that analyze simple lifestyle strategies for enhancing the well-being of women in midlife and beyond. She helps organizations implement an age-friendly approach to help support, retain and attract midlife and older female talent.



While utilization is important, measuring progress toward health targets (against your baseline data) will quantify the impact. This could include changes in disability and absence rates, health claims, overall benefit costs, health risk assessments and biometric screenings.

These metrics can form a compelling case for both return on investment and the broader value of investment. This includes the positive effect on morale and culture as well as on talent attraction and retention. These metrics will also show the path forward. A well-designed well-being strategy is iterative, focusing on what works, adjusting and identifying the next health priorities to address.

## Conclusion

Navigating this wave of demographic change demands a proactive and evidence-based approach to workplace well-being. Recognizing the unique needs of your aging workforce within targeted programs that promote physical activity and chronic disease prevention can positively impact your benefit costs and productivity.

Through engagement, evaluation and continuous improvement, your organization can chart a course toward a more healthy, resilient and inclusive workforce that thrives, contributes and leads across all stages of life. 📌

## Deliver and Engage

The success of any well-being strategy depends on reaching the employees you need to nudge most, where education and healthy behaviour change could drive the most significant health-risk reduction. This takes engaging and relatable communication, leaders championing your program, and incentives to drive participation and spark action. The most effective incentives answer the question, “What will excite and motivate our employees who lead hectic lives with little physical activity or self-care built in today?”

Regular evaluation is essential to keeping your well-being program accountable and relevant as well as knowing how to evolve. Surveying employees to assess their appreciation and perceived value of your programs (as well as any barriers to participation) can reveal opportunities to increase engagement through awareness and access.

## Endnotes

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