

what's working

well-being that works for everyone



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At the City of Abbotsford, connection isn't just an HR initiative—It's woven into the culture. From coffee chats, lunch-hour hockey tournaments and yoga sessions to seasonally themed staff crafts and contests, the city's wellness efforts reflect a simple philosophy: When employees feel seen and supported, engagement follows naturally.

"Our team represents a wide spectrum of talent, including operators, labourers, firefighters, engineers, planners, lawyers, accountants, lifeguards and more," said Alison Martens, senior people development manager, who leads the learning and development department for the city. "That variety is incredible, but it also means people work in very different environments. Our programs are designed to bridge those gaps."

Championed by the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) volunteer staff committee, the city began background research in 2022 to update its diversity and inclusion strategy. This included connecting with comparable municipalities to understand their processes, models, and other commonly used connection and engagement approaches. In 2024, the city codified those insights into its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2026 plan, which focuses not only on attracting a talented and diverse workforce but also on retaining and developing a corporate culture that reflects the community and citizens it serves. This work was also supported by feedback received through the City of Abbotsford's annual employee engagement survey and focus group sessions, as well as the directions found in the city's Retention Strategy and Safety Culture Strategy. Through these combined strategic efforts, the City of Abbotsford supports staff engagement through multiple channels and approaches.

Martens noted that although staff share a common goal of serving and supporting the Abbotsford community, the city's varied roles and work environments mean many departments rarely interact directly with one another. These

limited touchpoints constrained information sharing but also presented opportunities: chances for employees to gain a deeper understanding of each other's work and challenges, as well as to uncover new solutions that might otherwise remain hidden.

Strengthening Connections

To strengthen cross-departmental collaboration, Abbotsford's Volunteer Wellness Team Collective has been instrumental. Formed as a grassroots, staff-led group, the Collective takes a holistic view of well-being—physical, social and emotional—and organizes activities that bring people together across departments. Each October, the collective hosts an annual inter-departmental pumpkin carving contest. This year, it drew more than 30 entries and nearly 200 votes. "It's one of those small lunch-hour traditions that helps to build belonging and community," Martens said. "Not to mention a healthy and good-hearted competitive spirit between departments!"

Other initiatives focus on fostering connections across the city's roughly 1,000 employees. Twice a year, the Coffee Chat Program pairs participants with colleagues they might not otherwise meet. Each duo has a simple task: share a cup of coffee during their break, snap a selfie and make a connection. Some rounds have even included themes—for example, matching employees who speak the same first or second language. "It's a fun, low-barrier way to build relationships," said Martens. "And it reminds people we're part of something larger than our own teams."

For those who enjoy a more spirited, friendly competition, the Thunderbird Cup offers a lunch-time round-robin hockey tournament complete with a trophy awarded to a new team each year. It's a lighthearted but competitive event that underscores a deeper truth about Abbotsford's approach to wellness: Programs work best when they feel authentic, inclusive and employee-driven.

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These initiatives only happen because volunteer representatives from multiple departments come together to organize and implement them.

Building a Culture of Everyday Leadership

That philosophy also extends to leadership development and engagement. The city offers two leadership programs—one in partnership with the Justice Institute of British Columbia and another developed internally—as well as an open corporate training calendar covering everything from technical skills to team building.

Recognizing the importance of connection and workplace friendships from a learning and development perspective, the city launched “Manager Mornings” in 2024. Now at the end of its second year, the program sees managers coming together to share strategies, discuss master plans and learn about initiatives happening across departments—many of which staff may not encounter in their day-to-day work but still influence their roles.

Martens explained, “When the Province of BC changed building requirements to allow more units per lot, it significantly affected our water, sewer and road teams in terms of capacity planning. However, because these changes aren’t directly tied to their daily responsibilities, staff may not always hear about them right away. ‘Manager Mornings’ creates space for managers to connect, talk about their experiences and stay informed about broader strategies and corporate initiatives that may impact their work.”

“We see leadership and wellness as interconnected,” Martens explained. “People who feel empowered and supported are more engaged, and that has ripple effects across the organization.”

Future-Ready Wellness

The city’s next step is to take a more strategic approach. A new well-being strategy is being developed to better define what wellness means for Abbotsford’s diverse, multi-generational workforce.

“We’re collecting data and feedback to understand what matters most to our people,” said Martens. “For some, well-

ness might mean access to mental health resources. For others, it’s flexibility or community. There’s no one-size-fits-all.” In addition, the city’s total compensation package includes on-site parking for all staff as well as electric vehicle charging stations and reserved carpool spaces. In addition, a Get Active Pass provides staff with cost-reduced access to the Abbotsford Recreation Centre and Matsqui Recreation Centre, encouraging a healthy, active lifestyle.

Martens explained that participation rates across all of these programs have become one of the best indicators of success. “When employees notice if a program doesn’t happen—that’s impact,” Martens said. Coffee Chats fill up quickly, and the wellness team’s events consistently draw strong engagement. Leadership buy-in has also been key, with senior leaders modelling participation and sharing their own experiences in DEI and wellness sessions. Martens noted that the city’s employee benefit programs and employee and family assistance programs also continue to evolve. “It used to be that you simply called a counsellor and talked. Now we have online platforms, apps and many other components. With technology advancing and generational expectations shifting, things are moving very quickly,” Martens said.

Small Beginnings, Powerful Results

Abbotsford’s approach remains refreshingly down-to-earth and cost conscious. “Start small,” Martens advised other organizations. “Quick wins, like a kudos board or a coffee chat, can make a big difference. And know your people. Understand how they want to be recognized and what makes them feel valued.”

For Abbotsford, that formula is working. In 2025, the city was recognized as an Employer of Choice by the *Canadian HR Reporter* in the 500+category, a national recognition that highlights organizations excelling in attracting, developing and retaining employees, with a strong emphasis on workplace flexibility, employee well-being and career development. At the City of Abbotsford, wellness isn’t a standalone program; it’s part of how employees connect, celebrate and grow—one coffee, one conversation and one pumpkin at a time.