



### Dalhousie University uses Total Health Index™ (THI) to help build the business case for health and wellness

#### ORGANIZATION

Dalhousie University

#### CHALLENGE

To conduct an employee survey that would go beyond engagement to provide data on total health, identify priorities, and enable measurement.

#### SOLUTION

Though Dalhousie University had been conducting an employee engagement survey for several years, analysis did not help pinpoint where HR efforts should be focused to improve engagement or any other measures. Dalhousie opted to survey employees using Morneau Shepell's Total Health Index™ (THI) to assess overall total health (including engagement, stress, and coping skills) and identify HR priorities.

#### RESULTS

Feedback from the survey provided some surprising results. Issues that had previously not even been a concern became priorities. The fact that areas of focus were identified and outcomes would be measured simplified the planning and budgeting process. There is now a greater willingness and openness on the part of leadership to put resources into HR initiatives that will have a positive impact on employees and the university.

#### CHALLENGE

Dalhousie University (Dalhousie), with campuses in Halifax and Truro, Nova Scotia, has over 18,000 students and approximately 3,600 faculty and staff. Since 2009 Dalhousie has partnered with an external provider to conduct a bi-annual employee engagement survey. While the survey produced a lot of data, there was a lack of clarity around areas of focus to improve engagement and no lens into the total health risks of the workforce.

Dalhousie's HR team looked for an alternative study that would enable it to:

- Obtain credible evidence and measures to help identify priorities and target resources in ways that would have the greatest impact on outcomes for the university — both at the institutional level and by department — and especially for employees
- Provide a comprehensive view of the risks and opportunities to achieving improved "Total Health" for both the workforce and the university
- Gauge not only employee engagement metrics but also opportunities and risks that impact engagement as well as total health and productivity
- Provide clarity around results in order to determine not only if progress was being made, but what the improvement level was and how this impacted other factors related to employment.

## SOLUTION

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In 2015, Dalhousie opted to use Morneau Shepell's Total Health Index (THI) survey tool rather than its previous employee engagement survey. While THI certainly asks questions about employee engagement, it takes a more holistic approach by gathering employee feedback on workplace stress, coping skills, health opportunities, and risks. The premise behind THI is that both employer and employees have an important role to play in facilitating "total" health, which drives both engagement and productivity. Employees who are healthy, engaged and productive provide greater benefit at lower cost. THI provides more complete employee health data, helps create a shared accountability with employees for the state of their health, and enables organizations to turn this data into actionable insights, which ensures they receive an optimal return on investment for their expenditure on employee health programs.

Making the switch to THI was not without its challenges. There was considerable testing of the survey questions in an academic environment and it was essential that the research underpinnings be well rooted in science. Ultimately, THI was approved by the university's internal review board.

In addition, because the THI questions were more personal in nature than those on the previous engagement survey, some employees were reluctant to respond. And, while Dalhousie had more than 1,600 individuals initiate the survey and almost 1,400 complete it, they expect participation to be higher in the next cycle, now that employees better understand THI and how the aggregate data is used to inform actions and initiatives. One feature that may also persuade more employees to take part is the fact that each employee receives immediate, personal feedback upon completion of the survey regarding any areas of concern, along with suggestions to improve health. The employee report is an important aspect of THI. Employers cannot do all the work; total health will happen only through a partnership, with shared accountability between employees and employers.

## RESULTS

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Dalhousie's 2015 THI survey results have provided evidence-based benchmarks about the health risks of its population that drive productivity and engagement. By acting swiftly on the survey results and making changes to policies and programs — both at the institutional and faculty/department levels — Dalhousie has sent a clear message that it is an institution that cares deeply about its people and wants to create an environment where people have an opportunity to be at their best at work, home, and in their communities.

With a more consolidated view of its data, Dalhousie has been able to make better informed resource allocations. Leader engagement has increased through the process, employees are involved in the health conversation, and the legitimacy of wellness in the workplace has been established. Dalhousie is currently working closely with its various faculties and departments by using key findings from the research to evolve its HR strategy and next steps.

*"The THI results were a turning point for us. We finally understood the numbers and recognized our challenges. As a result, we have been able to develop a wellness strategy that will have impact, improving the health, productivity and engagement of our employees."*

Janice MacInnis  
Manager, Organizational Health, Human Resources,  
Dalhousie University

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