

Worksite wellness for the health of it

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Thinking about expanding your programming to include worksite wellness? Read on for a perspective into this growing industry.

During the last two decades, we have been bombarded with health and wellness information, from the birth of step aerobics to nutritional labels on all edible products. Health, wellness, prevention and promotion are words we've come to hear every day, and interchangeably. But what do they really mean? Individually, their definitions vary greatly depending on one's perspective, but put together they mean taking an individual or organization to a higher level of well-being.

Someone once said, "Prevention is so much better than healing because it saves the labor of being sick." With many of the leading contemporary diseases (i.e., high blood pressure, ulcers, cerebral strokes and congestive heart failure), it is better to avoid illness and injuries not only to avert pain and suffering, but because it may be impossible to repair their damages. These damages can be costly to business, as well as individuals and society. So how does one go about prevention and health promotion as a means of battling the cost of illness and injury?

Approaching health promotion

Health promotion can be approached from two directions. The first direction is to decrease the external sources of risk to the individual. For example, eliminating carcinogens from the environment, providing adequate safety features on the job, and wearing protective equipment help to lessen external sources of risk. This approach does not require individuals to recognize risks and usually does not require the employee to behave differently.

The second direction is on the individual level. The employee must change his/her own behavior in relation to risk factors. Smoking cessation, maintaining physical fitness, back care and stress reduction are examples of risk elimination on an individual basis. In each of these areas, the specific goal of health promotion is to help people learn and to become motivated to make decisions, change their behavior, break bad habits and develop ideas, all on a scale great enough to have both immediate and long-term effects.

The worksite is one of the best places to combat the costs of illness and injury. Americans spend more time working than doing any other activity, except sleeping. It's the ideal place to reach a large group of people, and colleagues can provide the social support necessary for individuals to make healthful lifestyle choices.³ For example, if everyone in the department is planning to participate in the 10K Walk for Health Benefit, chances are those who never considered participating in such an event would do so because of peer pressure and obligation. As a result, those who had never exercised a day in their lives may discover walking to be an enjoyable form of physical activity.

The worksite is also a logical location from a business perspective. *Investing in Employee Health*, a book that supports employee health in the workplace, poses a situation: What would you think if your organization's vice-president approved the purchase of a complex and expensive piece of equipment, but failed to provide for periodic servicing and preventive maintenance? You'd probably raise serious questions about his/her foresight.

Given the cost of today's equipment, even for standard office equipment, it is essential to commit resources to regular servicing. Only through periodic maintenance is it possible to maximize the output and lifetime of the equipment, and minimize the downtime when it fails. Failure to provide preventive maintenance for physical equipment can lead to catastrophe.

The same can happen with people. Employees can become run down or "broken" when there isn't preventive maintenance and, most often, a "broken" employee is much more costly to replace than a broken machine or a heavy-duty stapler. Why is it, then, that so many businesses fail to practice preventive maintenance for their employees?

There are a number of reasons why corporations do not offer health promotion activities: 1) Lack of staffing or budget resources; 2) Concern over implementation costs; 3) Unconvinced about cost savings; 4) Lack of ability to quantify results; and 5) Concern about making activities available to all employees.³ The majority of the reasons come down to money. Since money is the key issue, let's consider how much an unhealthy employee costs.

The costs of illness

Illness and injury produce two kinds of costs to organizations -- direct costs and indirect costs.

Direct costs could include:

- * salary to the absent employee
- * medical expenses
- * rehabilitation costs
- * worker compensation awards
- * survivor benefits (in the case of death).

Indirect costs of an unhealthy employee to an organization may include:

- * distress to others and disorganization during absence
- * costs of temporary replacement or overtime pay to cover the missing employee's responsibilities
- * training of temporary replacements
- * retraining of the employee upon return to work
- * recruiting, selecting and hiring a permanent replacement when the employee goes on permanent disability or dies
- * administrative costs associated with the above.²

Unhealthy employees, due to illness and injury, upset the corporate setting, as well as rob employers of dollars and lost productivity. So who is paying the bill?

In essence, everyone pays one way or another. General Motors says it pays \$3.4 billion annually for health care, which amounts to \$929 for every vehicle that comes off the assembly line.

Prevention costs are now being proven to be more economical than illness and injury costs. DuPont, a diversified chemical company, found that employees with any of the seven health risks (smoking, obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, excessive alcohol use, lack of exercise and avoidance of safety belts) were absent from work 10 percent to 32 percent more than employees not at risk. However, once DuPont installed health promotion programs at their 41 industrial sites, it noticed a decrease of 14 percent in absenteeism compared with a slight decline (5.8 percent) at the 19 sites where such programs were not offered.³

With medical costs per employee at \$6,000, nearly twice the national average, Union Pacific Railroad introduced the concept of personal health management to its 28,000 employees. Beginning with a simple medical self-care initiative at a yearly cost of \$50, the program achieved a net savings of \$1.26 million. Employees in the treatment group lowered their risk for high blood pressure (45 percent) and high cholesterol (34 percent); others moved out of the at-risk range for weight problems (30 percent); and 21 percent stopped smoking.³ Many other companies share similar success stories.

In order to make health promotion successful and to bring its impact to full potential, it must be an integral component in the overall business strategy.¹ As with other operations of the organization, health promotion must be part of the long-range strategic plan. The development of human capital is an ongoing process. The human body is a wonderful machine, as long as it is regularly maintained and serviced. Once others learn to appreciate human potential and generate momentum toward that potential, everyone can begin to reap the benefits. Health promotion must be perceived as a critical element and driving force in making change happen.

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