

## **Health and Wellness Programs**

### **What Is a Health Promotion and Wellness Program?**

A health and wellness program is designed to promote and support employee health and wellness through education and awareness programs primarily based at the worksite. The program is a win-win in that employees benefit from learning and staying well, and the employer has increased loyalty and less absenteeism.

As employers become more aware of the importance of employee health on productivity, there is increased interest in encouraging and supporting healthy lifestyle choices. Employer costs for these programs can rapidly be offset with fewer work-related injuries, improved attendance, less turnover, and increased morale.

### **Types of Programs**

#### ***Brown Bag Seminars***

The simplest program is one where the employer arranges to have quarterly seminars during lunchtime on topics such as stress management, nutrition, and exercise. A local mental health clinic, hospital, or the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) may provide these. They are usually arranged through Human Resources, the medical department, or the safety manager. Participation is voluntary.

Before selecting topics for seminars, it is a good idea to do some type of employee polling to see what topics people are interested in. This can be as simple as an e-mail to all staff asking for suggestions or as formal as having an outside group come in to conduct interviews and design a complete program.

#### ***Health Risk Assessments***

An employer can provide a comprehensive Health Risk Assessment (HRA) for employees. This is usually done in conjunction with a local hospital or community medical clinic. An HRA is a detailed questionnaire that covers all areas of behavior (seatbelt use, smoking, alcohol use, frequency of exercise, family history of disease and illness, etc.). It also may include cholesterol and blood sugar screening.

Once the HRA is scored, the results are shared with employees along with suggestions for changes. The employer is able to get aggregate statistics that will show trends that he or she may want to address.

For example, if a lot of people have high blood pressure, the employer may consider an educational seminar, biweekly onsite blood pressure readings, and low-salt, low-fat selections in the cafeteria or snack machines.

If there is a “trend” toward not wearing seatbelts, perhaps having the State police come in and give a presentation about what happens in an accident when you don’t have a seatbelt on would change some behavior.

### ***Smoking Cessation Programs***

Smoking cessation programs are very popular. Often, the local chapter of the [American Cancer Society](#) or [American Lung Association](#) will come in to run a group. Another option is for employees to attend a group in the community. Costs for the group can be offset by the employer after employees complete the program.

### ***Stress Management***

Stress is a major area of concern for employers. Stressed out workers get sick more often, make more errors, and generally do not perform up to capacity. There are many ways to address stress, and the beauty of these ideas is that everyone can benefit from them.

Certainly, stress management seminars are educational and informative and should be included in any program. However, there are other things you can offer as well, some at very little cost to you:

- Strike a deal with your local YMCA or fitness center to give your employees and their family members discounts on memberships.
- Do the same with a local sports equipment store so that employees can get a discount.
- Bring in an instructor to teach a few classes on meditation, yoga, or deep relaxation.
- Set up a lending library with tapes and books on topics like how to communicate effectively, how to talk with your kids about drugs and alcohol, how to keep your relationship alive, how to manage stress, etc.
- If you have a cafeteria, offer some “healthy choice” selections daily, at a discount if possible.
- Bring in a nutritionist or a group like Weight Watchers for a worksite weight loss program. Underwrite part of the program for those who complete it.
- Have representatives from the American Cancer Society come in to talk about breast and prostate cancer.
- Set up a walking group at lunchtime and sponsor them in a local charitable event.

- Provide 10-minute chair massages for employees weekly. You may want to subsidize the costs or just have it available and the employee pays the full cost.
- Challenge employees to meet a fitness goal over a 3- or 4-month period. Offer prizes to all who stick with it. Have a drawing for one “big prize” like a bike or a pair of tickets to a major event.
- Put on a health fair. It is a lot of work, and it takes planning, but it is a great way to educate your employees. It is a good time to bring in reps from your medical and dental plans, your EAP, and a variety of community organizations.

Typically, health fairs include a local hospital that performs blood sugar and cholesterol screening and blood pressure checks. Other participants may include chiropractors, massage therapists, nutritionists, personal trainers, and reps from the American Cancer Society, a local battered women’s shelter, and your work/life program.

### ***Work/Life Programs***

Many employers offer a work/life program that offers assistance with things from finding day care for a child or elderly parent and information on obscure college scholarship funds to information on which PC to buy and where to find someone to walk your dog. These programs fit into a wellness plan because they help your employees handle many of the things that are taking up work time and increasing stress.

### ***Employee Assistance Programs***

An EAP is also part of an overall wellness initiative. By helping employees address personal/mental health problems and concerns, an EAP can go a long way toward improving overall health and productivity. Representatives from your EAP can also work closely with you to design a health and wellness program.

### ***Time Management***

Time is one of our most precious commodities, and anything you can do as an employer to help your employees manage their time is going to be welcome. Although not traditionally thought to be part of a health and wellness program, offering flextime and telecommuting are two ways to reduce stress and increase productivity.

These programs take thought and planning and are not appropriate for all employees or all positions; however, in many workplaces, they are underused. Either your Human Resources manager or an outside consultant can help you design a program. If you belong to a business group or Chamber of Commerce,

you may find assistance there. Also, talk to colleagues who are doing this in their companies to see how it is working.

### **Why Should I Invest in These Types of Programs?**

The goal of any type of health and wellness program is to deal **proactively** with issues like stress, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Prevention is much less costly than treatment. In many instances, education and awareness go a long way toward changing behaviors.

Many of the diseases that lead to high absenteeism and inability to perform at optimum levels are related to lifestyle choices. They are learned behaviors that can be unlearned. If you think this should be the responsibility of the employee, not the employer, you wouldn't necessarily be wrong. However, when that obese, inactive, smoking, 50+ manager has a major heart attack and is out of work for several months, it is really going to affect you.

Cost savings can be seen in decreased use of health care benefits, decreased rates of absenteeism, decreased numbers of accidents and injuries, and reduced employee turnover.

### ***Fit Workers Have Fewer Injuries***

The National Safety Council in 1999 estimated the cost of workplace injuries in the United States to be \$125 billion. Can a wellness program make any impact on that number, and what kind of a return on investment in wellness is possible?

A 4-year study of Xerox Corporation employees has found a significant reduction in the frequency and severity of workplace injuries among those who participate in a wellness program. The study, conducted by the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center, examined on-the-job injuries of 3,338 employees from 1996 to 1999. The results of the study have been published in the July 2001 issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

Of the group measured, 943 had participated in the company's health risk appraisal program, designed to steer people toward a healthier lifestyle. Of those who participated in the appraisal, 5.6 percent made workers' comp claims, compared to 8.9 percent of nonparticipants. When they were injured, their average cost per claim was \$6,506, compared with \$9,482 for the nonparticipants. There was a 5 to 1 return on investment.

### ***Removing the Stigma of Mental Illness and Substance Abuse***

A wellness program is also an effective way to educate employees/parents about substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, depression, mental illness, learning disabilities, and other issues that affect adults, children, and

teens. Arming parents, other relatives, and concerned friends with information is a way to **prevent** problems in the future, for themselves and their children.

Employees may not be comfortable attending a program entitled “Substance Abuse and You” or “Dealing With Depression,” fearing they have “self-identified” just by their presence. However, when much of that same information is billed as “Teens and Substance Abuse” or “Recognizing the Signs of Depression in Teens,” there may be a full house for the presentation.

Once this happens, the levels of awareness are raised. An employee who is concerned that he or she is actually depressed can attend and gain life-saving information. This goes beyond raising awareness among parents whose children are struggling with personal problems.

Mental health topics are often difficult to introduce. There is still some stigma attached to being “mentally ill” or having alcohol problems. A benign way to bring information into the workplace is to use the National Screening Day programs. These are dates that have been set aside annually to increase awareness about various problems. They include:

- Alcohol Abuse and Addiction (April)
- Anxiety Disorders (during Mental Health Month in May)
- Depression (October)
- Eating Disorders (February)

There is a wealth of information available online that can be made available to your employees at no cost. All it takes is some type of notification in the form of an e-mail with an introductory statement and some links.

Local mental health clinics, medical schools, and hospitals usually provide free screenings on designated days so that anyone can come in, take a test, and get information and a referral for care if appropriate. You could arrange with a local provider for a block of time for your employees to participate in the screenings, or talk to them about coming into the workplace to provide them.

### **Special Situations**

Sometimes, “special situations” occur that offer an opportunity for employee education and support, at little or no expense to the employer. Not only do these situations help employees personally, but also they are an opportunity for the employer to be seen in a positive light. For example:

A company had several employees with cancer, as well as a number of employees with family members with cancer. Their Human Resources staff had received numerous questions about what to say to a coworker with cancer, as well as hearing about how difficult it was for the caregivers to manage work and

home demands. They thought that it would be a great idea to initiate a lunchtime monthly “discussion/support group” to talk about the struggles, frustrations, and fears that people were facing.

The group was facilitated by a rep from the EAP, but it was not a therapy group, nor was it promoted as such. It was informal and employees came as they could fit it into their schedules.

Did it solve all their problems? Of course not, but it did give them a place to vent, talk, and get some information and support. It was a powerful statement from the employer saying, “We care about you and we’d like to help you with this,” and the employees were very grateful.

Another employer had an employee who was autistic and often exhibited some odd or unusual behaviors. He had some significant difficulties and had to be out of work for several months. As time came for him to return, coworkers became anxious about what to expect.

The employer had someone come in to talk about autism and how best to deal with a person with the disease. It was a general discussion, and there was no discussion of the employee’s personal information. However, coworkers felt much more prepared to handle his return.

An employee with epilepsy told her coworkers about her condition in case she had a seizure. The employer then had someone from an epilepsy advocacy group come in and educate employees about the illness and what to do.

You may believe taking steps like this are not the responsibility of the employer, that it is not your business. But physical and mental illnesses affect just about everyone.

Employees who are preoccupied and worried about someone having a seizure or catching HIV from a coworker are not focused and productive. When you spend time informing and supporting employees, you not only have productive employees, you also have their respect.

### ***Wellness Programs Improve Retention***

Employee retention is a challenge. Offering perks such as incentives to exercise, healthy food, and stress management and weight loss programs at work is a way to keep your employees satisfied.

Attracting new employees is also a challenge, and anything you can do to “stand out” from other employees is to your advantage. Remember, salary isn’t everything. Often, the possibility of flex hours or a discount at the local gym may be the deciding factor for a future employee.

## **How Is a Health and Wellness Program Administered?**

Whether you run a small program inhouse or bring in an outside company to oversee the whole thing, program promotion is vital. You may have a great speaker come in to talk about a very “hot topic,” but if no one knew about it, it was a waste of the speaker’s time and your money.

Program setup and promotion go hand and hand. Depending on the size of your company, it may be handled by one person or an entire team. You may even have an employee who is interested in physical fitness and would love to organize some educational seminars and activities.

Other employees may have areas of interest and would be willing to set up some educational programs. Especially for smaller employers, once you have chosen your events and activities, it is best to set up a calendar with a schedule of events. Then publish the entire calendar as well as announcing each individual event as it comes up.

### **Access**

To make access easy, offer a wide range of programs and activities that can fit into everyone’s schedule. For example, some employees may find it difficult to get to a presentation at work or make a commitment for 8 weeks of the Weight Watchers at Work program. However, they will take advantage of a reduced rate at the gym and will borrow tapes from the health and wellness library.

If you have shifts, remember to schedule events for the after 5:00 group. Nothing will undermine your program as quickly as promoting great activities that are only convenient for first shift employees.

### **Evaluation**

It is important to evaluate the effectiveness of any program you set up. There are several very simple ways:

- How many attended, and was there participation or a visible level of interest?
- Use a short and simple pen and paper evaluation that people fill out at the end of the program/presentation. Statements that are rated on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) will give valuable information. Ask about:
  - The value of the program to the individual
  - The style of the presenter
  - The presenter’s knowledge of the topic
  - The level of knowledge gained by the employee

- Other areas that would be of interest for future programs

### Examples

- This program provided me with information and/or skills I will use.
- The presenter was knowledgeable about the subject matter.
- There was adequate time for questions.
- The methods used to present the information were effective.

Open-ended questions may include:

- The best part of this program was...
- The part that needed improvement was....
- I would attend another program by this speaker...
- Topics I would like to see included in other presentations...

This would be a process evaluation that examines how well the program was implemented. It is also important to look at health outcomes and cost outcomes.

More indepth information about the cost-effectiveness of a program can be found by analyzing data before and after the program concerning health care claims, workers' comp claims, sick time, productivity levels, etc. Health outcomes can be measured by looking at health claims and sick time.

It is also important to look at the impact on family members. For example, smoking by pregnant mothers may lead to the birth of a severely impaired child. This could cost an employer or health plan hundreds of thousands of dollars, an expense that could have been avoided with a well-designed wellness plan.

You can also compare the cost per employee of running the program to the savings per employee. One evaluation of wellness programs involving 20,000 to 25,000 employees at New York City-based Citibank showed a return of \$6.70 for every dollar the company invested. The findings were based on a study of medical costs and absenteeism.<sup>1</sup>

An ongoing evaluation should be performed each year and additional periodic evaluations should be conducted on an ad hoc basis. An ad hoc evaluation might be initiated by a variety of triggers. For example, at the end of flu season, a company might want to evaluate its flu shot program.

### **The Culture of Wellness**

Employee wellness has to be part of your company culture, not just something you throw in as an afterthought. It isn't a Band-Aid, but rather a thoughtful piece of your business strategy. For example, if productivity is down due to smoking

breaks, offering smoking cessation classes can help. But it's also important to establish a no smoking policy.

When employees feel valued, they are more loyal and tend to work harder. They take pride in their work and talk about what a great company they work for. A healthy workforce is a productive workforce.

## **References**

1. Kirsch, R. "Working Well." Available online at <http://www.loceycahill.com/articles/workingwell.html>.