

# Research Outlook

## Workplace health promotion

The business case for workplace safety is well documented and has been argued for by safety professionals and organizations, including the Campbell Institute and its Members. The latest focus for maintaining a sustainable business enterprise has moved beyond just workplace safety to include overall employee health and wellness. This Institute research brief looks at recent writings that investigate the benefits of workplace health initiatives and argue for their inclusion in EHS best practices.

Health care costs have been and continue to be of great concern to employers, especially because one's health insurance is generally connected to an employer. For this reason, Pfeffer (2010) believes that more attention should be paid to employee physical and mental health. Like environmental sustainability, Pfeffer (2010) sees investment in employee wellness as organizational sustainability, and argues that employer concern for worker wellness is part of being a socially responsible organization. Employers can create an organization that is devoted to total worker health by implementing wellness programs, better managing work hours and work stress and providing paid sick days. Numerous workplaces in the past decade have implemented health and wellness programs, with positive outcomes that cannot be ignored.

In 2003, Vanderbilt University initiated an employee wellness program called "Go For the Gold" (GFTG) and enlisted the help of researchers to track the program's statistics for the next seven years. In a program that mainly involved completion of a health risk assessment and lifestyle management tool (plus up to \$20 per month added to participating employees' paychecks), Byrne et al. (2011) reported a 6.4%

increase in employees exercising one or more days per week during the program's first year. Additionally, both the smoking and obesity rate of participating Vanderbilt employees saw sharper declines than the smoking and obesity rates of Tennessee and the U.S. as a whole. A related study of Salt Lake City government employees looked at both the health and cost effects of a workplace health program. Merrill et al. (2011) evaluated the Healthy Lifestyle Initiative Program (HLIP) from 2004 to 2008. The program included free annual screenings, financial incentives and educational programs to raise awareness of health issues. In addition to HLIP participants being more likely to exercise and having better self-perceived health, the total cost savings over four years due to lower prescription drug and medical costs was over \$3.5 million. In short, that means that every dollar spent on HLIP saved the county \$3.85.

Evidence nodding to the benefits of workplace health programs (WHPs) can be found in review articles that analyze multiple studies.

Cancelliere et al. (2011) looked specifically at workplace health promotion programs to improve presenteeism, or showing up to work when ill. The authors found not only that WHPs are effective at improving presenteeism overall, but that certain measures appeared to increase the level of success: exercise programs, depression screenings, health risk assessments, positive work environment and monetary incentives. In a similar review, Pelletier (2011) analyzed 27 studies performed between 2008 and 2010 on the clinical and cost outcomes of workplace wellness programs. In this time period, health promotion initiatives tended toward randomized clinical trials and focused on disease-specific programs (e.g. obesity, back

pain, lupus). The majority of the 27 studies indicated positive cost and clinical results, although Pelletier (2011) also notes the bias toward published research that focuses on statistically significant, positive results. Still, the number of studies from 2008 to 2010 focusing on WHPs suggests that more employers are implementing and evaluating workplace health initiatives.

The business case for WHPs has not escaped the notice of the Harvard Business Review. Berry et al. (2010) conducted a review of several leading companies' wellness programs and came to three overall conclusions: (1) investing money in prevention can have a return on investment of 300% or more, (2) WHPs reduce absenteeism and increase healthy working days, and (3) WHPs increase employee morale and retention. The authors also identified some key characteristics of successful wellness programs, such as having engaged leadership and aligning the program with overall company identity and goals. Successful WHPs should also be comprehensive in scope and quality, and easily accessible in terms of scheduling and cost.

Due to the scientific community's overall opinion that WHPs are both cost and health effective, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in partnership with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) launched the Total Worker Health™ (TWH) initiative in 2011. The CDC and NIOSH essentially saw a gap in caring for the wellbeing of workers – workplace safety and health programs tend to focus solely on safety and protecting workers from hazards associated with the work environment, while workplace

health programs tend to focus only on lifestyle conditions outside of the workplace that may put workers at risk. The Total Worker Health™ program was designed to integrate workplace safety protection with off-the-job health promotion armed with research evidence to suggest that this integration is the most effective way of protecting workers.

In conjunction with other CDC programs like Work@Health® and Workplace Health Promotion, Total Worker Health™ works with employers to design, implement and evaluate WHPs. Some examples of holistic TWH strategies and interventions include: comprehensive screenings for occupational and non-occupational health risks, concurrent programs to protect respiratory health and support smoking cessation, and maintaining communication channels to demonstrate management's commitment to worker wellness. Recently the National Safety Council announced its partnership with NIOSH to show its support of the TWH initiative. The Campbell Institute also recognizes the importance of complete worker protection both on- and off-the-job, and has invited Total Worker Health's™ director, L. Casey Chosewood, to present on the topic at the second annual Campbell Institute Symposium.

Paying close attention to the "H" in EHS has been shown to be sustainable not only in terms of personnel, but also profit. While there are many types of successful programs and numerous ways for programs to improve, workplace health promotion appears to be another best practice for maintaining an efficient and sustainable business organization.

## WORKS CITED

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