

Wellness in the workplace

Organizing a wellness program may be just what the doctor ordered

Encourage “wellness” in your employees’ lives, and you’ll likely also improve the “health” of your organization’s bottom line.

While some employers resist assuming more responsibility for addressing their employees’ unhealthy personal lifestyles, more enlightened and pragmatic employers are recognizing that ignoring them carries a financial cost.

More and more workers are physically inactive, eat too little nutritious food, too much junk food, and overall just too much. You probably can see the results in your own workforce: rising proportions of employees who are overweight, under-fit and suffering health problems related to those conditions.

On top of that, social and family problems and personal issues like drugs and drinking are affecting more employees.

These lifestyle issues are taking a toll on businesses. Employees who are less fit are more likely to get hurt on the job and off. That includes injuries from specific incidents as well as injuries and illnesses that develop over time, like some back problems. Once injured or ill, less-fit employees take longer to recover. For instance, medical studies show that smokers who suffer back injuries take far longer to heal, and their rate of successful back surgeries is significantly lower.

Far-reaching benefits

Wellness programs motivate employees to make healthier lifestyle choices for themselves—at work and at home. For employers, that means a more productive workforce. It also means reduced costs associated with employer-sponsored health plans, workers’ compensation,

short- and long-term disability, and absenteeism.

In addition, a wellness program that starts making a difference in people’s lives may also have a positive influence on your organization’s overall culture, with lasting effects on employees’ behavior and attitudes in their daily work.

Workplace wellness encompasses fitness, nutrition, personal health, mental health and other aspects of well-being. It’s adaptable to all types of businesses. It works even for employers who lack the resources of bigger businesses.

The investment is usually minimal—some ongoing staff time to organize activities, and perhaps a small amount of cash to work with. Consider the investment part of your organization’s loss prevention program.

Plan on an evolutionary period. Most employers try a number of things to see what works for their employees and feels right for their organization.

Learn from the success stories of other organizations. But don’t be discouraged if you model one of your efforts after another company’s, and it disappoints. Learn from it; build on it.

That’s what Shawnee Hills Inc. did, and with good results. For 20 years, Shawnee Hills, a 1,200-employee mental-health organization in West Virginia, has included wellness in its new employee orientation and has offered incentives to encourage employees to take part in wellness activities.

Initially, Shawnee’s program focused mostly on physical fitness. It offered employees partial payments for health clubs, paid time off work to visit health clubs and cash toward the purchase of

home exercise equipment. But the results were less than expected: Employees used the time off to do other personal errands and didn't use the health club memberships the company was helping pay for.

So Shawnee modified its approach. It introduced "Health-Styles," a voluntary membership wellness program in which employees earn up to \$500 bonus cash a year to spend however they'd like. To earn bonus cash, an employee must do three things:

- **Assessment and goal setting.** The employee goes through a "mini" physical assessment that includes weight, blood pressure, resting heart rate and cholesterol count. Then the employee consults with a health and wellness coordinator to set four goals for the upcoming year. Goals are realistic and achievable. They may include losing weight, or maintaining weight or strength levels, for instance. The employee looks forward to receiving \$100 to \$400 bonus cash based on how many goals he or she achieves by the end of the year.
- **Self-care.** An employee can earn an additional \$50 bonus by getting an annual physical, dental exam and vision screening.
- **Absenteeism.** An employee who uses no more than three unscheduled sick days or paid time off earns another \$50 bonus.

Shawnee says this program has reduced its use of sick leave and need for temporary workers by 20 percent and has saved \$300,000 annually in health-related costs for the past several years.

Pretty impressive results. They demonstrate that wellness can work—for both company and employee. Of course, organizations like Shawnee are making significant investments in wellness in anticipation of significant results, and they probably are at fairly well-developed stages in their programming.

Unlike Shawnee, many other organizations can get by with low-cost, low-maintenance wellness programs. And many wondering whether wellness is for them are looking for some easy ways to give it a try.

Consider these:

1. Delegate to your safety committee.

Get started by assigning responsibility to your safety committee or other employee group. You want a person or group that feels responsible for and empowered to get things organized. Let employees direct and shape your wellness program.

2. Introduce variations on everyday activities.

The things employees do regularly may be opportunities for introducing healthful variations. Think about employees' routines, habits and what's available to them. Some examples:

- Encourage employees to eat breakfast. Have small appliances available for convenience, such as a toaster or microwave.
- Replace candy dishes with healthier snacks.
- Ensure company cafeteria and vending machines have healthy options.
- Discourage eating at desks.
- Start a weight loss contest. To avoid personal pressure, suggest employees lose weight as a team or as a company.
- Start a lunchtime walking group.
- Publicize the walking distances from your workplace to various nearby points.
- Mark out walking routes in your facility in distance increments such as A to B is 600 yards.
- Encourage employees to exercise in small ways such as using the stairs instead of the elevator. Or parking across the parking lot instead of near the building.
- Introduce a workplace stretching program where employees gather at designated times during the workday to do group stretches. See the "Workplace stretching works wonders," insert.

3. Establish on-going programs.

Such as:

- Reduced-cost memberships to weight loss programs and fitness centers. Your firm subsidizes part of the membership fee.
- A weight-loss expert who conducts employee education sessions in your workplace.

- A dietician available for one-on-one or group counseling.
- Pedometers available to employees at cost, perhaps in conjunction with a walking club. A common goal promoted by walking clubs is 10,000 steps per day, which burns 2,000 to 3,500 extra calories per week.
- Subsidized access to programs for individual needs, such as smoking cessation or pre-natal education.
- Annual flu shots administered on-site.
- Annual company-wide workstation evaluations to ensure that each employee's workstation is the right ergonomic fit.

Look for opportunities—like ergonomics activities—to dovetail wellness programs with your loss prevention efforts. One SFM policyholder, for instance, brings in a physical therapist to teach employees the safe ways to lift and bend, including interesting lessons in anatomy. It's all health-related, and if it has a direct bearing on preventing injuries, so much the better.

4. Sponsor company events and activities.

Well-designed events enliven your wellness program, re-energize it and help renew employee interest. They are a good way to invite employees who've been reluctant to participate before.

Be inventive. If you are recycling an activity from last year, give it a new twist. Search out new ideas. Be responsive to the studies and discoveries continually coming out of the wellness industry.

Play off happenings within your own organization. For instance, at SFM, a manager's trip to Mongolia inspired employees to organize "Walk to Mongolia"—a 10-week event in which employees company-wide were challenged to walk 11.8 million steps, the estimated distance there.

Design activities to appeal to everyone. After an event has ended, see how well you attracted participation among all segments of your workforce, including your less fit employees. Redesign the event or rewrite the rules, if needed, before host-

ing it again.

Think about how the seasons may offer different fitness or educational opportunities.

For starters, here are some ideas to help get you thinking about events and activities you might do:

- Organize a physical exercise contest. Typically, these last around six to 12 weeks and promote many different kinds of physical activity that can qualify as exercise. Two scoring methods are commonly used: points earned, and time spent. Be sure your contest appeals to and rewards not only those who are already fit, but those who need it most. Competitively awarded prizes need to recognize extraordinary personal effort regardless of ability.
- Organize a nutrition challenge.
- Encourage employees to participate in a fitness walk such as the American Heart Walk or Breast Cancer Awareness Walk. Sponsor a company team.
- Produce a healthy recipe cookbook that compiles recipes submitted by employees. Or publish the recipes in your company newsletter or Intranet.
- Host a lunch-time seminar on healthy eating, cholesterol or nutrition.
- Conduct a health fair, with stations featuring various activities, educational resources and outside experts.
- Bring in a nurse to conduct blood pressure, heart rate and cholesterol checks.

Sometimes an employee will volunteer to "champion" a particular annual activity like, say, the American Heart Walk. To help the effort succeed, ensure that your company policies have the flexibility to enable the person to organize and communicate with other employees, such as using all-company email. Recognize the employee's leadership in this effort.

5. Mitigate stressful situations.

Stress is sometimes unavoidable. But left unaddressed, stress about work or non-work issues can lead to injuries on the job due to inattention and

carelessness.

- Handle personnel issues before they escalate. Healthy work relationships are as important as healthy habits.
- Whenever possible, make it a supervisory priority to help in managing an employee's workload. Injuries happen when employees get stressed out and fatigued from working long hours—especially when their supervisors are unaware or seem not to care.
- Provide an employee assistance program to help employees address personal and family problems.

6. Take advantage of the resources available.

The Internet is a great place to find a lot of stuff on wellness. Here's a sampling of websites geared toward different types of needs.

- www.welcoa.org
(Wellness Councils of America).
- www.americanheart.org
(American Heart Association).
- www.hopehealth.com
(Hope Health).
- www.minnesotasafetycouncil.com
(Minnesota Safety Council).
- www.wischamberfoundation.org
(Wisconsin Council of Safety).
- www.stayinginshape.com
(Concept Communications, an example of a content provider).
- www.10k-steps.com
(HealthPartners' "10,000 Steps" program).

Look at the big picture

Keep in mind that your ultimate goal is not simply to have a workplace wellness program. Your goal is to have an organization of employees who are as fit and healthy as possible. Let that drive what you do.

Keep attuned to your organization's culture. It should reflect an element of health and wellness. That encompasses not only an organized workplace wellness program, but also good safety practices, prudent behavior, awareness of risks, an educated workforce, and respect for their individual well-being. It all works together.

For specific questions or assistance with your Wellness Program, call your SFM Loss Prevention representative at (952) 838-4200 or (800) 937-1181.

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The Work Comp Experts

“Stretching works@work” kit available

Workplace stretching works wonders; here’s how to get a program started

Encouraging employees to stretch once or twice a day is a good injury prevention practice for any organization, and it carries other benefits, too.

Studies show that the reduced frequency and severity of injuries make stretching well worth the few minutes a day employees spend away from their tasks. Workplace stretching counteracts the effects of activities that can lead to cumulative trauma disorders, back injuries, wrist injuries and other physical problems that often turn into workers’ compensation claims.

Companies also have found that group stretching often doubles as a few minutes’ time for employees to catch up with each other on work issues—a bonus in fast-paced work environments. It also sends employees back to their tasks in a refreshed and more productive frame of mind.

Any company—whether large or small, whether involved in physical labor or office work—can benefit by implementing a workplace stretching program. It’s appropriate for employees of all ages and all levels of flexibility and fitness.

For instance, at SFM, employees—who range in age from 21 to 60+ and include all fitness levels—are encouraged to stretch twice a day. They gather at various points around the office in small groups at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. for about five minutes.

You can do something like that, too. Some things to think about in getting your program going: How you announce the start of the program, like email and newsletter publicity, which can ease the initial reluctance some people have who’ve never done workplace stretching before. Ongoing, how you remind people, “It’s stretch time.” How you educate people to know how to do stretch exercises correctly, and what a five-minute stretching routine looks like.

To help you with the last issue—figuring out a stretching routine and knowing how to do the exercises right—here are instructions for a few of the most common exercises:

Shoulder shrugs

With your arms hanging at sides, shrug shoulders upward, hold tightly for a few seconds, then relax and repeat.

Shoulder rolls

With arms hanging at sides, roll shoulders up and back, then repeat in the opposite direction.

Establishing a stretching program made easy

The “Stretching Works @ Work” kit is designed to help employers organize stretching programs in their workplaces.

The kit includes:

- A “Supervisor’s guide to a successful workplace stretching program.” Explains how to get a program started.
- An employee handout, “ATTN: Employees, let’s stretch!” Shows employees how to do each stretch properly. You can use it to publicize your stretching program.
- Two attractive workplace stretching posters.
- A postcard to order the “Stretching Works @ Work” audio CD. The CD can be used during group stretching. It narrates each stretching exercise so you don’t have to.

To order the kit, go to SFM’s website www.sfmic.com, click on “Resource catalog” and look under “Injury prevention.” Or order by calling (952) 838-4325 or (800) 937-1181 ext 4325.

Arm circles

With arms stretched out to sides, make circles 12 inches in diameter in both directions. Then roll arms in large full circles in both directions.

Wrist extensions

Hold arm out to the front with elbow straight. With help of other hand, bend wrist upward toward the ceiling, then downward toward the floor. Repeat with arm down. Then do the same motions with the other hand.

High reach

Stand tall and reach arms up as high as possible. Come up on tiptoes and stretch up to maximum height, then repeat.

Backward bend

Hands on hips, bend your back, shoulders and head backward. Return to upright position and repeat.

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