

HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS IN THE WORKPLACE

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

BY CAROLE BOULÉ

THE IDEA OF PROMOTING HEALTH IS GAINING GROUND IN WORKPLACES. HOWEVER, CHOOSING THE RIGHT HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAM THAT WILL MEET EMPLOYEE NEEDS CAN BE CHALLENGING. IN FACT, THERE ARE AS MANY HEALTH PROMOTION APPROACHES AS THERE ARE TYPES OF INSURERS AND SPECIALIZED PROVIDERS IN THE FIELD.

Prevention and promotion programs can influence the four areas that are recognized as having an impact on employee health, namely lifestyle habits, work environment, work-life balance and management practices.

However, choosing the best program is not enough. Sophie Dubé, Manager, Health and Wellness at Standard Life, believes there are nine necessary conditions for ensuring that the program is successfully implemented throughout the organization.

1 KEY POINT

Commitment by upper management is crucial. “That is the most important success criteria. You can have the best health and wellness program in the world, but if it doesn’t have the support of senior executives and managers, it won’t work for long,” notes Mrs. Dubé.

2 FAVOURABLE CULTURE

Once the program has obtained the support of upper management and managers, it needs to be incorporated into the organization’s culture. “It is an ongoing process. The program can’t be expected to change old ways of doing things overnight,” explains Mrs. Dubé.

For example, adopting flexible working schedules in the workplace can take time before they are accepted by all employees and managers. “A worker who asks to leave at a specific time may be refused a few times or may have to deal with resentful comments from his or her colleagues. And then, at some point, it simply becomes part of the general mentality. Employees

become better able to organize their duties in order to benefit from flexible schedules and to improve their work-life balance.”

3

REPRESENTATIVE GROUP

Creating a health and wellness committee is another key principle required to ensure that a program is successfully implemented. The committee will be in charge of representing employees and it will also recommend promotion and awareness-raising activities and programs within the company.

“Companies often skip this step.

The committee is important because in a way, it becomes the eyes and ears of the organization with respect to implementing the program. It must, however, represent the organization’s demography,” cautions Mrs. Dubé. “If you have a higher percentage of women or of a particular age group, the ten-member committee must be formed based on the same proportion.”

4

NECESSARY DIAGNOSIS

Data must be gathered – on the company as well as on the employees – in all four areas:

- Lifestyle habits (diet, physical activity, smoking, stress);
- Work environment (climate, health and safety, equity, values);

- Work-life balance (conciliation, work schedules, support);
- Management practices (training, communication, recognition, involvement).

Once this information has been collected, it can be used to carry out a specific need assessment. “The diagnostic analysis of disability claims helps assess the costs of absences and the reasons behind them. A three-year profile of the company can be drawn up by studying all prescription drug claims, healthcare costs, as well as reasons and costs related to absences. This helps identify major trends within the company, such as the top three or five causes of disability,” indicates Mrs. Dubé.

The Health and Wellness Manager adds that stress is the leading cause of disability for the vast majority of her clients (white collar workers, blue collar workers, all types of organizations). Cardiovascular disease, for both men and women, is the second major cause. The third and last reason for disability includes anything related to musculoskeletal problems. Put together, this information is used as a basis for developing a program that meets the needs of all employees.

“ IF THE HEALTH PROGRAM DOESN’T HAVE THE SUPPORT OF SENIOR EXECUTIVES AND MANAGERS, IT WON’T WORK FOR LONG. ”

– SOPHIE DUBÉ

5 IDENTIFYING OBJECTIVE
It is important to understand the reason behind the implementation of a health program. Is it to become an employer of choice, to cut costs or to ensure better management of disability claims related to psychological issues or mental health?

Given its objectives for implementing the program, the company needs to determine its current position, as well as its ultimate goal, in order to decide on an appropriate route to take. "This is referred to as gap analysis," explains Sophie Dubé. "A company that wishes to address its absenteeism rate and the reasons for employee absences must implement measures that will have an impact on the working environment. If the company succeeds in improving these conditions through various program interventions, the entire organization will benefit."

6 STRATEGIES FOR TAKING ACTION
Mrs. Dubé believes that the action plan must cover a three-year period. "The health and wellness committee

is responsible for developing the plan and submitting it to management. It is also important to review the action plan annually in order to make any necessary changes."

7 ONGOING COMMUNICATION
A good communication and promotion plan is the backbone of the program and needs to be rolled out each year in order to inform employees of upcoming activities, important dates, etc.

According to a Medisys survey on health promotion conducted in 2008, most companies that actively promote their program in conjunction with upper management will see a significant increase in their participation rate.

8 EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION
There are four pillars for implementing a good health and wellness program – promotion activities, awareness-raising activities, training activities and intervention programs. "With respect to intervention, it is often up to the employee

assistance program to implement the more significant and long-term actions, such as the return-to-work policy," notes Sophie Dubé.

9 ASSESSMENT AND FOLLOW-UP
The ninth principle, of equal importance, is assessing and following up on the implementation of the program. Making sure that the expectations are met is an important step when deciding whether to proceed with the program. ■

LOOK FOR ON THE WEB

A guide outlining the steps to be taken when implementing a health and wellness program in the workplace will be available in November on the Group for Prevention and Promotion Strategies website at www.gp2s.net.



PROMOTING HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE OVER THE DECADES...

PRIOR TO 1960

The issue of work-related accidents is the sole focus.

THE 1960s

The apparition of the notion of health and safety in the workplace and of the first company doctors, particularly in heavy industry (companies producing minerals, metal, etc.). Health promotion occurs especially after a work-related accident and is accompanied by specific advice about how to carry out certain work duties.

THE 1970s

The first anti-smoking and physical activity campaigns (e.g. ParticipAction). Increased popularity in jogging and aerobics. Emergence of first physical activity centres in the workplace in major companies. With the promise of a leisure society, the idea of health and wellness balance begins to take root.

THE 1980s

Concern regarding increased frequency of backache among employees. Implementation of campaigns and programs dealing with back pain. The role of ergonomics in the workplace becomes more important.

THE 1990s

Stress begins to be recognized in the workplace. A comprehensive, customized approach to health based on employees' working conditions gains ground.

THE 2000s

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) begin to appear in the workplace. Health and wellness programs, in partnership with company EAPs, begin to offer a series of awareness-raising sessions on healthy lifestyle habits, safe behaviour, work-life balance and managing stress at work.