

Return to health

An employee wellbeing program contributes to the health of an organisation if it's planned and executed properly.

■ BY MORRIS KAPLAN

A successful employee health program requires an investment of substantial resources to ensure it's executed well. While there is a growing belief that money spent on keeping employees healthy is a sound investment, many businesses need to see the return on investment clearly articulated.

There's more to employee health programs than building fitness centres and holding lunchtime lifestyle classes. Negative lifestyle habits such as smoking, inactivity and over-eating can impact on business by causing unhealthy and unsafe employees.

Stress and psychological issues are also areas of growing concern. High-intensity work environments, heavy workloads and financial pressure are an enormous drain on employees, and high stress levels lead to thousands of stress-related WorkCover claims every year.

According to a December 2003 National Occupational Health and Safety Commission report, cases of mental stress had by far the highest median (8.5 weeks) and average (16 weeks) time lost, and accounted for 29% of all new cases of disease. This is way above the median of 3.4 weeks lost and average of 9.3 weeks for all new cases of injury or disease.

Employee health programs are one way of preventing costs, low productivity and low

morale caused by poor health. It can also have the positive effect of reducing the risk of illness and improving the well-being of employees. But one of the big areas where it can return on the investment is in improving retention rates.

The programs can be expensive. "But the churn cost is worse," says Katrina Walton, manager of The Wellness Centre, Greenslopes Private Hospital. An employee leaving leads to the recruitment costs, the disruption to business and other employees, the loss of intellectual property and the induction of a new staff member.

According to a report by the Commonwealth of Australia (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency,

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September 2002), it costs \$150,000–200,000 to replace a lawyer, while for a bank teller it's \$30,000. Speak to any business manager and the answer is the same: retention is a key issue that affects business success.

"Acquisition and retention of talent is vital to an organisation's survival and its growth," says Holistic Services Group (HSG) director, Michael Stone. "HSG was formed to help business provide a healthier, more balanced work environment, and thus create a more contented and loyal work force," says Stone.

Mirjana Juka, human resources officer for IT company Sabre Pacific, arranged for massages to be provided for some employees. "We delivered workplace massage for approximately 65 of our staff, many of whom work in the call centre," she says. "We had good feedback when we first tried it. It's a benefit for our staff but for our call centre people we see it as having therapeutic value too."

Other popular initiatives include annual fitness events, and onsite seminars for weight and stress management, smoking cessation and other behaviour issues.

"Absenteeism and stress is a problem in this (health) industry," says Walton. She says the kinds of lifestyle, exercise and health programs that Greenslopes offers do have bottom-line impacts. "We have studied European companies like Adidas and believe the holistic model works best."

Employee health programs can be designed to suit organisations of all sizes and cultures. A large-scale program may start with health risk assessments, followed by awareness education and lifestyle behaviour change. Other popular initiatives include annual fitness events, and onsite seminars for weight and stress management, smoking cessation and other behaviour issues.

Some companies, including Lend Lease, Nokia and Flight Centre, have departments that specialise in promoting and managing their employee wellbeing activities. Approximately three-quarters of Australian organisations provide education through seminars and counselling for lifestyle habits, according to a survey of 100 medium-to-large organisations by the Financial Freedom Education Centre. About a third offer financial incentives for program participation and about 80 per cent sponsor additional activities designed to heighten awareness of health behaviours. These activities can include an onsite fitness facility, company sports teams and health club discounts.

Massage therapy, yoga, tai chi and other relaxation exercise programs are beneficial to general fitness as well as stress management. Programs of this nature are often the best-attended by employees, according to HSG's Stone.

Popular programs can include nutrition, weight loss, healthy cooking and exercise, especially with the use of onsite fitness centres. Health programs can also include individual counselling sessions, health risk assessments, parenting classes, and

PROGRAM ANALYSIS

It is critical to determine the following program components:

- What is included in the program?
- How is the program delivered?
- Who manages the program?
- How many people participate?
- Do participants complete the program?
- Are the participants satisfied?
- Which aspects of the program are best attended?
- Does the program improve knowledge about health issues?
- Does the program change behaviour?
- Does the program save money?
- What is the return on investment?





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programs on alternative medicine and holistic approaches.

The cost of health programs varies widely, depending on the components included. Michael Stone of HSG estimates employers are paying \$60 to \$100 per employee on average for year-round programs ranging from smoking cessation and health and fitness facility subsidies to communications and stress management seminars. According to Stone, whose

company specialises in providing corporate health and wellbeing programs, choice of content for a program is important.

“Management need to clarify what their goals are,” he says. “Do they want to address productivity issues and overall morale, engage in team-building or influence company culture? Programs can then be tailored to address the specific needs. Too many programs are simply copies of others. This may not suit the workplace conditions.”

A carefully planned employee health

management program will provide opportunities for employees to identify health risks, learn self-care and break high-risk lifestyle patterns through simple awareness. Fundamental to achieving this goal is communication.

Programs that include good communication tend to have higher participation rates, which can have a dramatic, positive impact on the program’s return on investment. A periodical newsletter is often used because of its affordability and accessibility.

WHO BENEFITS?

Can your employee health program demonstrate benefits on the following criteria?

Benefits to the organisation:

- A positive and caring image
- Improved staff morale
- Reduced staff turnover
- Reduced absenteeism
- Increased productivity
- Reduced healthcare/insurance costs
- Reduced risks of fines and litigation.

Benefits to the employees:

- A safe and healthy work environment
- Enhanced self-esteem
- Reduced stress
- Improved morale
- Increased job satisfaction
- Increased skills for health protection
- Improved health
- A healthier family and community.

Program providers consider a participation rate of 70 to 75 per cent of employees satisfactory. Efforts to keep this percentage of participants engaged are crucial, because studies show it takes between three and five years for a worksite to achieve cost-effectiveness and good results.

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