



Trends in holistic services

Employee wellness programmes need to be more personal and specific to the individual, writes **VICTOR SULTAS**.

What are the benefits for an organisation providing holistic wellness services?

Coca Cola claims its wellness programmes saves it \$500 per employee each year. The company has an online health education site for staff and has also set up The Beverage Institute For Health and Wellness, responsible for evaluating emerging wellness trends.

In the United States, Virgin Life Care Insurance is revolutionising the industry by

reducing the premium for companies offering employee wellness programmes. The rest of the insurance companies are so far reluctant to follow this path despite studies showing major benefits.

For instance, a Harvard Business Review study into workplace wellness programmes found a decrease of absenteeism and reduced claims costs by employees in organisations. Every dollar invested in wellness and work/life balance programmes returns between \$3 and \$5 on average.

In the future, however we can expect that insurance companies will provide health insurance with lower premiums to businesses which deliver employee wellness programmes.

There are plenty of other incentives for employers to incorporate wellness services. In today's workplace employees expect employers to provide a range of wellness options. Given that the labour market is exceedingly stretched, employers are wise to communicate to future and existing employees the differences that make

them stand out from other employers. The workforce is savvy and is alert to employers providing employee services and work/life balance options. According to Hewitt's Best Employers 2006/07 study, one of the factors of good quality organisational leadership is to "...accept and act on the premise that their people are the primary source of performance, competitive advantage, long term sustainability and focus."

While most large organisations provide employee wellness programmes, they run the risk of their initiatives being too impersonal and non-specific to individuals. Many workplaces have standardised wellness programmes such as health checks, stress management programmes, health screenings, fitness tests, health risk assessments and gym memberships. The challenge for employers across the board is to deliver personalised wellness services tailored to each staff member. Catering to employees' preferences and life priorities helps them to enjoy activities which deliver social, mental, emotional, physical and spiritual benefits.

Standard employee-assistance programmes can become disincentive for future participation and engagement, contrary to holistic workplace services, which provide a broader range of incentives to staff as they match people's priorities, likes, tastes and passions. The most popular employee holistic wellness programmes include some or even all of seated massage, beauty treatments, meditation, yoga, pilates, laughter, cooking classes, theatre, sports, health fairs, adrenaline sports, and tickets to favourite bands. New wellbeing services for employees include naturopathy, aromatherapy and reflexology.

The major influences on implementing workplace wellness programmes are varied and range from talent attraction and retention, reduced workers' compensation claims, company legal liabilities, corporate social responsibility, disability management, improved productivity, performance, growth and profit, stakeholders and shareholder accountability, minimising operating expenses, lower employee turnover, and improved satisfaction and morale levels. The workforce is shrinking as people choose to opt for a better work/life balance, and with an especially tight labour market, employers need to entice workers into the workforce today more than ever.

To attract and retain talent, senior management need to adopt a holistic workplace mindset, and implement a framework, policies and strategies to ensure they keep a proactive culture that supports employees. The key to increasing retention is achieving higher participation rates in employee-assistance programmes. You do this by determining what employees want and don't want. A good place to start is self-managed employee-assistance programmes. Ideally, these programmes are funded or subsidised by the company. AMP established a slush fund to which staff contribute between \$5 and \$8 per month and they choose what services they want. It's completely staff-managed and -driven, with the participation rate about 82 per cent.

In the US, some companies are starting to fire or fine employees who are obese, smoke, or are drug users. Delta Airlines provides an incentive of a \$45 cash bonus to take a health risk assessment, but as this didn't inspire many, they decided to raffle off 25 gift certificates and to pay full-year health premiums to employees who signed up to take the online health risk assessments. Delta's health care costs are currently US\$5208 per employee annually and its goal is to reduce the figure by five per cent. Their aim is to decrease the high-risk health adverse employees who are the major cause of the company's rising health care costs. They are looking at a healthier culture through healthier living.

IBM decided against offering premium health discounts. They found cash incentives to be a more effective motivator. IBM introduced wellness incentives in 2003 and began offering prizes such as pedometers, books and towels to staff who participated in a variety of fitness challenges. In 2006, the company decided to change its strategy and began offering a \$150 cash rebate to employees who participated in the company's physical activity programmes. Participation rates jumped from about 10,000 employees to 100,000.

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Clearly understanding what drives your employees to participate is vital in achieving successful workplace wellness programmes. Most workplaces deliver multiple positive incentive policies, while others use negative behaviour reinforcement policies. The company rule book approach is becoming more prominent as organisations stamp their policy authority with employees. Companies are not hiring people who are smokers, have a high health risk, or do not subject themselves to a health risk assessment. Depending on the industry, this is a very valid approach. Once hired, staff who do not adhere to the company wellness policies are faced with such options as being fired, monthly pay docked, charged for higher health care premiums or placed on a strict health management programme. They are given plenty of time to comply and if not done within the certain time frame, strict measures are swiftly taken. A number of US companies have taken this approach and the legislation allows it at present.

Social benefits

The social benefits from comprehensive wellness

programmes show a decrease in conflicts between staff, and even lower rates of domestic violence and child abuse. Individuals, families, communities, the private sector, and governments all have roles and responsibilities with respect to wellness, and working together to improve wellbeing.

A healthy society tends to be a wealthier society, according to the World Health Organisation. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Health Research Institute, in conjunction with the World Economic Forum, published a report Working Towards Wellness (www.pwc.com/workwellness) which calls upon global chief executives to make wellness central to their corporate business strategy.

In the report, PwC assesses the future challenges facing businesses as a consequence of the growing epidemic of chronic diseases. It found about two per cent of capital spent on the workforce is lost to disability, absenteeism and low productivity from unwell employees who still go to work. Simon Leary, a partner of the company's UK division and Health Research Institute Leader for United Kingdom/Europe, says the economic case for prevention is overwhelming. "You can improve the health and wellbeing of your workers while also bolstering your bottom line."

PwC conducted a survey on wellness programmes among multi-national employers representing more than three million employees worldwide and found a growing emphasis on health facilitation in the workplace.

Holistic Services Group believes the future will be very different in five to 10 years regarding holistic workplace services. Spiritual and alternative healing practices will increase in the workplace.

Organisations will embrace a wider diversity of employee morale-boosting strategies. Staff passions will dominate their choices of work: for instance, if they are passionate about the environment, working for a mining company may not comply with their values. Choosing purposefully-orientated work in order to make a difference in the world is increasing as it holds significant meaning to one's personal life. Companies need to understand the increasing influence within the workforce of personal values, cultural backgrounds and mass community media.

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