

ATN Business Sense
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Smokers! Many non-smokers find the habit unpleasant and time-wasting. Asking a smoker once about the time wasted the reply, from a highly intelligent professional was dismissive with the observation that it was as little as to be insignificant. It's often more time consuming than most smokers think. Fortunately the professional, after a number of tries, quit smoking.

From the healthy viewpoint, what is workplace wellness? Berry, Mirabito and Baun, (the researchers) writing in the December 2010 Harvard Business Review, following extensive research, define it as: "As an organized, employer-sponsored program that is designed to support employees (and sometimes their families) as they adopt and sustain behaviours that reduce health risks, improve quality of life, enhance personal effectiveness, and benefit the organization's bottom line."

The researchers found the most successful programs have six essential pillars. They found firstly that employees will not buy into a program that is just about money. They found that if "the CEO makes time for exercise, employees will feel less self-conscious about taking a fitness break." They report that Johnson & Johnson, with about 250 distinct businesses around the world has only two companywide mandates about health. "Any employee with HIV/AIDS will have access to antiretroviral treatment, and all J&J facilities will be tobacco free."

Alignment is the next pillar and executives need to remember that a cultural shift to better health takes time. It takes planning and patience and one company holds monthly staff meetings that "always include a wellness team report on current wellness activities and resources." Every other Wednesday afternoon, workers have an opportunity to share a healthy snack and connect with others. The payback is high as it creates opportunities for cross-team connections. Positive incentives are favoured as employees lose trust if they feel they are being forced to act against their wishes.

The third pillar is to understand the scope, relevance and quality as employee's needs vary tremendously. Wellness is about depression and stress as well as physical health. These days, many organizations use Health Risk Assessments (HRA) on-line to guide investment in wellness. While many employees need to be persuaded about the benefits, J&J has managed to achieve an HRA participation rate above 80%. This enables them to tailor their wellness programs from business to business. Also highlighted is the importance of fun and ensuring the health related services are of high standards.

Fourthly, convenience matters. One employer got high participation rates as they thought of all the reasons why people wouldn't use the facility and then worked to eliminate them. Employer Biltmore has two day health fairs twice a year focussing on physical, financial and spiritual wellness. Naturally businesses are going mobile and increasingly using online resources to deliver wellness messages and let their people input information such as HRA data and activity reports.

Fifthly, having internal partnerships help wellness programs gain credibility. Establishing external partnerships with specialized vendors enable wellness staff to benefit from vendor participation. They gain competencies and infrastructure without extra internal investment. Impressively, a supermarket chain estimates that moving 10% of its employees from high and medium risk to low risk status yields an ROI of 6 to 1. The chain also uses Intranet videos featuring employee health success stories as it recognises not all employees read a lot.

Finally, wellness communications must overcome “individual apathy, the sensitivity of personal health issues, and the geographic, demographic, and cultural heterogeneity of employees. What steps can you take to increase the wellness of your people?

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