

# THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN WORKPLACE LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

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## PASSION

*Health is a rudimentary motivator and requirement for making your organization succeed. Increasing organizational health and wellness in your corporate culture could be the most influential catalyst for promoting a more productive workplace, decreasing healthcare costs, and standing apart from your competition.*

In 2005, healthcare spending in the United States alone increased almost 6.9 percent, nearing \$2.0 trillion dollars, or \$6,697 per person (Catlin, Cowan, & Heffer, 2007). If healthcare costs are to drop and companies are to remain globally competitive, healthy living initiatives and cultures must be strongly explored and implemented in the workforce.

Health and wellness programs receive support from both employer and employee groups. Employers recognize the potential savings in healthcare costs and improved productivity by investing in their employees' daily and long-term health. Employees, recognizing their bodies and minds are influenced by lifestyle choices and environmental factors, are seeking behavior modification strategies to promote their own well-being.

People spend much of their time working. Workplace health is essential as workers' health and productivity are affected by work- and non-work-related factors. Health initiatives can no longer be reserved strictly for after hours and weekends.

## Goals of Health and Wellness Initiatives

Wellness programs promote a healthy lifestyle in and out of the workplace. The goal of such programs is usually to provide employees with opportunities to find self-improvement efforts that meet their needs, increase awareness, stimulate healthy lifestyle changes, and improve overall workplace productivity.

On the quest for health and wellness, a variety of programs may be offered to employees. Many programs are intended to encourage good nutrition, healthy hearts, weight management, effective workplace ergonomics, work-life balance, positive communication, emotional intelligence, and self-help. Programs also target specific disease prevention, management, and healing.

Perhaps most impressive is the dedicated attention that stress management and reduction programs are receiving in the workplace. Optimal programs focus on the importance of identifying and addressing stress factors. Although many of the programs listed above contribute to the reduction of stress, biofeedback is currently a new approach that focuses on specific stress factors. Biofeedback uses the mind to train the body into new or forgotten behaviors. Feedback mechanisms that measure brainwaves or skin conductance and temperature guide the user in learning how to control various involuntary body responses; brain activity, heart rate, blood pressure, or muscle tension.

Recently, two new biofeedback programs have become very popular within innovative corporations. The Institute of HeartMath produces a program called Freeze-Framer that is a heart rate variability program targeting the coherence of the heart's rhythm. U.S.-based businesses such as AT&T, Boeing, Cisco Systems, Duke University Health System, and DuPont, to name a few, recommend that their employees use HeartMath's Freeze-Framer for a mere five minutes a day and have reported that employees are happier at work and report fewer arguments at home. Healing Rhythms by The Wild Devine Project is another popular biofeedback program that targets breathing, relaxation, mindfulness,

invigoration, and balance. It is supported by medical notables as Dr. Deepak Chopra, Dr. Andrew Weil, and Dr. Dean Ornish.

On-site physical fitness programs, such as yoga, aerobics, tai chi, and weight training, also offer employers the benefit of promoting and receiving real-time benefits of health initiatives while providing employees the opportunity for realistic wellness. By increasing the implementation of integrated health and wellness options at the workplace, employers should experience a drop in absenteeism and turnover while experiencing an increase in productivity and retention, all of which directly affect the company's bottom line.

## **Health Care Cost Reduction**

When promoting wellness initiatives to the financial decision-makers, it is important to understand what draws their attention: the bottom line. In one four-year study (Ozminkowski, Ling, Goetzl, Bruno, Rutter, Issac, & Wang, 2002), medical expenditures were reduced \$224.66 per employee. The greatest cost savings occur with individuals that move from high-risk to low-risk status. Cost benefits were also recognized as the number of in-patient stays, mental health visits, and outpatient visits were lowered. Therefore, programs designed to address wellness may provide substantial health and economic dividends in years to come.

As the world experiences an increase in environmental and nutritional sensitivities, it may also become a legal concern for corporations that fail to provide proper accommodations to such individuals. Environmental sensitivities come in many forms, such as sensitivities to electromagnetic fields and chemicals. Nutritional sensitivities also come in many forms, such as to wheat, corn, peanuts, and dairy. Organizations that provide a cafeteria may also find it necessary to list ingredients for grocery items to avoid worker health complications.

Health sensitivities are of growing concern for employers and employees, as they are not usually visible to others. However, the impact on employee health and the organization's liability may be quite noticeable. Remember: it is the responsibility of the employer to provide reasonable accommodations for all employees with disabilities and sensitivities.

## **The Role of Health in Motivation**

When promoting wellness initiatives to employees, it is important to show them "what's in it for them." Health is a basic need for motivation and survival. People need health to function at the most rudimentary level. Providing a work environment that supports organizational health and effectiveness also addresses the importance of individual health and wellness. Although it takes more than health to be productive, workers who are unhealthy generally have a downward shift in motivation. Therefore, health is a basic foundation required for learning, performance, motivation, and productivity.

The importance of corporate wellness programs is already recognized and supported in many countries. It is time to focus on long-range impacts and to explore lessons learned from others' early adoption and implementation strategies. Realistic program integration is necessary to create a healthy, supportive, and positive organizational culture; organizations will be asked to put their money where their mouths are. Remember: to change a corporate culture, actions speak louder than words.

## **Corporate Strategies**

Workplace health and wellness programs have been increasing in national importance and recognition. Some current strategies include:

- Lowering the cost of healthy foods by increasing the cost of unhealthy foods in vending machines and cafeterias
- Providing cash incentives for participating in wellness programs

- Providing flexible work hours or time allocations during work hours to encourage participation in the wellness programs
- Creating team-based environments for support, such as online blogs, fitness wall charts, walking teams, and family integration programs
- Providing opportunities for health and wellness professionals to provide services on-site, such as fitness, nutrition, medical and preventive care practitioners
- Participating in insurance partnership programs

## Insurance Partnerships

Healthcare insurance companies are recognizing the growing demand for health and wellness initiatives. Currently, health promotion and preventive care opportunities may include:

- Free online education programs
- Free on-site education classes when a certain number of members sign up to attend
- Consultations, screenings, and literature for health risk assessments and lifestyle strategies
- Campaigns to promote health and wellness with individual and team-focused challenges
- Providing a personal allowance for investing funds into professional preventive care of their choice, such as chiropractic, acupuncture, osteopathy, psychotherapy, counseling, massage, yoga, meditation, biofeedback, art therapy, qigong, tai chi, personal training, naturopathy, and homeopathy. (*Note:* It is important to educate on these options to better empower the individual to make selections aligned with interest, budget, and health goals that integrate conventional and complementary arts for whole person healing.

## Education and Empowerment for Improvement

The future of international wellness lies on empowering individuals to make educated choices to strengthen their overall health. Empowerment is supported through health and wellness education and promotion. Health is an interdisciplinary movement, involving the integration of knowledge and research for integrative learning and whole person health. Highly respectable organizations, such as Friends of Health, provide educational information grounded in research to support whole-person healing. Such organizations should be explored and referenced when designing and promoting health and wellness education.

Educating individuals on the multitude of strategies for whole-person health, wellness, and healing increases the likelihood they will select a path of personal interest and will continue making health a lifestyle choice, rather than a short-lived attempt. As multidisciplinary professionals continue to work together in the name of health and healing, it will become increasingly important and *expected* that individuals play a critical role in the management of their own health and wellness, including in the workplace.

## Summary

Providing a healthy workplace to encourage learning and performance improvement is becoming a core requirement of successful organizations. It is important for organizations to measure, monitor, and report their health and economic results to their own workforce and the public to expand this growing body of knowledge. Organizations may incorporate a *variety* of options to improve the well-being of their workforces. For success, it is crucial for organizations to monitor program feasibility,

demand. and participation, as well as the economic and health benefits realized from wellness program investments. You *can* make a difference in your organization, start today.

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