

Wellness & Safety equals Healthy Occupational Performance



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Workplace safety and wellness programs benefit employers and their employees. While the programs can be implemented independently of each other, there are proven enhanced results when the two are combined into one overarching Employee Health, Safety, and Wellness program. Research indicates that integrated programs result in a healthier, more productive workplace. Benefits to the employer include better employee retention rates, reduced costs associated with high turnover (such as training), fewer instances of sick leave and disability claims, increased productivity, and improved quality of products and services.

Our ideas about a healthy workplace have evolved from an almost exclusive focus on the physical work environment (primarily on-the-job safety concerns) to a more holistic concept that encompasses psychosocial and personal health factors. One result is that the workplace is increasingly used as a setting for the promotion of employee wellness and preventive health activities. This new focus is comprehensive in scope, encompassing assessment and improvement of employees' overall health in addition to occupational injury prevention. It includes an increasing emphasis on programs that support and accommodate older workers and those with chronic diseases or disabilities. The expanded concept of a healthy workplace aligns with the World Health Organization's definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease.

Several important business trends underscore the need for an integrated approach to safety and wellness programs that reflect our broadened definition of health:

- Healthcare costs have risen faster than wages and corporate profits, causing many employers to cut back on health benefits and employees to pay more for their healthcare.
- Corporate mergers, restructuring, and job insecurity that have often led to increased work hours and greater job responsibilities for employees, resulting in added health risk factors.

- Higher rates of chronic disease and increased costs of treatment, which highlights the importance of effective prevention and disease management programs.
- Telecommuting and a 24/7 accessibility mindset, which is eroding the distinction between illness or injury sustained at work and elsewhere.
- An aging U.S. workforce that faces increased health and wellness challenges, and employers who are seeking ways to increase work longevity in order to benefit from older employees' experience, wisdom, and commitment.

Given the current financial outlook, these trends are not going away in the foreseeable future and businesses are well advised to consider ways to mitigate health related costs for the company and its employees. The combined safety and wellness program can be an integral part of a company's plan.

An integrated program functions as a holistic program that responds to a wide range of objectives. Elements of a comprehensive program may include job safety initiatives and efforts to create cultures of health and safety; early recognition and treatment of injury or illness; disability prevention and return to work programs; assessment of worker health status; a proactive response to personal health risks; emergency preparedness planning; and behavioral health and environment safety issues. While these may appear to be diverse, unrelated activities, they are aimed at the same goals: promoting overall employee health and preventing workplace injuries and illnesses. The growing body of evidence makes a strong argument for an integrated approach. Programs that address health risks from work (both physical and psychosocial) and individual risks (such as diet and smoking) are more effective in protecting and improving employee health than traditional isolated programs. Parker Smith & Feek has internally named this program H.O.P.E. = Healthy Occupational Performing Engaged Employees

With an integrated program in place, an employer can evaluate a problem from a viewpoint that takes all the components of a healthy workplace into consideration. For example, if musculoskeletal

disorders are occurring among people working in a clinical setting, the employer can examine the ergonomics of the work process/station and correct any hazardous physical conditions. However, there may be additional contributors to the problem that need to be considered, such as psychosocial issues related to workload and time pressures, or personal health issues related to employees' physical fitness or obesity. In addition to the ergonomic solution, an onsite 30-minute core conditioning class three times a week might be effective for reducing these disorders.

In my role as a Health Management Consultant, I work with our Benefits clients to determine if a combined safety and wellness program is the best fit for their organization. There are several factors that an employer will want to consider. One is the cost of prevention programs vs. the costs resulting from employee accidents and illnesses. Another is the financial penalties associated with violations of health, safety, and occupational rules and laws. The third important consideration is the value of employee health as a business asset. This final consideration is identified by most program committees as essential for maximizing the effectiveness of a combined safety and wellness program. As such, an important component in the establishment and perpetuation of the program is senior management's adoption of a health, safety and well-being "filter" in all corporate decisions.

Depending upon a company's current programs, the creation of a combined Employee Health, Safety, and Wellness program can be a challenging process:

- If two separate committees for safety and wellness are already established, you will need to plan on several meetings to discuss the mechanics of integrating the two programs. A strong facilitator is important for this process, which should include some thoughtful attention to goals for the combined program.
- If the company has only a safety committee in place, adding the wellness component can be fairly smooth since the wellness initiatives can draw upon the same resources, including the history of what has engaged and motivated employees in the safety program.

- The type of industry may complicate integration because safety requirements can be subject to complex laws and governmental oversight. In some cases, it may be best to keep the safety and wellness programs as separate entities. If so, it would be beneficial to include at least one person from the safety committee, or its leadership, on the wellness committee. This will help keep the lines of communication open regarding mutual goals and effective means of achieving them.
- In the healthcare industry, the most common hurdle is how to implement the integrated committee. Established committees for safety, quality assurance, human resources, and employee health typically have budgets for safety and well-being programs. All four committees can potentially contribute resources to a blended committee. A key to success for healthcare organizations will be a collaborative management of the changes that is inclusive of all existing committees.

While the creation of an Employee Health, Safety, and Wellness program in whatever format that is suitable for your company may take some effort, it will undoubtedly prove worthwhile. Health is one of the most important and complex issues faced by our country today, and the workplace has a central role to play.

Integrating workplace wellness, health, and safety supports a holistic approach to health and I encourage you to join this new approach. Start by conceptualizing how integration may work for your company: take a look at the "big picture" and potential blending of your existing committees and resources.