



Work Smart Live Smart

Comprehensive Wellness Programming and EAPs

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Employee assistance professionals can help take wellness programs to the next level by identifying employee needs, getting top-level buy-in, and assisting employees and supervisors in seeing a link between the program and their health and work.

Industries rely on healthy workers to keep themselves competitive, and a comprehensive health and wellness program has emerged as a necessity in business strategy planning. But pulling together all of the components that comprise a successful wellness program can be a challenge. The first step is to let go of past notions regarding wellness and understand that workplace health has evolved from crisis intervention to personal assistance and prevention to health promotion and that it now also needs to address environmental and organizational issues that may be adding to employees' stress loads.

A Brief Look At The Past

Originally, workplace health concentrated on physical health and safety issues such as the handling of chemical substances. Employers were required to address these hazards to meet government laws and regulations. However, eliminating these factors alone was not enough to ensure healthy employees. Personal and mental health issues affected workers as well, and employees were expected to resolve them on their own. If they failed, they often lost their jobs.

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) initially were formed to help employees who were in danger of losing their jobs because of addiction problems. Over time they broadened their scope of responsibilities to include mental health, financial, legal, and various "crisis" events. Throughout their evolution, their objective remained the same--to help employees return to their previous level of productivity.

Over time, a more preventative orientation emerged in the form of wellness initiatives and currently into a comprehensive wellness program. A comprehensive wellness program incorporates the World Health Organization's definition of health, which is "the extent to which an individual or group is able to realize aspirations, satisfy needs and to change or cope with their environment." This definition recognizes the employee as a whole person who requires a variety of health supports and environmental adaptations.

In some nations, employers can be held legally accountable for ensuring that the work environment promotes health and not disease. A report from Health Canada (Canada's health ministry) says that workplace stress can be attributed to the employer if the workplace defeats the employee's sense of control over his/her work and health--which in turn reduces motivation to pursue positive health practices--and/or the workplace makes it difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle and pursue positive health practices.

Workplace wellness should not be construed as a means of making company leaders solely responsible for their employees' health. Corporate leaders can, however, create a work environment that fosters well-being and target employees' unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Putting it All Together

Few companies have a truly comprehensive wellness program. Corporate wellness initiatives still tend to be disjointed and operate in isolation; many have no process of benchmarking, measurement, or evaluation. The current evolution of wellness programming is in the direction of a comprehensive plan that is corporate-connected and results-focused.

Benchmarking, developing buy-in, and conducting evaluations are all critical to developing a comprehensive plan, as is ensuring that the 10 fundamental principles and values listed in the sidebar are a part of the corporate environment and are internalized by the leadership team. As a key member of the wellness team, an EA professional will want to help impress these principles and values on those who will be making the key decisions.

SIDEBAR 1 **Fundamental Principles and Values** **(As determined by Health Canada)**

1. People are an organization's most important resource, and each individual has a unique, value-adding contribution to make.
2. Concern and care for the health of people are essential to the achievement of business success.
3. Healthy employees enhance an organization's competitive position.
4. A company with healthy employees has a positive impact on its community and customers.
5. A change in individual employee health metrics can be an early indicator of changes in other aspects of business performance.
6. Optimal employee health is compatible with and supportive of excellence in other aspects of business activity.
7. Health, like other aspects of business, can be managed and self-managed.
8. People adopt values that are emphasized by their organizational leaders.
9. Employee health is an integral part of the business and is built on the belief that all injuries and most illnesses are preventable.
10. Every employee at every level has responsibility for creating a healthy work environment and promoting healthy lifestyles.

While some of these values are formally addressed in vision and mission statements, they are often disregarded when making difficult business decisions. Not understanding or truly internalizing these values and principles will compromise the success of a wellness program.

When pulling ideas together to form a comprehensive wellness plan, you must evaluate what you currently know about the health and well-being of your employees. This process, called benchmarking, will help you to determine what outcomes you can hope to achieve. For example, there is no point aiming for 100 percent participation in a smoking cessation workshop if only 1 percent of employees are smokers.

Proper benchmarking gathers information about the current costs of stress and illness to benefits programs, including benefits usage, compensation, and short- and long-term disability; absenteeism patterns and related costs; retention rates and the costs of rehiring; productivity and quality costs; current employee health, stress, and satisfaction levels; and current wellness programming. Employee health, stress, and satisfaction information can be obtained through an employee questionnaire. An example of one that can be tailored for your workplace can be found at www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com

Your current wellness programming and relevant statistics should pull together all of the programs that your company has in place that affect the way a person functions in his/her job. This includes not only safety, fitness, nutrition, health monitoring, and health benefits but also training and development, reward and recognition, team building initiatives, conflict and problem-solving programs and strategies, and communication programs. Once this information is gathered it can provide a solid foundation for determining the types of stressors facing employees, the costs associated with these types of stressors, and the wellness programming that will be of most benefit.

Some wellness programs are meant to raise consciousness; others may promote self-evaluation and provide an opportunity for individuals to assess themselves and see incongruence between their self-view and their behavior. Still others are “countering” programs that help individuals look for positive alternatives to their non-desired behavior.

These various types of programs are then directed toward assorted issue areas to ensure a variety of wellness strategies that mesh with the diverse aptitudes and needs of employees. The strategies include the following:

- * Healthy living strategies that help an individual with self-efficacy, such as stress management, nutrition, and relaxation classes;
- * Work/family/life strategies that address issues such as eldercare and parenting, alternate work arrangements, and financial planning;
- * Onsite and offsite health-related services, including employee assistance, disability case management, blood pressure screening, and back care classes;

- * General working environment strategies to provide information and skills in areas such as handling harassment, learning cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and other emergency techniques, and conducting safety audits;
- * Workplace culture strategies, which bolster corporate initiatives by ensuring clear job descriptions, empowering employees, and recognizing good performance;
- * Team support-building programs that use employees as in-house experts to teach and inform their co-workers; and
- * Supplemental health and dental benefits covering alternative therapies such as massage, orthotics, and vision care.

Once the issue areas are determined, a five-year plan should be developed that describes the wellness strategies that will address them, the outcomes that are expected, and the budget needed to implement them.

Developing Buy-In

Once a five-year plan is in place, the leadership team must fully support it. Leaders need to see how a comprehensive plan will decrease costs and support the mission of the company, and they must be able to link the plan to their leadership strategies and their own health needs. The plan must also be presented to employees in a way that they, too, understand the costs to the company and themselves and see how a comprehensive plan will support their choices for a healthier lifestyle.

Setting up a wellness committee is part of developing organizational buy-in. The responsibility of this committee is to establish programs that are in line with the benchmarks gathered initially and that reflect a balance of information, skill development, and attitude and value changes. Using a committee structure builds on existing internal communication channels and encourages a deeper-rooted buy-in from participants. Organizational leaders and wellness committee members who model healthy strategies and who actively support and/or are involved in the wellness initiatives can influence other employees and enhance the success of the comprehensive wellness program.

Both leaders and employees need to receive reward and recognition for their involvement and for their health behavior changes. This can be accomplished through give-aways and recognition in company-wide letters. Some companies have initiated a university-type program whereby employees must take part in a number of initiatives throughout the year as part of their employment expectations with the company. Some companies have linked participation directly with extra benefits and coverage or with lower employee costs for these benefit plans.

Conducting Evaluations

The final step in implementing a comprehensive wellness program is to incorporate a process of evaluation. There is a shortage of solid corporate research backing the benefits of a comprehensive wellness program in the workplace. A recent Buffett and Taylor survey found that fewer than one in four companies evaluates their wellness programs, which explains why much of the data associated with workplace wellness is so limited and mostly anecdotal.

Many managers do not see a clear link between the corporate health program and the overall corporate strategy and don't perceive how the program affects their day-to-day work. This is where an employee assistance professional can share his/her expertise with the wellness committee. EAPs have withstood many changes within the corporate environment because they have been able to measure and translate their benefits to company leaders. EA professionals should emphasize that measurements of wellness programs need to be tied to overall business outcomes and need to make sense to business unit managers if workplace wellness is to be seen as a critical and essential part of the business plan and not just the "flavor of the day."

As an EA professional you provide services that meet the health needs of individual employees, but part of your larger role is to assist in the integration of all corporate initiatives into a comprehensive workplace wellness program. An EAP is not and should not be the corporate wellness program; rather, it is part of a comprehensive plan that helps employees realize their aspirations, satisfy their needs, and cope with their environment. This involves providing education to employees, managers, and leaders about values and principles, benchmarking, coordination, developing buy-in, communication, and evaluation.

SIDEBAR 2

Wellness Programming 101

Consider the following five questions when beginning your wellness programming:

1. What will happen or continue to happen and how much will it cost if we do not invest in wellness?
2. What programs do we currently have and are they working?
3. What programs would meet more of the needs of our employees?
4. What outcomes are we hoping for or why are we willing to invest in wellness?
5. What can we realistically afford to invest?

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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