



Work Smart Live Smart

Corporate Wellness Programs – A Business Case

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The World Health Organization of the United Nations proposes that Depression will be the leading cause of disease burden by 2020. Mental health claims are the fastest growing category of disability costs in Canada overtaking cardiovascular disease.

Why Implement A Corporate Wellness Program?

The impact of stress on physical and psychological well-being and its negative effect on company productivity and morale is soundly documented. More and more Canadians are having difficulty keeping their mind on their work. Employees are preoccupied with personal problems and focusing less on their jobs. Without assistance and coping strategies, these potentially productive workers will end up costing their company money by having accidents, using up their sick benefits, and getting into workplace conflicts. Employee stress lowers work quality and company productivity. Unmanaged stress will negatively affect the bottom line.

The cost of unmanaged stress is clear but the effectiveness of wellness programs in reducing these damaging outcomes is not yet well documented. There is no standard for corporate wellness programs. They range from incentives and rewards to participate in personal health programs to compulsory education. . Currently most of the research on the cost-effectiveness of corporate wellness programs is being done by Employee Assistance Programs. Their research shows that for every dollar spent on EAP's, savings can range from 7 to 14 dollars (Warren Shepell Consultants).

In the new global economy, health of the knowledge worker will be key to the financial success of the company. For every dollar spent by Canadian business and industry on training, the U.S. spends twice as much, Japan five times, and Germany eight times. Only 31 percent of Canadian firms provide formal wellness training for their employees (Source Warren Shepell Consultants Corporation). In order to stay competitive, Canadian companies will have to invest in their employees' health.

Where To Start?

A successful corporate wellness program starts with employee input. Program design and the strategies offered must be responsive to employee issues and work within the parameters of their lifestyle.

Workers consistently identify stress management programs as a top priority for workplace health promotion activities. Management consistently identifies decreasing absenteeism, and long-term health claims as a priority for increasing productivity and quality. Stress management education is the first step of a comprehensive plan to ensure a healthy workforce and achieve corporate success. According to one study, *'a 10% rise in employee education can produce nearly that much in productivity.'* (Source Perez, Wilkerson, Mindsets, 1998)

Stress management education begins by providing information about the basic concepts of stress management, including sources of stress, our body's stress response, and various coping techniques such as relaxation, breathing, exercise, nutrition, sleep, and support. Along with this information, further guidance should be provided on more specific stress issues including family balance, conflict, communication, organizational skills, and dealing with change.

Next Steps?

Once a company provided education on healthy lifestyle strategies, it needs to look at organizational issues that may be unnecessarily adding to employee stress levels. Issues such as employee involvement in decision making, two-way continuous communication, shift work practices, physical conditions, appropriate hiring practices that ensure the 'right' person for the 'right' job, clear job descriptions and expectations, opportunity for development, job security, management styles, and office politics should all be reviewed to obtain optimum performance and employee satisfaction.

Innovative companies further decrease employee stress levels by adding various services within the company benefits program. Some have offered reduced fitness memberships, or built fitness centers in their buildings. Daycare centers are springing up in some large urban companies, where competition for quality daycare adds further stress to employees. When supervisors support employees to manage the conflicting pressures of work and family obligations, 'employee satisfaction was 69% higher, employee retention was 200% times higher, quality was 18% higher and customer service and retention was 6% and 7% higher respectively'. In a Johnson and Johnson study employees who had supervisors who supported them in managing work/family concerns, and had access to family programs at work were among the highest performers in the company, the best providers of internal and external customer service, least likely to leave the company, and least likely to have disciplinary problems.' (Source Perez and Wilkerson, Mindsets, 1998)

Companies on the cutting edge of dedication to stress reduction and prevention have created Stress Management and Relaxation Centers. These areas/rooms provide access to stress assessment tests, audio, video, and text lending libraries, TV/VCRs and stereo systems, massage bookings or massage chairs, and aromatherapy. These centers may also have staff that co-ordinate employee stress breaks and activities. The rooms may also have stress-reducing equipment like light-sound machines (which are fairly inexpensive and facilitate a state of relaxation) EMG monitors (for learning to decrease muscle tension) or even R.E.S.T. flotation rooms. *'The emphasis of the center is on providing a number of approaches for the control of harmful stress. A holistic or comprehensive approach provides greater assurance that the employee will receive the assistance they need'*. (Source Ernesto Randolfi, Montana State University, AWHP's Worksite Health, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1997)

Summary

Stress education, healthy organizational practices, and counseling services are all part of a comprehensive workplace health program. Companies dedicated to implementing these strategies demonstrate to their employees that they are committed to facilitating and maintaining their well-being. Employees who are educated about healthy choices and have the support of the company to make these positive choices repay the company by being present at work and performing well. Corporate wellness initiatives make positive contributions to company culture and have a definite impact on the bottom line.

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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