5 ways to improve corporate wellness

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With insurance costs rising for North American companies and their employees, implementing innovative solutions to improve wellness and slow down costs has become a business imperative.

But reducing this steep climb in health costs is actually easier than one might think. With some simple ideas and a bit of determination on the part of employers and employees, you can help improve the health of your workplace. Here are five easy ways that you can begin to improve the wellness of your organization right now.

1) Encourage walking
Walking is probably the most underestimated type of physical activity, yet according to health professionals, regular walking can:

- reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke;
- reduce blood pressure;
- reduce stress;
- lower blood cholesterol levels;
- increase bone density, which prevents osteoporosis;
- minimize the consequences of osteoarthritis;
- relieve back pain; and
- improve overall health and longevity.

Encourage employees to walk or bike to work rather than drive, use the stairs instead of the elevator and walk during their breaks. Offer flexible schedules so they can commit to an exercise routine. If employees take on these small changes, they will start to notice a positive difference within weeks.

2) Help employees butt out
Smoking is responsible for killing approximately 438,000 people in the U.S. every year, and tobacco is projected to be responsible for the deaths of one billion people in the 21st century. As well, employees who smoke can significantly impact productivity and benefits costs:

- Smokers are absent from work more frequently than non-smokers.
- Smokers can cost more in terms of insurance claims.
- Smokers are hospitalized for long periods of time more frequently than non-smokers.
- Smokers are more susceptible to complications such as infection, pneumonia or respiratory problems after surgery.

Tobacco is enemy number one when it comes to employee health, but you can combat the problem with a workplace tobacco policy.
Promote a smoke-free lifestyle by showing employees the advantages of quitting and by offering psychological or clinical support to assist them. Consider offering subsidized tobacco cessation programs that include prescription medication to reduce the urge to smoke, along with telephone counselling and educational materials.

3) Provide healthy food
Supplying healthy foods that taste good will greatly increase the odds that your employees will eat well. Certain dietary trends like hypocaloric diets are notorious for being tasteless—and this reputation is often spot-on. To bring healthy and tasty together, you could offer health-oriented or vegetarian cooking courses, and workshops on how to shop healthy. Another smart idea is to replace the high-fat and high-sugar junk food from vending machines with healthier options such as nuts, dried fruit and low-fat popcorn. Consider lowering the prices of healthier options to encourage employees to choose them. Add more water coolers so that employees avoid sugary beverages.

If your company provides on-site meals, ensure the catering service offers high-quality, healthy foods and that their menu will provide enough energy for a good day’s work. Of course, there is a cost to providing high-quality food on-site, but this cost will be offset by the many benefits it brings: healthier employees will be more productive and make less insurance claims over time. You will also see greatly improved workplace morale and employee retention.

Provide your employees with nutrition information, advice, guides and brochures so they can learn how to change their habits. Some free guides are available at the following sources:

- Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide
- Dietary Guidelines for Americans (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services)

4) Help employees control stress
Stress is now the primary cause of long-term employee absenteeism. From 1996 to 2000, the number of employees calling in sick due to stress tripled, according to a survey of 800,000 workers in more than 300 companies by The American Institute of Stress. An estimated one million workers are absent every day due to stress, and stress is estimated to cost American companies $602 per worker every year; the study reported that the total price tag for large employers could approach $3.5 million annually. The Conference Board of Canada found that employees who reported a high degree of stress balancing their work and family life missed 7.2 days of work each year, while those who reported very little stress only missed an average of 3.6 days. Studies conducted by the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health found that disability costs represent 12% of payroll costs, and that mental health claims are the fastest growing category of disability costs in Canada.

Chronic stress is a serious health risk factor; reducing stress is just as important as a healthy diet and exercise, especially for heart health. Counselling services and employee assistance programs can provide employees with information and advice on workplace stress, as well as emotional, psychological and personal issues. Offering meditation or yoga classes is also a way to help employees combat stress; meditation calms your physiological reaction to stress and even helps alter brain chemistry so that over time you become less reactive to stress, while yoga combines breathing and meditation with an element of physical exercise.

5) Diagnose
One of the most important measures for improving employee health is to conduct a diagnosis of your workforce.

This diagnostic should evaluate several different aspects of health, not just physical health and lifestyle questions. Rather, it should include an assessment of emotional health, so that stress and similar issues are properly considered and understood. As well, it should include an organizational health evaluation that asks employees about workplace factors, such as communication and workload, that affect their productivity and morale. Without analyzing these issues, employers cannot hope to have a wellness program that addresses the full spectrum of issues that impact health costs.

A diagnostic will inform company leaders about the overall state of health in their business—not just of the employees, but of the company itself. It will put the spotlight on the issues where an intervention is necessary. This allows management to implement solutions that are adapted to the specific needs of the employees and the company, thereby minimizing overall expenditures and maximizing the return on investment.

If your company is thinking about starting an employee wellness program, conducting a diagnostic should be the first action taken. Comprehensive scientific reviews show that work site health promotion programs improve health knowledge, health behaviours and underlying health conditions.