

STRATEGIES FOR INVESTING IN A
HEALTHY
WORKFORCE



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Executive Summary

Problem

Today's environment makes it difficult for your employees to achieve and maintain optimal health. High-fat, tasty food is cheap and accessible, green spaces are few and far between, and our jobs often promote stress and long periods of inactivity.

Unfortunately, the situation only seems to be getting worse. During these difficult economic times, employees and managers alike are dealing with the negative effects of chronic stress: high blood pressure, increased appetite, lack of sleep, emotional eating, depression, and anxiety. Add to that tobacco use, physical inactivity and a lack of proper nutrition and there is a good chance your employee morale and productivity will be at an all-time low. And their health problems –and your healthcare costs—will be at an all-time high.

Solution

The good news is that by implementing a comprehensive healthy workforce initiative, you can help to slow the seemingly inevitable march towards greater rates of obesity and chronic disease. A study conducted in 2008 looked at the scores on healthy worksite evaluations and concluded that one unit of improvement in an area of an employer worksite undergoing a healthy workforce initiative resulted in a \$35 reduction in cost and \$22 reduction in outpatient costs.¹ By investing in a healthy worksite environment and implementing strategies that will encourage your employees to engage in healthy behaviors, you can improve the overall health and productivity of your workforce and improve your bottom line.

Engage: Establish an Employee Advisory Board

An Employee Advisory Board (EAB), also known as a worksite wellness committee, is a group of employees that can help your organization generate excitement around healthy behaviors and make the decisions necessary to provide a healthy worksite for your employees. The responsibilities of an EAB can include evaluating your organization's current programs and policies, assessing the needs and preferences of your workforce, developing a plan for implementation and promotions, and assisting in the implementation and evaluation of your worksite wellness initiatives.

Here are some ideas on how to build an effective EAB:

- **Engage staff across all areas of your company.** Include representatives from multiple functional areas and organizational levels to ensure diversity of viewpoints when planning your program offerings.
- **Recruit people responsible for employee health.** Staff in human resources, employee benefits, and occupational health and safety will bring specialized knowledge to your committee that can give you insight into the needs of your employees.
- **Involve people who are tasked with environmental and policy changes.** Facility, operations, and legal department staff will have the knowledge of company and campus policies, vendor relationships and other operational considerations that can assist you in making relevant changes.
- **Determine the people in your organization who will be the key communicators.** Nominate the people on your EAB who will take responsibility for ensuring clear and ongoing communications and promotion of your health program offerings.
- **Encourage an active EAB.** Your EAB may dedicate most of their time to planning and promoting new initiatives, but make sure they also take time to encourage overall employee health by hosting health fairs and weekly activities such as company walks.
- **Enlist the support of leadership team.** Gaining and maintaining support from management down is perhaps the single most important aspect of implementing initiatives for a healthy workplace. You want to be certain that once new policies are drafted and communicated you will have ongoing support from the key stakeholders in the organization should you be faced with any noncompliance.

Key Success Factors

Assess: Conduct a Healthy Worksite Evaluation

Appraise the depth and breadth of the health initiatives your organization already has in place. Next, identify which areas may need improvement. A thorough analysis of your current offerings will also serve to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders, assess economic efficiency and form the basis of advocacy for policy change.

- **Health promotion, programs and policies.** Determine whether you are currently offering comprehensive programs and policies to address unhealthy behaviors such as tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity and stress. For example, does your worksite offer employees a comprehensive, evidence-based tobacco cessation program, a smoke-free policy and a tobacco-free campus? Evaluate the effectiveness of the programs you already have in place in relation to your company's health goals, and determine whether more effective programs and policies are needed.
- **Food environment.** Evaluate the healthiness of your cafeteria, snack bars and vending machines and determine whether your EAB should draw up healthy food guidelines and educate your employees about the importance of good nutrition to overall health. Consider subsidizing the price of healthy foods and make sure fresh fruits are delivered regularly.
- **Physical activity environment.** Consider how conducive the environment in and around your worksite is for physical activity. Does your campus promote walking? Are the internal stairwells in your buildings designed to encourage usage by employees? Does your organization offer an onsite fitness facility or subsidize gym memberships? Do you promote an employee walking club or sponsor sporting teams?
- **Stress environment.** 80 percent of workers report stress at work; 50 percent of these reported they wanted help learning how to manage stress.² A key factor in employee stress is whether they feel they have control over their work. Determine whether your employees' workload carries a manageable stress level and what counseling resources are available for them, should they feel overwhelmed physically, emotionally or mentally.
- **Corporate culture.** Take stock of your employees' current behaviors surrounding holidays, birthdays, meetings, and events. Are donuts the staple of morning team meetings? Is pizza and cake the standard fare for celebrations? Remember that a healthy corporate culture starts at the top – consider what kind of example your leadership team sets and start there first.

Plan

As you assess your current worksite environment you can begin to make plans to revitalize the healthfulness of your workforce. Your EAB should be responsible for working with stakeholders to accomplish the following:

- **Assess resources and develop a budget.** Conducting a healthy worksite evaluation, addressing and refining worksite policies, promoting new policies and programs, implementing worksite changes, and evaluating the success of your initiative could potentially put a strain on your organization if you're not adequately prepared. Make sure you have the money, staff and time to do so efficiently and effectively.
- **Create a calendar.** Allow enough room for education and preparation of management and employees. Employees should be given enough notice to adequately prepare for new developments (i.e. new vending machines).
- **Develop healthy worksite policies.** Develop healthy cafeteria guidelines, policies that govern catering for meetings and events, smoke-free campus policies, etc.
- **Promote the availability of free programs that support healthy behaviors.** Make sure to communicate the availability of your wellness offerings to your employees before you implement any new policies at your worksite. If comprehensive behavior change programs are offered in advance of policy change, employees may feel better prepared, more supportive of the changes and less likely to view the changes as punitive.
- **Offer incentives.** Develop a plan for rewarding employees who engage and reach key milestones in the healthy behaviors programs that you provide for them. Remember that incentives don't have to be financial to be effective; recognition of achievement can be worth more than financial gain. For example, you could announce in your company newsletter or corporate blog how many people in your walking club have reached a set goal, such as 10,000 steps per day.

Promote the Initiative

Once you have developed appropriate messaging and a strategy for communicating new programs and policies, it will be time for promotion. It is recommended that you develop a promotional calendar for the year and follow it as closely as possible. Ongoing promotion is essential to both build awareness and then to maintain momentum and engagement in the initiative in order to achieve sustained health behavior change.

- **Develop clear messaging.** Determine your expectations for the policy and program early on and develop clear messaging to support them. Think about the demographics of your workforce and determine the most effective way to reach your employees. Some employees may need culturally specific or low-literacy materials.
- **Develop a strategy for communication.** Recognize the fact that your employees will appreciate transparency as well as frequent communication. Determine the best methods for communicating within your organization, both with employees and management.
- **Determine the people in your organization who will be the key communicators.** Nominate people in your EAB to take responsibility for ensuring clear and ongoing communication support.
- **Enlist the support of your vendors for promotional ideas and materials.** A comprehensive provider will help you develop strategies and deliver promotional and recruitment materials that are customizable to your organization, providing promotional copy for newsletters, email blasts, direct mail, posters, brochures, and more.

Implement

Once you have communicated and promoted your plan, you are ready to implement your new policies. Keep in mind that a healthy workforce initiative is intended to promote wellness and encourage employees to live a healthy lifestyle, not to punish those who are making unhealthy choices. As you implement the new policies, make sure that management and staff remember to focus on correcting the behavior, not on punishing or judging those who are engaging in unhealthy behaviors.

- **Announce new policies within an adequate time frame.** Don't implement new policies before giving employees enough time to prepare. Once you announce your intentions to your organization, spend the remaining time planning, promoting, and educating your management team and employees.
- **Provide comprehensive behavior change support.** If you don't already have effective programs that address tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity and stress, this is the time to add them to your benefits package. Your employees should be provided with the best support available to help them comply with new policies at the worksite and with the knowledge and skills to carry those new behaviors over into their personal lives.
- **Enforce new policies.** Your policies for healthy behaviors will not be as effective if you do not establish a strategy for compliance. Think about ways you can make sure your employees comply with the new policies, and what measures will be taken if they do not.

Evaluate

After spending the time and effort planning, communicating, and implementing the initiative, you'll want to see clear results. Formal evaluation of your new policy and program will be an ongoing process that will help you know how to make improvements. Begin planning early to ensure that you can effectively collect the data you need to clearly evaluate success.

- **Determine early how management defines success.** In order to have clear, transparent results, you will need to ensure that your management team has clearly defined its expectations for what constitutes a "successful" implementation.
- **Monitor employees' reactions to the policy.** Pay close attention to the reactions of both employees and management as the initiative is implemented. Identify any areas of confusion and instances of noncompliance. Is your EAB inspiring excitement for employee health?
- **Set goals for future improvements to implementation.** Take your employees' reactions into consideration and determine how you can improve communication strategies, offer more support or perhaps consider implementing more effective programs if the ones you have in place are not producing results.

How to Select Effective Programs for Behavior Change

In order to give your employees the best chance for success, your healthy worksite initiative should be paired with comprehensive, evidence-based programs to address the key contributors to chronic disease, poor health, and low productivity: tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and stress. The best programs will not only support and supplement the healthy behaviors you are encouraging with your worksite policies, but will teach your employees the knowledge, behavioral strategies, and cognitive skills needed to achieve and maintain lifelong health. Generalized programs are often too broad and too shallow to create lasting change. Effective programs will:

- **Offer independent treatment for tobacco use.** Tobacco use is widely recognized as an addiction more powerful than heroin or cocaine. It must be treated independently of other behavior change goals and should combine coaching interventions with medication usage and social support.
- **Draw from an evidence base that is biological, behavioral, and psychological.** Most programs only use methods developed from behavioral science, which does not address the underlying cognitive issues that can sabotage plans for behavior change.
- **Teach people life-long skills.** A comprehensive program will provide participants with the tools they need that will last them far beyond the time they spend with the program and help them to face any difficult situation they face in the future.
- **Emphasize engagement.** Many people grow tired of information-only programs that provide details on “what to do” but not “how” to change their behaviors and “why” specific behavioral changes will result in improved health. A successful program will keep participants engaged in a continuous journey of education and interactivity so that they stick with the program and gain a complete understanding of how to obtain long-term health through behavior change.
- **Offer data transparency.** Look for a provider that offers your company visibility into their operations, the data they collect, and the results they achieve. Your provider should be a strategic, tactical and operational partner to you as you work to achieve health and productivity improvement goals at your workplace.

Conclusion

In order to overcome the obstacles of our modern environment, your workforce needs to be provided with the knowledge, behavioral strategies, and cognitive skills they need to make healthier decisions for life. Your employees spend over half of their waking hours in the environment you provide for them; you have a unique opportunity to influence their behaviors in a measurable way.

Taking the time to create a comprehensive plan with an EAB that represents a broad range of opinions will allow you to best serve the needs of your workforce. With the support of your leadership team, you can conduct a healthy worksite evaluation to determine how your organization ranks in the areas of corporate culture, health promotion, food, physical activity and tobacco use.

Clearly communicating with management and staff and allowing them enough time to prepare for the changes you need to make will help you to enlist support for the creation of a healthier workplace. Once you have determined the areas that need immediate attention, you can prioritize the steps needed to roll out the initiative.

Give your employees the best chance of success by offering comprehensive, effective programs for addressing tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity and stress, helping them reduce their risk for chronic disease and prepare for a lifetime of healthy behaviors. If such programs are supplemented by a supportive healthy worksite environment, you can effectively revitalize the energy and productivity of your staff, thus reducing healthcare costs, decreasing absenteeism and increasing staff retention.

CITATIONS

¹ DeJoy, DM et al. Development of the Environmental Assessment Tool (EAT) to Measure Organizational Physical and Social Support for Worksite Obesity Prevention Programs. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 50(2): 126-137, 2008.

² Gallup Poll, Quint Careers, http://www.quintcareers.com/managing_job_stress.html

About Us

Aleré Wellbeing

Aleré Wellbeing (formerly Free & Clear) drives sustained health behavior change by connecting individuals with knowledge and information, and then empowering them to act on that knowledge to improve their own health and wellbeing. Aleré Wellbeing's evidence-based programs address modifiable health risks that contribute to chronic disease: tobacco use, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and stress. Current clients include 27 state governments and more than 600 health plans and employers, 63 of which are in the Fortune 500. Aleré Wellbeing is known and respected for its pay-for-performance business model, intense focus on scalable service quality, dedicated account management, continuous program improvement, and transparent reporting of measurable outcomes at the individual participant and aggregate population level. Aleré Wellbeing has contributed to more than 100 published research studies and maintains collaboration with the American Cancer Society® and an active research program funded by the Centers for Disease Control, American Legacy Foundation, and the National Institutes of Health. More information about Aleré Wellbeing can be found at www.alerewellbeing.com.

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