

1.2 Steps to a Healthier Workplace



Steps to a Healthier Workplace

The benefits of health promotion and disease prevention are significant. Over the long-term, a health promotion and disease prevention program can improve employee health, reduce healthcare costs, and improve productivity. In addition, several short-term benefits exist, such as improved employee relations, a more positive company image, and a healthier work culture.

Following the steps below will enable employers to create a data-driven plan that meets the needs of the organization. The focus of this resource kit is on developing policies and changes to the work environment, which ultimately lead to workplaces that support healthy lifestyles. The kit offers specific examples from worksites in Maine that have created healthier work environments with no- or low-cost strategies. These success stories can be replicated across large and small organizations in various industries. The following steps describe the key elements that should be a part of the planning process.

Gain Management Support

Create a Wellness Team

Assess Needs and Interests

Develop a Plan

Create a Supportive Workplace

Evaluate

Gain Management Support

Before a program can get off the ground, it is important to identify key individuals in the organization whose support is essential to the success of the new initiative. The most important factor for program success is the level of support and participation from senior-level management. Having a clear understanding of management support, and tailoring strategies accordingly, can increase the likelihood of success for a new initiative. In some cases, initially low support may necessitate starting small in order to build support and generate some easy wins. In other situations, the CEO will be the driver behind certain ideas. Top-level support can be gauged in a variety of ways.

1.2 Steps to a Healthier Workplace

Start by asking some of the following questions:

- Does senior-level management believe in worksite health promotion?
- Has the CEO spoken or written to employees about the importance of health?
- Do senior-level managers participate in wellness activities or practice good health habits on their own?



Case in Point

Dan Dauphinee, Operations Manager at Northeastern Log Homes in Kenduskeag, is one senior manager who is invested in the health of his employees. “My initial interest in employee health was to see if we could control our healthcare costs,” recalled Dauphinee. After systematically looking for opportunities to support and encourage employees to adopt healthy lifestyles, along with identification and education about risk factors, Dauphinee is a believer. “As a result of our efforts, I’ve seen employees who have completely changed their health. Now I know that we’re making a difference in peoples’ lives,” he says.

Create a Wellness Team

The best way to generate and implement new ideas is through a Wellness Team. A Wellness Team should be comprised of a cross section of the organization, including staff from various departments, senior-level managers, and key individuals in the organization with a proven record of leadership success. Ideally, teams should be appointed by management with a clear mission and vision. This “official” capacity cultivates a greater sense of purpose among team members and adds value to the organization. The team should have a designated coordinator who is a good facilitator and strong leader. Wellness Teams should have a budget to ensure dedicated funding, meet on a regular basis to sustain momentum, and provide consistent reports to management to demonstrate activities and progress.



Case in Point

At Barber Foods, a company priority in recent years has been to increase the use of preventive care benefits. The Wellness Team was seen as a potential contributor to this effort, and they certainly have made a positive impact. The team identified a variety of ways to educate employees about existing benefits such as regular physician visits, screenings, and routine dental examinations. In their annual wellness calendar, the Wellness Team provided clear descriptions of these underutilized benefits, including basic information about setting up appointments and the costs to employees. The team also built benefits education into their *English as a Second Language* class, knowing that these classes provided access to a large number of employees. In just three years, the company has successfully increased preventive care benefit utilization by 300%, largely due to the work of the Wellness Team.

Assess Needs and Interests

To best plan for new wellness initiatives, information should be gathered at several levels. This information gathering process gives the Wellness Team a better sense of existing health promotion initiatives, management buy-in, and employee interests.

Organizational Assessment

An organizational assessment should be utilized to catalog existing programs, policies, activities, and benefits. This assessment is useful in providing baseline information on the policies, programs, and activities used by the organization to support employee health. In addition, it will provide information on the worksite culture regarding health. The Heart Check Assessment (see Appendix One) is a helpful, easy-to-use tool to gather this information.

Employee Interests

The success of any new initiative is closely tied to employee interests and readiness levels. Conducting a survey on employee interests provides the Wellness Team with new ideas that will have a higher likelihood of success. Employees should be asked about health topics of interest and preferred delivery of information. They should also be invited to offer strategies that support tobacco use treatment, eating healthy, and being physically active during the workday. This input provides the Wellness Team with new ideas and includes employees in the planning process.

Employee Readiness

In order to develop strategies that produce long-lasting changes in health behaviors, the Wellness Team must assess employee readiness for change.

1.2 Steps to a Healthier Workplace

The Stages of Change model serves this purpose, allowing for programs or interventions to be planned according to the readiness level of the target population. The stages are described below:

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| Precontemplation: | Has no intention to take action within the next six months |
| Contemplation: | Intends to take action within the next six months |
| Preparation: | Intends to take action within the next 30 days and has taken some behavioral steps in this direction |
| Action: | Has changed behavior for less than six months |
| Maintenance: | Has changed behavior for more than six months |

The Stages of Change can be used to determine individual readiness for change regarding specific health behaviors such as tobacco use and physical inactivity, or can be applied in more general health terms. (Please see question 6 in the Employee Interest Survey [Appendix Two] and questions 4 and 10 in the Behavior Survey [Appendix Three] for examples.) This information is quite useful for a Wellness Team in choosing where to target their efforts. For example, if a large number of smokers at a worksite fall into the precontemplation stage, efforts should be directed at raising awareness of the health and financial costs associated with tobacco use. On the other hand, if a significant number of employees are contemplating or preparing for a change, the employer should provide incentives and support, such as health insurance benefits that cover smoking cessation and medication, employee support groups, and tobacco use policies which restrict smoking on company grounds. In most organizations, it is likely that employees will be spread across the Stages of Change model.

Gaining an understanding of employee interests and readiness for change allows Wellness Teams to develop strategies that, in terms of health behaviors, meet employees where they are at. The Employee Interest Survey (see Appendix Two) and Behavior Survey (see Appendix Three) provide a variety of questions on employee interests, health behaviors, and readiness for change.

Healthcare Data

Gathering healthcare data from a health insurer or third-party administrator helps employers target programs toward the most costly health issues. Employers who have access to this information should conduct a review of overall



healthcare claims, including medication utilization, chronic disease prevalence, injuries, and preventative benefits utilization, to name a few. This data provides a baseline for which to evaluate program effectiveness in the future.

Develop a Plan

Data from the assessments described above allows the Wellness Team to define and prioritize needs as well as identify potential strategies. For example, survey data may reveal that employees are unaware of the company's insurance benefits for tobacco use treatment. This indicates a need to increase awareness of available benefits, and the strategies may include benefits education classes, improving the new-employee orientation regarding tobacco use treatment, or providing benefits explanations in payroll stuffers, newsletters, or on posters throughout the workplace.

Once the needs and corresponding strategies have been identified, the Wellness Team must also address the feasibility of each strategy. To do this, the following issues should be considered:

- What is the potential impact of the strategy?
- How many employees will be affected?
- Is it likely the strategy will address the need in question?
- Next, how much will the strategy cost in dollars and time?
- Does the strategy fit into the Wellness Team budget?
- What amount of time will be involved to implement and maintain the strategy?
- Is this a sustainable initiative?

Finally, the team must weigh the potential impact and feasibility of each initiative, prioritize the initiatives, and then determine a realistic timeline for implementation. This process will enable the Wellness Team to develop a plan that impacts a large number of employees, is both cost- and time-effective, and has a high degree of sustainability. The Sample Workplan (see Appendix Four) provides a template for developing a plan, along with examples.

1.2 Steps to a Healthier Workplace

Create a Supportive Workplace

Following these first four steps puts the Wellness Team in position to turn their ideas into reality. Making policy changes or modifications to the work environment will require teamwork, good communication, and a commitment to carry out the plan as it was developed. The success stories in this kit share the ideas, experiences, and outcomes of employers, large and small, across various industries. These in-depth summaries provide information on the process and costs of implementation, key outcomes, and additional resources to assist in the development of similar initiatives. These examples are organized into several categories:

- Nutrition—Section 2.2
- Physical Activity—Section 2.3
- Tobacco Use Policy—Section 2.4
- Small Business—Section 2.5
- No-Cost—Section 2.6
- Healthy Lifestyle—Section 2.7

Evaluate

A thorough evaluation of the Wellness Team's activities should be performed at least once per year. An effective evaluation provides the Wellness Team information on the following questions:

- Which strategies were fully implemented according to the plan?
- Which strategies were effective in reaching a large number of employees?
- Which strategies will be sustainable over the long-term?
- Was management supportive of the Wellness Team's efforts?
- Collectively, were the Wellness Team activities effective in changing employee health behaviors? Healthcare utilization?
- Specifically, which strategies were most effective in changing health behaviors?
- Were the Wellness Team activities associated with changes in employee satisfaction, company image, or job performance?



Without some type of survey or analysis, the Wellness Team cannot answer the first three questions from the preceding list. This information is critical to help the team reshape the work plan, either by eliminating certain strategies that are not feasible nor popular, or by revising the particular approach. Furthermore, a reassessment of employee interests is an ideal way to get new ideas and build those into a revised plan.

To compare against the baseline data, information on employee health behaviors can be gathered using a behavioral survey. To minimize bias and get a true sense of employee behaviors, a high percentage of employees must return surveys; otherwise it will be difficult to compare from one time point to the next. In addition to employee behavior surveys, employee perception of work culture can be assessed. Finally, a yearly assessment of healthcare data should be conducted and compared to baseline data. The 12 Month Behavior Survey (see Appendix Five) allows for a self-assessment of employee work satisfaction, company image, and job performance.

In summary, the steps described previously are critical for developing and implementing effective strategies to create healthier work environments, as well as to develop a long-term health promotion and disease prevention plan. The Wellness Team plays the key role in the success of this effort. This team approach provides focus, creates momentum, and ensures shared responsibilities. Each of the steps outlined in this kit should be part of an ongoing process to develop new strategies and maintain successful initiatives that address company needs, match employee interests, and have strong management support.

