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WELLNESS

Over the past several years, there has been an ever increasing awareness drawn to worker health as it relates to workers' compensation, productivity, employee wellness, and improving company culture.

AND SAFETY PROGRAMS

SHOULD BE INTERTWINED

Traditionally, many organizations have used an approach where various groups are working in their own silos to improve employee health safety, with varying initiatives spearheaded by human resources, safety, and operation departments. While each group's intent is admirable, the varied degrees of communication, efficiency, total costs, etc. has caused this approach to fail. An integrated approach is vital to sustain these programs. Research by organizations such as NIOSH (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) has shown that efforts combining worker health promotional programs, such as weight-loss and smoking cessation, combined with a company's occupational safety initiatives, result in higher levels of employee engagement, greater return on initial investments, lower insurance costs (for both employee benefits and workers' compensation), and fosters a more productive workplace, as well as happier and healthier employees.

When employers separate safety, risk management, and benefits/human resource functions, the impact of each of their efforts are measured and monitored separately, and objectives may be counter productive to each other and the overall effectiveness is reduced. Employees may feel that internal promotional and messaging efforts, when provided by multiple leaders of their respective departments, seem disjointed or just another "flavor of the month". Even if your company doesn't have individuals assigned to each of the roles mentioned above concerted efforts should be made towards improving the overall health and well-being of the employees while incorporating your compliance and workplace safety efforts.

The Opportunity

Promoting overall health and wellness in an integrated fashion will result in reduced direct costs, increased productivity and happier employees at work and at home. Employee behaviors, both positive and negative do not just switch on and off depending on whether they're at home or at work. Promoting positive health behaviors will carry over into their home life and many times to their families. The costs associated with poor health have significantly increased for both disability and workers' compensation. One example of how both areas are integrated is a statistic showing that stressful workplaces contribute to a 30% increase of coronary disease than a less stressful workplace (1). In addition, there has also been increased frequency of employee absenteeism due to high stress work environments. Obesity, a national health crisis, is of particular concern, with one study showing 183 lost days per 100 full time employees with a BMI (body mass index) of over 40, compared to only 15 days for employees with a normal BMI (2). These lost work days drive the workers' compensation dollars to be eight times higher for an obese person than an employee of "average" weight according to a Duke University Medical Center study.

What Your Organization Can Do

An integrated approach for both occupational safety and overall health and well-being for your employees may seem like a daunting task while balancing your business goals, however, it should be a priority to help achieve your goals. The efforts can be scalable depending on your company size and resources available, and it's recommended that you pilot some of the initiatives and don't do too much too soon. The goal is to have a long standing, sustainable process and incorporate it into your company culture for the long term, not just a program that is rushed through and once a task is complete, it's forgotten about.

Primary Implementation Process:

- Management commitment and involvement
- Safety and health education
- Employee engagement
- Driving safe and healthy behaviors
- Continuous improvement

Some additional suggestions for an integrated approach

- Strategic planning for health, safety and wellness given equal importance to business goals.

- Empower a cross functional management/ employee committee with a budget and authority to implement safety and wellness programs.
- Defining metrics of success for all health, safety and wellness components together.
- Continuous safety training for both on the job and off the job; include safety tips for employee families.
- Consider high impact wellness programs such as weight loss, smoking cessation, driver safety, along with occupational safety programs such as ergonomic analysis combined with a stretching warm up program, drug free workplace, and comprehensive fleet safety program.
- Consistent communication from management and high levels of employee engagement with an accountability structure linked to performance management.

Promoting overall health and wellness in an integrated fashion will result in reduced direct costs, increased productivity and happier employees at work and at home.

Statistics show that companies who have succeeded with this combined approach have experienced less employee turnover, better management/employee relations, and a much lower total cost of risk. A healthy and happy employee always makes a productive employee. ☞

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References

- 1 Heubeck, Elizabeth. "Workplace Stress and Your Health." WebMD. WebMD, n.d. Web. 03 July 2014.
- 2 Truls Østbye, MD, PhD; John M. Dement, PhD & Katrina M. Krause, MA (2007). Obesity and Workers' Compensation Results From the Duke Health and Safety Surveillance System, *Arch Intern Med.* 167:766-773.