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Workplace Health System: An Overview

OVERVIEW

Canada 

Health Canada is the federal department responsible for helping Canadians maintain and improve their health. We assess the safety of drugs and many consumer products, help improve the safety of food, and provide information to Canadians to help them make healthy decisions. We provide health services to First Nations people and to Inuit communities. We work with the provinces to ensure our health care system serves the needs of Canadians.

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¹ Buffet & Company National Wellness Report 2008; European Network on Workplace Health Promotion, “Making the Case for Workplace Health Promotion: Analysis of the Effects of WHP”, 2004; World Health Organization 2008 (http://www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/workplace/en/index1.html)



An Introduction to the Workplace Health System

Over the past decade Health Canada has directed its attention increasingly to helping Canadians live healthier, more satisfying and more productive lives.

Since 1983, part of that involvement has focussed on the workplace. And for good reason. Two-thirds of Canadians over age 15 are employees². On average, they spend about 60 percent of their waking hours at work. And when surveyed, most reported that the workplace is an appropriate place to promote health issues³. After all, what happens in the office, on the plant floor, or wherever Canadians might work, can have a profound impact on their overall health and well-being.

To achieve the goal of healthier Canadian workplaces, Health Canada has developed a comprehensive Workplace Health System. Canadian employers are using this System to put health programs and policies in place, and to integrate health considerations into their normal way of doing business. This booklet will tell you more about it.

The New Way to Look at Health

Traditionally, health has meant the absence of sickness. But today, the term has a broader meaning. To be healthy means to be able to cope with and adapt to the changes going on around us; health refers not only to our physical condition, but also to our state of mental and social well-being.

What is Health Promotion?

Health promotion means to give people the tools to improve their own health - tools in the form of information and health programming. In other words, health promotion helps people take care of themselves.

Finding cures for diseases must necessarily be left to those with the medical know-how, but striving to regain, maintain or improve health is something everyone can participate in - and from which everyone who participates can benefit.

2 Census 2006 - (<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/data/highlights/labour/Table601.cfm?SR=1>).

3 The Workplace Health System was tested with organizations that were actively seeking to improve their workers' health. About 50,000 Canadian employees, primarily workers in large companies, participated. Because the sample was not random, one cannot generalize the findings to the general working population. The results do provide useful insights and indication of what may apply to the rest of the workforce.

Why Your Organization Should Be in the Health Promotion Business

From management's perspective, having healthy employees is a definite plus. Healthy employees are sick less often and recover from illness faster. They are more efficient, energetic, alert, less prone to accidents and more able to manage stress. Research⁴ in a number of countries, including Canada, point to the same conclusion: that health programs reduce medical costs, sick leave, absenteeism, employee turnover and lower job accident rates. With the evidence of the positive effects of comprehensive workplace health programming mounting, companies can ill afford not to get involved.

But improvements in employee health need not be equated directly with the bottom line. Employers who care about the people who work for them will want to play a part in improving the quality of their lives - so long as the cost is manageable. From the employee's perspective, the benefits of having access to health programming include better eating habits, lower smoking rates, better working conditions, less conflict between management and staff, and an increased sense of self-worth. Most importantly, healthy people feel more in control of their life, and that kind of attitude has positive benefits on and off the job.

The Workplace Health System

Deciding your organization and its employees could benefit from a comprehensive workplace health plan is one thing. Setting it up is quite another. The Workplace Health System provides a proven way forward - a practical, flexible formula for devising effective health policies and for setting up health programming that meets employees' real needs. Using the Workplace Health System offers a number of advantages over starting from scratch:

- You benefit from the experience of other worksites. Often, they can suggest approaches that have worked elsewhere or caution against approaches that haven't. Each component of the System (described later) has been tested at sites across the country.
- The Workplace Health System offers an approach that is detailed enough to save you from "reinventing the wheel", while at the same time is flexible enough to be shaped to your particular circumstances and requirements.
- The Workplace Health System outlines a way to coordinate the efforts of local health services groups to ensure efforts are not duplicated. For small businesses and farm businesses, working with other small and farm businesses in the same community can open up the possibilities for shared-cost programming.

4 Buffet & Company National Wellness Report 2008; European Network on Workplace Health Promotion, "Making the Case for Workplace Health Promotion: Analysis of the Effects of WHP", 2004; World Health Organization 2008 (http://www.who.int/occupational_health/topics/workplace/en/index1.html)

Principles

To set an overall framework to guide the development and implementation of health-related programming and policies, the Workplace Health System rests on the following five principles:

- 1) meet the needs of all employees, regardless of their current level of health;
- 2) recognize the needs, preferences and attitudes of different groups of participants;
- 3) recognize that an individual's "lifestyle" is made up of an independent set of health habits;
- 4) adapt to the special features of each workplace environment; and,
- 5) support the development of a strong overall health policy in the workplace.

Avenues of Influence

The principles are linked to another very important premise: that creating a healthy work environment requires addressing three broad avenues of influence on health:

1) Environment (physical and social):

Factors in the home or work environment that effect employee health, such as air, noise and light conditions, the quality of machinery and equipment, the type of work, responsibilities at work, relations with supervisors and co-workers, and relations with family at home.

2) Personal Resources:

The sense of influence employees feel they have over health and work, how much social support they feel they receive from others, and the degree to which they actively participate in improving their own health.

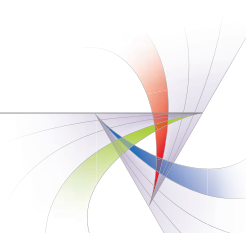
3) Health Practices:

Practices that effect health, including physical activity, smoking, drinking, sleeping and eating habits, as well as the use of medication and other drugs.

To be truly effective, an organization's health plan must address all three avenues of influence. In other words, the plan should go further than simply offering fitness classes at noon. It could include:

- literacy courses or other forms of skills upgrading;
- workshops for those who want to quit smoking or maintain a healthy weight;
- courses dealing with how to management stress, communicate effectively, accommodation in the workplace, or occupational health and safety training; or
- mentoring/coaching support focussed on leadership and organizational effectiveness or successful change management strategies.

Counselling services, retraining, or any number of other forms of programming, is only constrained by the imagination and the realistic limitations of what is affordable. It should be a practical, business-like plan that directs resources toward the identified needs of the employees and the organization. It should be a plan that takes the guesswork out of putting in place effective health and organizational effectiveness programming.



As well, to set your organization up for success, it is also essential that:

- management demonstrate their support, commitment and participation;
- others in the organization are involved during all stages of the process (e.g. strategic planning and human resources specialists, middle managers, supervisors, communications, labour representatives, and employees); and
- a committee be formed that reflects a cross section of the employee population (e.g. employees in positions at different levels as well as in various occupational groups), who are willing to take action.

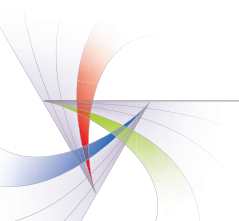
Workplace Health System Components

The Workplace Health System has several inter-related components. The Small and Farm Business Health Models and the Corporate Health Model provide a step-by-step method for introducing comprehensive health promotion programming into the workplace. These health models aren't meant to replace programming already in place. They are meant to strengthen them and to identify and fill in any programming gaps.

The Small Business, Farm Business and Corporate Health Models

The Small Business, Farm Business and Corporate Health models provide a step-by-step guide for setting up comprehensive health programming. The general process involves several steps:

- 1) **Commitment** - Successful workplace health programming depends on the organization's commitment to the five principles and three avenues of influence - environment, health practices and person resources. It is essential at this stage that senior decision-makers or owners in the organization demonstrate their commitment by agreeing to address all three avenues of influence and make available sufficient resources, human, financial and material, to respond to employee needs. Key players in the organization will need to be briefed on the compelling research and process for implementing a comprehensive approach to improving health and well-being in the workplace.
- 2) **Getting organized** - A group of managers, employee representatives and health professionals then carries forward the process, ensuring all employees are made aware of health-in-the-workplace issues and the importance of their involvement in making any future health plans work. This group plays a coordinating role by identifying and implementing relevant workplace health and well-being programming. It also serves as a communication link with employees, encouraging their input and participation as well as keeping employees informed of progress.
- 3) **Needs assessment** - Employees complete a survey that essentially asks them specific questions on what their needs are and what health risks they face. This needs assessment is an essential component of the



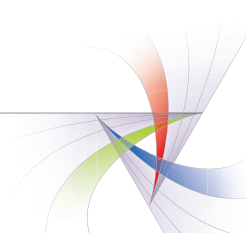
Workplace Health System because it provides the tangible data about employee needs and risks that inform the development and implementation of relevant workplace health and well-being programming.

- 4) **Workplace Health Profile** - The results of the survey are compiled and analysed, resulting in a workplace health organizational profile of employee health needs and risks. This work is best done by an independent company in order to respect and protect the confidentiality of individual respondents. This organizational profile is then used by the coordinating group to develop a health plan that reflects the organization's workplace health needs and risks.
- 5) **Health Plan** - The coordinating group analyses the findings and decides how the information gathered fits in with available resources. It then drafts a long-term health plan.
- 6) **Program Action Plan (annual)** - In this phase, the first year's activities are developed and the programming begins.
- 7) **Review of Progress** - Measuring progress should be considered from the very beginning of your workplace health journey. Establishing baseline measures upfront will assist with tracking changes over time. This information is critical because it provides the evidence required to know whether your interventions are working, and when you need to make changes or improvements to your overall program action plan.

Drawing a distinction between large, small and farm businesses

We recognize that developing effective workplace health programming for a company with a few thousand employees requires a different approach than developing programs for a company with 100 employees or less. That is why we have developed various models - one for large and medium-sized corporations, the other for small and micro businesses and another for farm businesses. Here are some of the main differences:

- * The Corporate Health Model is designed for organizations with a sufficient number of employees and the resources to go it alone; the Small and Farm Business Health Models bring many small businesses within a community together to share the resources and costs associated with health programming.
- * The workplace health committee for a large organization typically will comprise representatives from management and labour; the same group for small and farm businesses is community-based and organized through a central coordinating agency. This agency works with a small or farm business health committee made up of small or farm business farmers and employees and health service providers.





The Next Step

Now you know a little bit more about the Workplace Health System and how it operates. But this could only be the beginning. The following links will provide you and your organization with more detailed information on specific components of the Workplace Health System:

[Corporate Health Model](#)

[Small Business Health Model](#)

[Farm Business Health Model](#)

For more general information about the Workplace Health System or setting up a workplace health and well-being program within your organization please contact:

Health Canada at:

Website: www.healthcanada.gc.ca/workplacehealth

Email: info@hc-sc-gc.ca