



CREATING A HEALTHY WORKPLACE

Bringing everyone on board is key to overall staff wellbeing.

by DR JOHN CUMMINS

The average employee will spend 80,000 hours of their life at work. Cultural shifts and technological advancements mean that our careers are increasingly sedentary and as a species we are now dangerously overweight. Healthier employees are happier employees with greater energy levels, less absences, and better turnover, making this an important decision for wellbeing and the bottom line.

So what works and what doesn't? Firstly it's important for health initiatives to have buy in, so that employees can nominate what they want and need. Initiatives should be clearly outlined, enabling employees to make the conscious decision to improve their own health, and management must lead by example.

For example, Victorian company Synergetic Management Systems provided flexible work hours to promote physical activity on lunch breaks and outside of work. Having information, exercise equipment and healthy snacks easily accessible to employees fuelled the creation of a healthy company culture.

In the Tasmanian Police Service, simply introducing the option of purchasing pre-prepared microwavable healthy soups gave night-shift police officers a more nutritious alternative to the fatty fast-food previously only available in the middle of the night. The soup program's success meant that officers began bringing their own pre-prepared meals and soups, making them active and accountable participants of their personal health.

The police service also utilised a computer-based prompting and recording program

(Exertime Program), which prompts workers to increase their incidental activity by breaking up long periods of sitting at a desk. They are held accountable by having to record their progress on the computer. This idea shows that just doing a minute or two of something like wall push-ups or chair lifts in each hour of the workday can decrease blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides and musculoskeletal complaints, increasing both the physical and mental health of workers.

Sydney Water achieves positive outcomes for both employees and employers by encouraging a healthy work/life balance. They increased employee autonomy by surveying employees for their opinions of what would be a useful health initiative, and offering flexible working conditions such as part-time work, compressed work weeks, and the opportunity to work from home. The outcome of supporting this kind of work culture saw staff turnover numbers for employees with less than one year's service drop in half from 2007 to 2009. Average sick leave days also dropped from 7.2 to 5.9 in this time period. A 2011 employee survey indicated that approximately 83 per cent of staff would boast the benefits of working for the company and also recommend it to a job-seeking friend, demonstrating an increase in the overall morale of the company and the health of employees.

So what do HR managers need to be careful of before implementing such initiatives? Firstly, weight loss programs can be a highly sensitive topic, particularly for those who may need to participate the most. Companies need to be conscious of this in the way they roll out such programs and they should carefully

select what is prioritised by a program to avoid heightening already-existing social pressures to lose weight. Highlighting failures, or stigmatising individuals does not create a healthy workplace. Secondly, even the best programs will fail if employees do not participate, whether due to not understanding the value or goal of such initiatives or from having the program offered at an inconvenient time. Initiatives will also not work if such programs are prioritised above existing unhealthy work conditions, if employees feel forced, or it comes at an unwelcomed cost to them, financial or otherwise.

Strategies to avoid under-participation include having a critical mass of workers on board, which encourages others to do the same. Inspiring nutrition changes can be facilitated by having healthy snacks easily and cheaply available and by choosing a catering company that will assist in that for office events. Having a designated eating space with a microwave and fridge encourages people to leave their desk and eat something they have pre-prepared, as opposed to buying fast food or mindlessly snacking on junk whilst working. Placing the office printer at the far end of the office and encouraging people to meet face-to-face instead of sending emails all encourage movement at work.

Most importantly, create a positive and inclusive atmosphere surrounding the change and have involvement of people from all levels of the company. Consistently re-evaluate what is and isn't working for the employees and the benefits will be twofold. The need for preventative health strategies has never been greater than right now. **HRm**