

Right Way Training White Paper for Download from Web Site Sign Up Box

Creating a Corporate Health Strategy and Action Plan

Why do you need a strategy?

Every business needs to take the health of its employees seriously. Doing what you can to prevent sickness is not just a 'nice to have' option; it's a legal and financial necessity. It's also key to recruiting and retaining the best staff.

The legislation

Today's legislation puts the onus on employers to be able to show that they have taken steps to prevent their staff becoming ill from work-related causes. Every workplace is potentially dangerous and the risks are often higher where they are hidden, because the extent of the problem goes unrealised.

Stress is the classic example. UK courts have recognised the culpability of employers in stress-related illness since 1995 when John Walker was awarded £175k against Northumberland County Council in the first case of psychiatric injury caused by an employer.

The costs of sickness

CBI calculations show that British industry is losing around £13 billion every year from sickness absence. That's 30 million working days. Of this, nearly half are attributed to stress, anxiety, and depression (HSE); and a third to musculoskeletal problems (TUC). And low morale is very much part of the picture, with an estimated 25% of people working below par at any given time.

The risk factors are often hard to spot – by the time you see a problem, it's too late.

Becoming an employer of choice

Once you have systems in place to ensure compliance, then you can look at the next level.

Staff recruitment and retention is becoming an increasingly fraught area, and employers are keen to do what they can to find and keep the best people. Those who make a consistent effort to care for and support their employee's health are seen as better employers to work for. Organisations are competing for the best staff in their field, and those that show a real commitment to their people see their rewards in increased loyalty and higher quality applicants.

There are real and direct financial incentives related to being an employer of choice. As an example, if you take the costs of recruitment into account (CIPD 2006 - estimated at £4,000 - £6,000 for managers/professionals, just in direct costs), then spending money to keep staff in place makes good financial sense.

Workplace health is not just the latest management fad. It has to become an integral part of your organisation's activities, not just an ad-hoc add-on. It's not something you can look at once, then forget about – it has to be part of everything you do. Providing an occasional desk massage is a great reward but not a long-term strategy.

Education and practical intervention can have a dramatic effect on enhancing the lives of employees, reducing absenteeism and increasing productivity and morale. The figures from companies who have undertaken comprehensive employee health projects speak for themselves. Parcellforce Worldwide, for example, increased overall productivity by 12.5% and employee satisfaction by a third.

What should your strategy include?

Your strategy must identify your business objectives. You need to be clear why you are doing this and what you want to achieve. The strategy is just the starting point – it must lead on to an action plan. This should include assessment of your own situation; identification of actions required, timescales for implementation, budgets, and methods for monitoring and evaluating progress.

To be effective, such a project requires expertise in the legislative framework and in workplace health, plus a thorough knowledge of specific activities and therapies that can address the organisation's particular issues. If you don't have this expertise internally, you will need to look for an external partner who can co-ordinate all aspects of the initiative.

How do you start?

Assessment

The first step is assessment.

Organisational audit: You need a thorough audit of how your organisation is meeting different aspects of health and safety legislation. You will already be doing a number of things on a regular basis – but is it enough to ensure that you are protecting all your staff from harm and the organisation against legal action?

Just to give a few examples:

- Does your manual handling training programme include everyone it should - office staff who lift boxes of paper, and IT staff who carry PCs?
- What do you do to help your staff manage stress, now the biggest cause of visits to the doctor and of serious illness (BMA – 75% of illness is a direct result of stress).
- Have you assessed every person at their workstation – and do you do this every time some one changes a desk?
- Does every manager/team leader know what to look out for on a day-to-day basis?
- Do you know who hasn't taken all their holiday leave – and what do you do about it?

Individual assessment: You have to look at each person's health needs. What is causing them problems? Where do they feel the company could help them? To do this thoroughly requires both an individual questionnaire and actual physical health checks to include blood pressure levels and cardio-vascular risk factors. There could be simple solutions that don't cost you anything, but unless you are asking the right questions, you're not addressing potential problems.

From the results of this assessment, you should compile a full needs analysis, from which you can identify your priorities. Activities to ensure compliance will obviously come at the top of the list.

Budgetary constraints will always play a part in deciding where to go beyond this level, but money spent on health must be seen as an investment likely to bring in a good return. The

Parcellforce Worldwide programme showed a typical rate of return, with savings of £6 million on a direct investment of £2.25 million.

Planning

Once your priorities have been agreed, you need to map each area of need against a specific action or intervention. You will also want to identify measurable outcomes. By putting costs against each action/intervention, you will be able to estimate where you see the best return on investment. You'll need to look at timeframes, and at both launch and ongoing activities.

Implementation

The first aspect of implementation will be education. You have to be able to present information in a fun and dynamic way – it's critical to avoid being seen as patronising. You can run regular health/fitness forums, in topics such as back-care, relaxation and stopping smoking; and you can give people the opportunity to try out different activities.

Together with the education comes the practical intervention to meet the needs you've identified. Simple initiatives could include providing free fruit, or starting lunchtime walking or jogging groups. You can arrange regular visits from fitness instructors, physical therapists and dieticians, or give vouchers to staff for health-related activities.

You will need relevant professionals to deliver the programme.

Monitoring and evaluation

It's all too easy for the initial momentum to wear off, and it takes a conscious and sustained effort to ensure that things keep happening. You should monitor and evaluate all aspects of the programme on a regular basis. You will want to know what is working and whether it is really making a difference to the business, and to adjust what you are doing where necessary. If you can show a demonstrable benefit, you will be able to build on what you are doing.

Putting together – and maintaining – an effective Corporate Health Strategy is a significant challenge for any business. If you do it well, you will protect your business against litigation; improve productivity, and retain valued team members.

How Right Way Training can help you

Right Way Training provides tailor-made corporate health and fitness solutions. You will be given a Corporate Wellness Manager, who will work with you from needs analysis through to implementation and evaluation. They provide a single point of contact, making all arrangements and bringing in established professionals as required. This gives you all the resources and expertise that you need to establish and maintain an effective corporate health programme.