

Cutting the cost of wellness

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Ensuring staff wellbeing is obviously paramount, whether we are in a recession or a growth economy, but with budgets being cut wellbeing benefits could face the chop thus sending out the wrong signal to staff. Rob Woollen explains how to implement cost-effective wellness strategies.

The business case for wellness is now well established, and forward-thinking companies who have invested have seen attractive returns. So much so, in fact, that the Department of Work and Pensions quotes an average ROI of £2.50 for every pound spent on wellness. But business is tough these days and non-essential expenditure is being held back for more certain times.

Think about employee wellness and you may well imagine expensive initiatives such as on-site massage, personal trainers and health fairs hemorrhaging cash. It has never been more important, however, to look after the people we will need to face the myriad challenges of this downturn – and bring us round the corner when things pick up again.

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Despite the fact that the CIPD 'Absence Management' survey found that 40% of companies intended to increase their spending on employee wellbeing in 2009, few seem to have set aside specific budgets for this at present. Achieving the fine balance between spending too much and doing too little requires skilful navigation and careful planning.

Any money which is directly allocated needs to be put to good use – providing measurable results - and spending 'soft dollars' (ie diverting existing resources without assigning new budgets) is proving to be increasingly popular as a way of funding wellness initiatives.

From its early days of supplying an EAP, paying full sick pay and perhaps offering contributory health insurance, wellness has grown to encompass the entire culture of the organisation. Affecting the way people interact - both with each other and with their jobs - can have just as much effect as more traditional interventions. Health fairs, healthy rewards and free fruit still have their place, but how else can you improve wellness without emptying the company coffers?

- Appoint a workplace health champion. Courses like the Level 2 Award in Understanding Health Improvement from the Royal Society for Public Health will save you a fortune on wellness consultancy, giving you your very own in-house peer champion to suggest and implement a range of health promotion activities. The advantages are not limited to the 'soft-dollar' element either; your employees understand better than anyone else how the company works, what the real issues are and how they can be tailored to suit their colleagues (Around £100 each)

- Address your culture. ACAS has produced a fantastic guide to what they consider is required in the 'well workplace'. Use this to identify training needs and policy changes and to see where you can make small changes for massive gains. (Free)
- Carry out an audit of your current workplace wellness practices. If they aren't making a difference, use the money wisely elsewhere. All too many companies have great wellness policies written down, but they are not reaching the people they are meant for. Follow our three-stage plan below for auditing wellness. (Free if you do it yourself; consultancy fees vary)
- Put pressure on onsite caterers and vending suppliers to provide healthy, attractive food. Make sure it is highly visible and even think about subsidising it. Your caterer/vendor can give you monthly feedback on the success of this scheme. This shouldn't cost you much, and if you do subsidise the healthy choices, it will be directly proportional to the take-up. (Price - infinitely variable)
- Be creative. You don't have to spend a fortune to help your staff stay well. Think of all the opportunities you have to communicate to staff and find little ways to add a wellness angle onto everyday activities. How can you encourage staff to combine movement with work? Consider how your environment impacts wellness. Are your stairs comfortable and attractive, well-lit and maintained? Or are they dark, dank and uninviting? (Price - a splash of paint and a little thought)

As discussed earlier, wellness is no longer the preserve of the individual. Generally speaking, wellness can be split into two distinct areas, that which affects the organisation as a whole, and that which affects the individual. Undoubtedly, individual wellness has a knock-on effect on the organisation, but the key is to look at where the focus of intervention should be (there will, of course be some interface between the two).

Individual wellness would cover such things as your staff's lifestyles; their resilience and coping ability; posture and individual working practices. Organisational wellness would include job autonomy; engagement; line management (people skills); flexibility of roles; workstation design; and supportive working practices (with the ability to influence workloads and vary work as appropriate).

By addressing elements of both individual and organisational wellness you can make a real difference to the lives of your staff, and the bottom line of your business, without spending a fortune.

The workplace wellness audit

1. Find out what you say you are doing. Is it up to date? Does it apply to current roles and resources? Is it enough to promote health and wellbeing amongst your staff? Does it cover both organisational and individual wellness?
2. Find out whether you are actually doing it. Is somebody in charge of implementing the policy? Do they have sufficient resources? Do your staff believe their employer cares about their wellbeing? Can they tell you what the

company does to look after wellness? Why have certain elements fallen out of favour? Do you need new ideas to breathe new life into the idea of wellness?

3. Find out whether it is working. How do you report on your wellness strategy? What are your key performance indicators? How do changes affect them? Wellness strategies often seem to assume immunity from the maxim, 'You can't change what you can't measure'; but there are plenty of tangible elements that can show improvements in corporate wellness

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