2017 Employer Guide

Job Autonomy

Social Supports

Total Worker Health®

Missing Pieces to the Employee Well-Being Puzzle

Built Environment

Modern Workplace Hazards

St. Louis Area Business Health Coalition
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May 2017

Introduction

Total Worker Health® (TWH) is defined as policies, programs, and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with the promotion of injury and illness prevention to advance worker well-being.[8] It goes beyond an employee's risk status and family history to consider those upstream, job-related factors that may impact an individual's health and well-being. TWH strategies not only protect employees from physical, mental, and operational hazards of the workplace but also explore mechanisms to help employees become their happiest, most energized, and productive selves.

Modern Workplace Hazards

When occupational safety and health first became a priority in the 1970s, worker deaths due to on-the-job accidents, chemical exposures, and dangerous environments were at an all-time high.[9] Although regulations and policies have been enacted to assure safe and healthful working conditions for employees, developments of 21st century have introduced a host of new workplace hazards that threaten the well-being of modern workers.

Sedentary jobs have increased by 83% since 1950. Referred to as "sitting disease," this level of inactivity has been attributed to a rise in illness, medical costs, and death among employees.[1]

Technology advances, including cell phones and email, have allowed work to extend beyond business hours. As a result, employees are working longer– an average of 47 hours each week.[1]

Job insecurity and employment stress have been heightened as positions are eliminated due to financial savings, mergers and acquisitions, company restructuring, and outsourcing.[3]

This guide provides employers a brief summary of the modern hazards that may be diminishing the well-being of employees and resources to take action in addressing these factors through organizational culture, policy, and environmental changes. By identifying gaps and relevant evidence-based solutions, Total Worker Health® strategies are helping employers find missing pieces to the employee well-being puzzle, resulting in a more total picture of how business, occupational, and health outcomes are connected.

Psychosocial Risks

As a more refined understanding of the work-health relationship has emerged, psychosocial risks have been identified as a new challenge in addressing holistic employee well-being. Stemming from organizational processes and practices that influence how job design, team management, and human resource policies are structured, these risk factors are now considered primary contributors to rising employee stress levels. This stress has been tied to both psychological and physical health problems among employees, high rates of absenteeism and turnover, and poor performance on an organizational level.[3] Below are several examples of how employers may consider addressing psychosocial risks in the workplace.

Job Autonomy

Job autonomy entails giving employees a choice in how, when, or where their job tasks are performed. The Karasek-Theorell Job Strain Model shows that employees with high job demands (physical, psychological, or pace-related) and low decision latitude (lack of control) are more likely to experience excessive stress, job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, burnout, and disease.[7] Employers can empower employees by providing autonomy in the following areas:

FLEXIBLE WORK SCHEDULES: Policies may be implemented to allow employees to alter work schedules based on personal or family needs, including condensed work weeks (e.g., working four 10-hour days per week), adjusted work days (e.g., earlier start and end time), personalized break time (e.g., enabling employees to choose what time they take lunch), and the elimination of penalties for absenteeism that occurs due to no-fault of the employee (e.g., sick child, car problems, etc.).[10,12]

WORK LOCATION: Organizations may consider providing employees a choice in where they work, both internal to and external of the organization's building. Inside the workplace, this may include offering a variety of spaces (e.g., quiet offices, collaboration rooms, common space) for employees to select based on project activities, concentration level, or social inclination. Outside of the workplace, this may involve telecommuting options for employees to work from home, a library, coffee shop, or other preferred venue.[10,12]

WORKSPACE DESIGN: Employees can be offered the opportunity to select workspace features that are ideal for their unique physical capabilities or job tasks. For sedentary jobs, ergonomic workplace design may include the choice of a sitting, standing, or adjustable desk, type of office chair, wrist support for computer use, or size and positioning of computer monitor. For active roles, ergonomic decisions may be related to floor materials or foot support, style and comfort of safety equipment, arrangement of work tools, or environmental controls for noise, temperature, etc.[10,12]

TASK STRUCTURE: To avoid monotony and burnout, employees may be afforded greater participation in decisions related to the completion of job activities, including total workload, project pace or deadlines, variety and order of tasks, or performance goals. This also includes continued evaluation of job processes and subsequent changes based on employee suggestions to improve efficiency, communication, or outputs.[10,12]

Social Supports

With an increase in mobile work environments, dispersed work teams, and telecommuting options, employers now experience even greater challenges in establishing effective and meaningful connections within the workplace. Nevertheless, social relationships with co-workers, supervisors, and the organization itself continue to be some of the most critical factors weighing on an employee's day-to-day professional experience. As such, employers play an important role in creating a culture of reciprocity, in which positive and fair social interactions inspire positive cognitions, emotions, and behaviors among employees.[6]

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES: Research by Gallup shows that workplace managers account for up to 70% of the variance in employee engagement scores. Strong managers demonstrate the following practices: consistent communication (both in-person and electronically), clear delineation of expectations and job tasks, establishment of a safe and open environment for questions or concerns, and performance reviews anchored in employee strengths, fair standards, and accountability.[4,6,10]

TEAM RELATIONSHIPS: Interpersonal connections among coworkers (both peer-to-peer and supervisor-to-staff) can play a critical role in job satisfaction, performance, and effectiveness. To encourage civility and respect as a foundation for employee interactions, policies and procedures may be implemented to combat workplace bullying behaviors, such as gossip, social isolation, or public undermining of ideas. Informal team-building activities, including social outings, can also be prioritized to enhance information sharing and mutual understanding among employees.[6,10]

EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT: The opportunity to acquire new knowledge, skills, or experience has been tied to positive changes in employee job satisfaction, organizational loyalty, and stress levels. Examples include professional training opportunities, reimbursement of continuing education courses or degrees, mentorships, or rotational job shadowing. After developing new skills, employees can also be given a chance to apply this knowledge through new responsibilities, project leadership roles, and internal promotions.[10]

REWARDS AND RECOGNITION: Employee engagement and happiness have been shown to have a direct correlation to the perceived benefit that an employee believes they receive from their role. The level of benefit can be impacted by both intrinsic rewards (e.g., an employee's sense of purpose or growth in contributing positively to the organization or its mission) and extrinsic rewards, in the form of tangible, experiential, or financial incentives provided for job accomplishments. Public recognition and praise among peers has also been demonstrated to positively affect employee performance and job satisfaction, contributing to a culture in which employees feel valued and fairly acknowledged for their contributions.[2,6,10]

Physical Risks

Workplace Environment

The modern relationship between the workplace environment and employee well-being goes beyond the availability of stairs, fitness facilities, and bike racks to consider the ambient and design elements contributing to the look, feel, and perception of the workspace. With employees spending two-thirds of waking hours at work, it is important that the environment promotes physical comfort, while also minimizing hazards or distractions that may impede health or productivity. Below are examples of environmental elements for consideration:

AIR: Clean air quality requires appropriate ventilation systems and cleaning procedures to reduce pollutants. Additional attention may be given to air filtration (to minimize common allergens); humidity and moisture controls (to minimize microbe and mold growth); tobacco bans (to minimize secondhand smoke exposure); and temperature regulation (to minimize employee discomfort).[5]

LIGHTING: Lighting guidelines for brightness and acuity are dependent on the type of room and job task, with the intent of minimizing eye strain. Additional considerations for design and functioning include windows for natural light exposure, shades for high sun hours, low-glare workstation design, and lighting controls to minimize disruptions in the body's natural circadian rhythm.[5]

NOISE: Noise management includes controlling for external sounds (e.g., traffic or construction) and internal sounds (e.g., electronics, HVAC systems, or coworkers). Solutions may include the installation of noise-reducing windows, walls, or floor materials, or the provision of quiet zones for concentration. Alternatively, in some spaces, a low level of background noise may be required to maintain privacy.[5]

AESTHETICS: The visual design of a workplace has been shown to impact employees' moods, morale, and productivity. These elements include the use of colors to reduce stress, plants and water features, natural materials (e.g., wood) for furniture, artwork, attention to ceiling height and open spaces, and opportunities to interact with nature via outdoor gardens or patios.[5]

Job-Related Injuries

While the physical injuries associated with manual labor still exist for many employees, the rise in sedentary and technology-based positions has introduced new job-related risk factors to the workforce. In reviewing medical and workers' compensation claims data, companies can examine the root cause of injuries to determine additional protections and hazard controls that may need to be incorporated into their occupational safety and health programs.

MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS: Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) refer to medical conditions that affect a person's joints, muscles, nerves, tendons, cartilage, or spinal disks. In the modern workplace, an increasing number of these injuries are being caused by obesity, repetitive motion due to typing or texting, or poor posture during sedentary work. In addition to ergonomic workspace design, well-being programs focused on stretching, proper posture, and varied movement throughout the work day can be beneficial.[11]

EYE STRAIN: Digital eye strain due to computer, phone, or tablet use is common in the 21st century workforce and may result in headaches, blurred vision, dry eyes, or neck pain. To help, employees can be reminded to take regular breaks from screens, to view screens at a distance of 20 to 28 inches from the eyes, and to angle screens approximately 4 to 5 inches below eye level.[11]
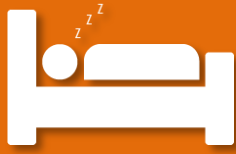
SLEEP HEALTH: Technology has also created challenges for proper sleep cycles, with the blue light emitted from screens associated with disruptions to the body's natural circadian rhythm. Workplace cultures and managers can model "unplugged" behavior by discouraging late night emails and project work, allowing time to unwind and relax before bed. Additionally, screening and treatment for common sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea, may be promoted and covered affordably in benefit plans.[11]
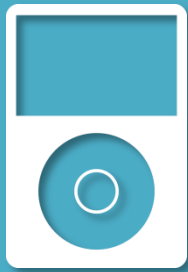
DISTRACTIONS: On-the-job accidents are not new to the workplace, but injuries stemming from technological distractions have increased in recent decades. These include trips, falls, and collisions as a result of walking or operating machinery while using phones, ear buds, or other devices. In addition to implementing technology-free zones and addressing related risks during safety trainings, some companies have also empowered employees to spot and intervene when they notice a coworker practicing an unsafe behavior.[11]

Conclusion

As psychosocial and physical risk factors in the workplace continue to evolve, Total Worker Health® strategies will remain important cornerstones of robust employee safety and well-being programs. Supported by research and real-world practice, the Total Worker Health® program provides guidance in determining which solutions are truly evidence-based for the advancement of health. At the core of success is an understanding that an integrated, rather than fragmented, approach is necessary to comprehensively address the hierarchy of organizational, environmental, and job-related factors impacting health and productivity. By finding these missing pieces and understanding the linkages between each, employers can get one step closer to solving the employee well-being puzzle.

Ready to get started? See page 8 for free employer resources to address the Total Worker Health® topics discussed in this guide.

RESOURCES

Total Worker Health Workplace Resources
Healthier Workforce Center of the Midwest (HWCMW)
http://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/hwcmw/for-the-workplace/

Workplace Solution Series
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)
https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/pubs/workplace_date_desc_nopubnumbers.html

Organization of Work: Measurement Tools for Research and Practice
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)
https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/workorg/default.html

Healthy Workplace Participatory Program
Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW)
https://www.uml.edu/Research/CPH-NEW/Healthy-Work-Participatory-Program/default.aspx

WELL Building Standard and Certification
International WELL Building Institute^{TM} (IWBI^{TM})
https://www.wellcertified.com/

Workplace Flexibility Toolkit
United States Department of Labor (DOL)
https://www.dol.gov/odep/workplaceflexibility/

Center for Organizational Excellence
American Psychological Association (APA)
https://www.apaexcellence.org/resources/

St. Louis Worksite Wellness Resource Guide
St. Louis County Partnership for a Healthy Community
http://www.thinkhealthstlco.org/

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About the BHC

The St. Louis Area Business Health Coalition (BHC) is a nonprofit organization representing 60 leading employers, which provide health benefits to 500,000 lives locally and millions nationally. For over 30 years, the BHC has worked to achieve its mission of supporting employer efforts to improve the well-being of their employees and enhance the quality and overall value of their investments in health benefits. To accomplish these aims, the BHC centers its work on providing pertinent research, resources, and educational opportunities to help employers (and employees) understand best practices for the strategic design (and informed use) of benefits to facilitate high-quality, affordable health care.

Acknowledgements

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