Addressing Barriers To Workplace Health and Wellness Initiatives



There are a multitude of factors that contribute to achieving health and wellness in the workplace. A healthy workplace is impacted by factors both within and external to the workplace including the environment in the workplace and elements of employee's personal lives. A healthy workplace involved addressing the physical, emotional and mental health of everyone who is part of the workplace in combination with healthy functioning of the organization itself.

With all of these highly complicated factors in play it is easy to feel overwhelmed with the task of improving workplace health and wellness. And while workplace health and wellness is not solved by ensuring that employees get more exercise, participate in mindful meditation, are more engaged in their jobs or have a supervisor who treat they well, by identifying elements you can impact HR can play an critical role in the facilitating the health and wellness of the organization and of your individual employees.

Barriers to Healthier Workplaces

Looking broadly at the barriers to the implementation of workplace health and wellness programs we often find 4 overarching factors

- Financial resources
- Human resources
- Leadership investment/buy in
- Employee buy in

Each one of these barriers includes many factors that combine to create a challenging environment for the implementation of a workplace health and wellness initiative especially in todays environment of reduced budgets and stressed out employees.

A 2015 report released by GoodLife Fitness provided a closer look at some of the barriers to better health and wellness in the workplace in Canada. The report Workplace Health And Wellness Study: Breaking Through Barriers was drawn information based on a survey of 50 Canadian workplaces and over 1,000 working Canadians. Taken together with previous findings we find two key barriers to effective workplace wellness initiatives:

- **Resources both Finances and Human:** Those responsible for managing or

implementing these programs indicated they are being held back by a consistent lack of human and financial resource.

1. More than one third (36%) said that not being able to demonstrate the ROI (return on investment) was a significant challenge. Yet time and again research has demonstrated the benefits, in terms of both cost reduction and improved workforce performance, from the implementation of workplace health and wellness initiatives. Many organizations still do not have a workplace health and wellness program and of those surveyed 53% cited that the lack of a budget was the primary factor in their lack of programming.
2. Lack of resources, primarily people and, mostly people's time remains a barrier. Of those organizations with a wellness plan 14% cited that they did not have the time to manage the program and of those without a program 41% indicated the same thing.

- **Buy-In of both Management and Employees:** without buy in it is difficult to gain the resources required to enable the ongoing support and participation required to sustain a successful program
  1. Perhaps because the data on the ROI of the programs for a specific organization is often lacking management fails to provide sufficient resources including financial and their own time actively communicating the value of wellness programs.
  2. According to the research 34% of respondents reported that getting employees to participate was a challenge.

Employee Buy-In: Communication and Customization

Resources and buy-in as barriers present challenges but not insurmountable challenges if you approach the process one step at a time. If you lack financial and human resources demonstrating employee interest is going to be a key step forward. Begin by surveying employees but take care to ask the right questions. Do not ask employees if they want better workplace wellness initiatives ask them what they need and what they are willing to participate in.

Communication about programs is not just a matter of getting the message out, it is a matter of how well the message is taken in

63% of workers surveyed reported that they were not fully aware of their employer's workplace health initiatives and 23% of employees specifically indicated they would be more likely to participate if they understood what initiative were available. Communication about programs is not just a matter of getting the message out, it is a matter of how well the message is taken in. While organizations can often find new ways to communicate out without understanding what their employees will hear the message will not be retained.

Better communication through two methods

- **Customization of communications by customization of programming.** Employees are more likely to participate in programs that meet their own personal needs. A well rounded program that includes health and wellness initiatives that range from physical health to personal and financial well being including relationship and self-management, career and education, financial education and so on will appeal to different people at different times and can help you gain buy in and participation. Survey your employees to identify what they need including how they are prepared to participate (the activities they personally are interested in). Then tailor your messages and programs to individuals. Often small initiatives such as a personal stress or financial management seminar, a weekly walking club, an onsite massage therapist are effective ways to open the door to

more employee engagement in more programming.
- **Buy in and engagement from management.** Management participation in communication including communicating by showing up and getting involved, sends a message to your employees. Demonstrate to management that the resources they spend on programs will be better spent if they also commit a small amount of their own time to the causes.

Management Buy in: Cost and ROI

Measuring the success of employee wellness initiates should include gathering information on 4 areas of program feedback

1. Employee Participation
2. Employee Feedback
3. Health costs and expenditures
4. Workplace employee satisfaction

Both management and employees need to be reminded that health and wellness takes time and effort from all involved. They all understand the importance but often do not know how to get started.

Workplace health and wellness initiatives clearly offer an advantage to the success of organizations but only when you are able to identify and initiate the right programs, gain buy-in and participation from management and employees.