How to Plan for Health Promotion

The current cost of work-related ill-health in the UK stands at over £100 billion each year, so taking action to address this issue makes good business sense. [1] Here we present the business case for health promotion and offer some ideas for events and campaigns that will benefit employees and employers alike.

The facts
When presenting the case for health promotion in the workplace, it is important to be able to articulate the benefits of such a programme. These facts and figures will help strengthen the argument:

1. It is estimated that approximately 2.3 million people in the UK suffer from ill health caused by work, amounting to 32.9 million lost working days, and costing the economy £100 billion each year. [2]
2. Musculoskeletal and mental health disorders are the most common causes of sickness absence, yet the majority of these cases are preventable.
3. Employee stress levels are soaring to record levels.
4. UK organisations lose 34 million work days each year due to smoking related sick leave, while the average smoker clocks up approximately 115 hours of untimetabled smoking breaks.
5. Increasingly sedentary and desk-bound occupations lead to lower back problems and a greater risk of obesity.
6. New technology creates health concerns such as Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), and increase the threat to productivity.
7. Working hours are getting longer, with the average UK employee spending more time either at work, or travelling for work. Sleep deprivation and fatigue reduce attention, alertness, vigilance and decision-making ability by 50%, communication skills by 30% and memory loss by 20%, and contribute to depression, irritability, mood disorders and the ability to reason.
8. Workplace health promotion initiatives have been proven to have a real return on investment by reducing sickness absence and increasing productivity levels.

Benefits for all
What can you expect to improve or reduce as a result of a well-planned workplace health promotion campaign?

Improvements to ...

- organisational reputation and image
- recruitment and retention of employees
- employee morale
- job satisfaction
- community relations
- quality and quantity of production
- psychological wellbeing
- energy levels
- knowledge and understanding
Reductions in ...

- absenteeism and turnover
- on the job injuries and accidents
- compensation claims
- feelings of stress, depression or anxiety

Promoting health

The bottom line is that health promotion improves wellbeing, which in turn improves motivation, thus improving performance, which increases productivity and profits. But how do you put health promotion into practice?

1. Investigate and quantify the impact that sickness absence and other health-related issues have on your organisation. You can do this by:

- looking at sickness absence records
- investigating accident report forms and compensation claims
- looking at the findings of exit interviews - do a great majority of people cite stress, or ill health caused by work as a factor in their leaving the organisation?
- distributing surveys or questionnaires amongst employees to determine if there is a real need for health promotion in a particular area e.g. are many office-based employees complaining of musculoskeletal disorders or RSI?

2. Choose a specific subject for either an identifiable target group, or a general issue for the whole organisation, e.g.

- obesity
- healthy eating
- smoking
- back pain and musculoskeletal disorders
- stress/mental health
- sun awareness
- fatigue/sleep deprivation

You could combine any number of these to create a programme devoted to improving general wellbeing.

3. Remember the basics for planning any event or project:

- **Set objectives:** i.e. what is the purpose of the health campaign? For example, is it to improve awareness, educate employees, or encourage behavioural changes?
- **Define the target audience:** this will generally be guided by the health issue in question, but most organisational health promotion campaigns should be wide-reaching and available to all employees, appealing to all ages, interests and needs. Focus on simple messages delivered effectively.
- **Get top level support:** a well-presented business case, backed up with relevant facts and figures will help to ensure buy-in from the highest levels. A senior sponsor or champion will give the campaign credibility.
• **Involve the right people:** some health promotion campaigns may require specialist health professionals such as occupational therapists or dieticians, and communications experts such as designers, writers and marketing professionals. It may be necessary to buy-in some of this expertise if it does not exist in-house so ensure there are sufficient funds in the budget to cope with this. However, if the budget is tight, there may be other ways of accessing this expertise, for example by tapping into networks or asking around to discover what other talents employees or their families/friends may have out with their current roles.

• **Identify the resources required (time, people, money):** this will determine the range of approaches that can be developed - a small budget may call for more creative use of resources. Factor in all potential costs, for example equipment hire, marketing materials, speakers/healthcare professional fees, venue hire, catering.

• **Define the communications plan:** think about how you will promote your campaign by evaluating the nature of the information to be communicated, the target audience and the resources available. Examples of publicity materials include e-shots, leaflets, intranet, team meetings, newsletters and posters.

• **Put the plan into action:** create a written statement detailing who will do what, with what resources and by when and then turn the plans into reality. Remember that a health promotion campaign may require a series of activities over a period of time, so break this up into sensible sections and create a schedule with key dates/people/resources etc.

• **Evaluate:** measure success and discover whether or not objective were met. This could be done by distributing questionnaires or surveys, speaking to participants and through simple observation. This will provide valuable information on what went well, what went less well and how future campaigns could be more effective.

**Ideas for promoting health at work**

**Raising awareness and communication methods**

• **Speakers:** for example ask ex-smokers or reformed couch potatoes who have completed a physical challenge like a marathon or other sporting event to give first hand accounts of their experiences.

• **Classes:** for example provide exercise classes such as aerobics or Pilates, or cookery classes to teach people how to cook healthier meals.

• **Multimedia:** use a range of media to convey your message, e.g. blogging, podcasts, emails, video clips and traditional methods such as posters, leaflets etc.

**Activities**

• Issue fun quizzes or diagnostics to get employees thinking about their health. They could access these quizzes from your intranet and submit their answers online.

• Sponsor people to lose weight or give up smoking and donate the proceeds to charity.

• Run competition or other events, like a sponsored walk, bike ride or swim, fun runs or activity days with organised sports such as a five-a-side football league in a day. You could also involve employees' families/friends in these events.

• To promote healthy eating, ask employees to find creative ways of incorporating more fruit/vegetables into their diet, for example by devising a new flavour of smoothie. Share recipes on the intranet and/or create a company cookbook.

• Issue employees with pedometers and encourage them to reach up to 10,000 steps per
day. Chart everyone's progress over the course of a month and award a prize to the employee who consistently goes beyond the target.

- Put quick health and fitness tips on payslips, or use payslips to advertise health promotion events.
- Create a 'Cycle to Work' day or week - involve local bike clubs and shops, and ask them to give demonstrations and talks about the rules of the road, safety etc.
- Run a 'Fitness Challenge' with rewards (t-shirts, gym memberships, spa days) for those who commit to some form of aerobic exercise over one, two or three months.
- Send daily or weekly tips via email, forums, bulletin boards, posters, signs on W.C. cubicle doors on how to sneak activity into your working day, e.g. by doing stretches at your desk, taking walking breaks, visiting colleagues rather than emailing or phoning, taking the stairs instead of the lift etc.
- Run a 'Family Fitness Fair' - invite local sports shops, health clubs, health food stores, bike shops, ski shops, sports clubs and gyms to participate by setting up stands or displays, offering hands-on activities and demonstrations. Encourage them to provide safety tips, samples, vouchers and raffle prizes.
- Favourite routes - ask employees to contribute their favourite local walking/running/cycling routes and distribute a list of these via email/newsletter/intranet. Ask them to give each route a creative name - the most inventive wins a prize.

**Conclusion**

There is a great deal of evidence to show that organisations which promote health and wellbeing in the workplace will reap significant rewards. The basic principles outlined here will go a long way to raising awareness, encouraging action and evaluation in your own organisation.