

Workplace Health Promotion: A North Carolina Assessment of Progress

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Although a couple of worksite health promotion (WHP) initiatives in the United States can be traced as far back as the late 1890s, many of America's most notable programs were conceived in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. North Carolina's earliest WHP programs were conceived shortly thereafter, with most taking shape in larger cities. The rationale for such programs initially focused on promoting employees' health and boosting their morale and productivity; yet, as employers' medical care costs spurred to double-digit levels in the 1980s and 1990s, a growing percentage of WHP adopters added cost containment to their list of desired outcomes. The original WHP programs consisted primarily of a health risk appraisal questionnaire, clinical health screenings, and educational seminars, with a few sporting on-site fitness and/or recreation centers. Nowadays, it's common to see worksites sporting outdoor walking trails, weekly lunch 'n learns, health newsletters, healthy food vending options, smoke-free workstations, financial incentives, e-mail-delivered daily health tips, and internet-based personal health programs.

It stands to reason that since most adults work for a living and that employers pick up the lion's share of the state's healthcare tab, worksites arguably provide a natural venue to promote the overall health and welfare of employees. Nonetheless, many worksites have been slow to act on this opportunity while others have enthusiastically adopted WHP. Why such a dichotomy? First and foremost, I believe the philosophy of senior management greatly influences the presence or absence of WHP. Although I've seen a handful of WHP programs evolve from a bottom-up [employee-driven] perspective, the vast majority of successful WHP efforts are driven from the top, originating from senior management's belief that employees are an organization's greatest asset. Moreover, I've discovered that successful WHP programs are usually (1) operated by competent professionals, (2) tied, to

some extent, to employees' health risk profiles as well as their interests, (3) enhanced with "carrots" (e.g., financial incentives), (4) positioned as a key business strategy, and (5) subjected to regular evaluations.

Fortunately, numerous employers throughout North Carolina have taken advantage of our state's temperate climate by developing outdoor recreational facilities and walking trails for employees to use. Continued growth in our state's evolving high-tech industries, which are typically comprised of more educated and health-conscious employees, also spurs more WHP initiatives for companies to achieve greater health and productivity outcomes. Flexible work hours have also made it easier for employers to offer on-site WHP programs since employees can use this "down time" to pursue on-site wellness opportunities. Also, as more employers are becoming aware of the strong correlation between health status, on-the-job productivity, and healthcare utilization patterns, we're seeing traditional WHP efforts expand into more far-reaching and progressive health and pro-

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ductivity management (HPM) initiatives. I'm also impressed with the growing number and quality of organizations (commercial, educational, healthcare, and governmental) throughout our state that are assisting employers of all sizes in their quest to establish successful WHP initiatives.

Rising Healthcare Costs to Employer Are a Primary Driver

Obviously, rising costs to provide employee healthcare benefits is one of the most pervasive forces behind the growth of WHP, as risk managers grow more frustrated with managed care and other short-term bandages to this long-term problem. Yet, numerous worksites have found out that WHP, like any other

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cost-containment strategy, must be positioned within an *integrated health management initiative* to really pay off. Thus, I expect more worksites to engage return-on-investment (ROI) metrics—ranging from break-even analysis to benefit-cost analysis—in their quest to measure the financial impact of these initiatives.

Barriers to Worksite Health Promotion Programs

On the flip side, numerous factors impede the growth of WHP programs in North Carolina. The high cost of doing business in today's costly economy keeps many companies on the sidelines. Business' unrealistic demand for a quick return doesn't bode well for WHP. Sadly, some decision-makers haven't realized that WHP is a human capital investment that yields proportionately greater results over time. Add to this list of barriers, the typical worksite culture that does little, if anything, to respect or support a person's right to practice health promotion.

Certainly, downsizing prevents many business owners from adopting any long-term human resource strategy (such as WHP), especially when they have high turn-over rates and view their workforce as "temporary." Another barrier to WHP is that most worksites spend virtually all of their healthcare budgets on purchasing traditional "defensive-minded" healthcare coverage for their employees; thus, leaving nothing to invest in more progressive health plan options (e.g., "good health rebate" and healthcare expense accounts) that motivate healthy lifestyles in addition to breeding more consumer-driven decisions among employees and covered dependents. No wonder an enlightened business owner recently stated, "health insurance doesn't really do anything for our company's productivity—*healthy employees do.*"

What does the future hold for WHP in North Carolina? Will the growth of WHP in the next 30 years reflect that of the past three decades? In these challenging economic times, how

Worksite Health Promotion Return on Investment

Many North Carolina employers have realized a positive return on investment (ROI) from their WHP efforts. ROI dividends have been reported by companies from the mountains to the coast. For example, WHP efforts have cut risk factors in 40% of diabetic-prone employees and shaved workers' compensation costs at Replacement, Inc.; enabled GlaxoSmithKline to earn honors as one of Working Mothers Magazine's list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" for 14 consecutive years; earned Capitol Broadcasting Company the state's first Be Active Workplace designation; yielded healthcare cost reductions at Blue Ridge Paper and Asheboro Elastics; reduced emergency room visits and held healthcare costs flat for the past two years at Syngenta Crop Protection; boosted productivity and work-life quality outcomes at SAS Institute; and enhanced employee recruitment and retention at Cisco Systems. Even smaller firms like Charlotte-based Robert Mason Company and Rivers & Associates in Greenville attribute much of their healthcare cost containment and productivity gains to WHP programs.

can North Carolina really be competitive in today's global economy without healthy and productive workers? From Murphy to Manteo, much of that challenge can be met head-on if today's business leaders steer their worksites with WHP and other human capital investments that will indelibly foster a healthier and more prosperous 21st Century. **NCMedJ**