

Small Businesses, Worksite Wellness, and Public Health: A Time for Action

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The United States Small Business Administration (SBA) defines a “small” business as an independent business employing 500 or fewer employees. The SBA estimates that there are approximately 25.8 million “small” businesses in the United States, and they employ roughly 50% of the working population.¹ Small businesses tend to offer less health insurance for employees.² While 98% of businesses with 200 or more employees offered health benefits, only 59% of firms with less than 200 workers offered health benefits to employees.³ A lack of health insurance severely limits access to health and medical care for employees and places them in a precarious financial position if an injury or illness befalls the employee or a member of his/her family. National worksite survey results indicate that health insurance or managed care providers are the leading source of health risk appraisals, health screenings, lifestyle behavior change programs, and disease management programs offered by employers of all sizes.⁴ As a result, when a small business does not offer health insurance, employees have less access to health promotion programming of all types. However,

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even among small businesses that offer employee health insurance, the evidence is clear that at nearly every level of employee size, smaller worksites are less likely to offer all types of health promotion programs, offer fewer environmental programs or supports, and report fewer health-oriented policies.⁴ Moreover, these patterns

have persisted over the past 30 years!⁴⁻⁷ Given growing evidence that worksite-based health promotion programs lead to improvements in employee health, morale, productivity, while helping employers address the rising cost of healthcare. It is a matter of public health concern that small businesses and the 50% of United States workers employed by them do not enjoy these important benefits. This paper will offer some plausible explanations for why small businesses offer fewer health promotion and safety programs, why this problem has persisted over time, suggest a multi-level intervention strategy for increasing the number of small businesses who offer health and safety programs for their employees, and offer a few final research-related next steps.

Why Do Small Businesses Offer Fewer Health Promotion and Safety Programs?

First, we acknowledge that understanding why some small businesses offer health promotion and safety programs (and others do not) is an important question that is worthy of additional research. There may be different reasons for different types of businesses (e.g., service, retail, manufacturing), different “size” businesses (e.g., under 15 employees vs. over 250 employees), businesses in different regions of the country, and/or businesses with different longevity (e.g., start-up, over five years, etc.). While more information would be desirable, here we offer several plausible reasons why small businesses are less likely to offer employee health and safety programs. One likely reason is the additional cost of offering these programs. Small business owners take a serious personal and financial risk to open a new business. More small businesses fail than succeed. Start-up costs for any business are

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substantial. Owners must learn how to hire and retain employees and to run a successful business. When business survival is the focus, any other costs, including those linked to employee health, may be seen as prohibitive. In addition to direct costs, a small business may be less likely to offer health and safety programming because indirect costs (e.g., time and resources) for anything other than the business enterprise are typically in short supply. Competing demands to meet production or service goals, to operate efficiently, and/or to grow the business, are constantly being juggled with human capital needs and resources in the small business environment. Thus, employee health promotion may be low on the list of priorities for small business owners.

A third possible reason why small businesses offer fewer health promotion programs is a lack of personnel dedicated to employee health and safety. National survey results indicate that worksites with a dedicated staff person for health and safety are 10 times more likely to offer a comprehensive worksite wellness program than are worksites without dedicated staff.⁴ Small businesses have fewer staff members, and these staff tend to have multiple responsibilities. Thus, few small businesses employ individuals who are able to dedicate any time/effort to worksite health and safety. Interestingly, as small businesses grow in employee size, some of the barriers to offering health and safety programs may diminish. Wilson⁸ conducted a nationally representative survey of small businesses and learned that employers with 50-99 employees were different than even smaller employers (i.e., those with less than 50 employees) on nearly all categories. While access to safety programming was about the same in these two categories of employers, the slightly larger worksites were more likely to offer employee health insurance, had more formalized health-related policies and practices, and offered more health promotion programming than companies with less than 50 employees. They also found that the slightly larger employers were more likely to have dedicated staff for health promotion, occupational health and safety, and employee assistance programs.⁸ Having a dedicated staff person is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for success. It is important to have dedicated and knowledgeable and/or experienced staff to successfully plan, implement, and evaluate worksite health promotion programs.

One final reason why small businesses are less likely to offer worksite health promotion and safety programs is linked to the small business culture and leadership tendencies of their owners.

Here, some fundamental research has been undertaken. Eakin⁹ conducted an important study on the social culture of work in small businesses and the role of manager beliefs and attitudes in framing the meaning and experience of work in those environments. She interviewed 53 small business owners and found that the prevailing way of “managing” health and safety issues was to “leave it up to the workers.” Owners discounted health hazards overall and emphasized the perspective that if they tried to address employee health behaviors, they were viewed as paternalistic and/or meddling. Linnan and colleagues¹⁰ corroborated these findings with survey results from more than 1,000 managers in 23 small-to-medium size manufacturing worksites where they found that, while managers strongly believed that safety issues are the responsibility of employers to address, they rated far lower the matter of employer responsibility for supporting employee lifestyle health and/or behavioral issues.¹⁰ It follows that, because most United States small businesses have less than 15 employees, issues of privacy and confidentiality, which are essential to ensuring employee program participation in health promotion programs, can be compromised. As a result, some small business owners may choose not to offer any programs at all, so as to avoid the perception that they are prying into the private lives of their employees.

Despite the many reasons why small business owners are less likely to offer health and safety programs, small businesses have assets and strengths that will serve to help facilitate the adoption of these programs. Specifically, small businesses have fewer organizational layers than larger companies to consider in the decision-making process, so that if an owner wants to adopt a new program or create a new policy, it is typically not a cumbersome decision and approval process. In larger companies, these decisions involve multiple people and additional time. In addition, with fewer employees, it is easier to solicit opinions or assess health needs from the entire workforce at a small business. In larger companies with remote locations, these efforts are complicated, and some employees may be left out. Third, the influence of the leader may be more direct and, thus, stronger in small businesses. As a result, if the leader is supportive of health promotion efforts, employees may be more highly motivated to get involved in worksite-sponsored health promotion, given the stronger and more direct interpersonal relationship between managers and employees in small businesses. Small business owners also know that the health of every employee is important; and employees may be family members (or viewed as “part of

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the family”), which provides additional motivation to treat employee health as a priority issue.

Recognizing both the challenges and potential strengths of working with small businesses to address health promotion is an important first step toward addressing this public health imperative. One of the *Healthy People 2010* national objectives states that “75% of employers (of all sizes) should offer a comprehensive worksite health promotion program,” which is defined as including: (1) *Health education programs* (e.g., skill development and lifestyle behavior change along with information dissemination and awareness building); (2) *Supportive social/physical environments*; (e.g., an organization’s expectations regarding healthy behaviors and implementation of policies that promote health and reduce risk of disease); (3) *Integration* (e.g., of the worksite program into the organization’s structure); (4) *Linkage* (e.g., to related programs like employee assistance programs (EAPs) and programs to help employees balance work and family); and (5) *Worksite screening programs* (e.g., linked to medical care to ensure follow-up and appropriate treatment). While the majority of employers offer one or more of the five key elements of a comprehensive program,⁴ it is clear that small businesses offer far fewer of all programs and are unlikely to reach the 2010 national health objective. In the remainder of this commentary, we share some strategies for how to successfully increase the likelihood that small businesses offer worksite health and safety programs for their employees.

Strategies for Success—Increasing Adoption and Implementation of Health and Safety Programs among Small Business Owners

There are multiple reasons why small businesses may not be offering these programs, so a successful strategy for increasing adoption and implementation of health promotion programs among small businesses should involve multiple levels of intervention, consistent with ecological approaches.¹¹ Here we present a brief review of some promising strategies at three levels of the social ecologic framework (policy, community, organization) and conclude with a call for additional research.

Policy-Level Changes

Public policy at the federal, state, and local levels could be enacted to support small business owners who want to implement employee health promotion efforts. For example, legislation extending tax credits to small businesses that offer selected health promotion programs was sponsored by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) in the Healthy Lifestyle and Prevention America Act (S. 1074). This type of legislation was proposed at the state level in Rhode Island as well.¹² In addition to tax credit strategies, public policy changes that would offer some type of universal healthcare coverage at reduced rates to small businesses would be helpful. As noted previously, because managed care or other health plans are the primary source of employer-sponsored health promotion programs, offering health plan coverage that includes a basic health promotion package would be desirable. These public policy changes—whether at the national or state

level—have the potential for making an immediate and significant impact on small business adoption and implementation of health promotion programs for employees.

Community-Level Changes

If not a part of a franchise or a larger corporate affiliation, small businesses can be isolated organizational structures without much power or leverage in a given community. Recommended community-level changes to help stimulate small businesses to adopt and implement health promotion programs is all about identifying and creating leverage points for change through partnerships. Promising community-level interventions include encouraging partnerships to address health promotion initiatives with regional Small Business Administration offices, local Chambers of Commerce, local Business Councils, and national or local Business Groups on Health. These organizations typically exist to support businesses, and if health promotion “packages” or training sessions or workshops could be developed with a small business focus, it might stimulate owners to adopt more health promotion programming. In addition, these partnerships create leverage opportunities where members could be called upon to advocate for policy changes at the national, state, or local levels. In Rhode Island, the state health department helped to organize a statewide worksite wellness council that included business leaders of all sizes, health department officials, insurers/health plans, consultants, and researchers.¹² In North Carolina, most local communities have a Healthy Carolinians Task Force that could embrace and sponsor worksite wellness initiatives. University-based partnerships can bring student skills and help; opportunities for student projects or practicum experiences; and expertise in planning, marketing, or evaluating programs. These community-level partnerships and activities could be a powerful force for change.

Organizational-Level Interventions

Here, we refer to interventions that might be initiated within the small business itself to support the adoption and implementation of employee health promotion programs. Barbeau et al¹³ reported that there were no significant differences between small manufacturing sites that did/did not agree to participate in a cancer prevention research trial. Happily, there is growing research evidence that small businesses are interested in and can successfully adopt these programs and that employees who participate can improve their health. For example, Sorenson and colleagues¹⁴ found that small businesses randomized to receive a social-contextual intervention, which included employee participation through wellness committees, and a multi-level intervention addressing employee and manager health and work conditions, were significantly more likely than control worksites to improve multivitamin use and physical activity among employee participants.

The types of strategies that an interested small business can use to develop a successful health promotion program include many of the same approaches that other businesses (of all sizes) should consider. Specifically, first it is important to mobilize all available internal and external information and resources that

might be related to health promotion (e.g., marketing, facilities, nurses, benefits, etc.). Small businesses should create a small team, task force, or wellness committee including employees who are interested in helping focus attention on employee health. This small group can provide the staffing and leadership needed to get a project underway. Second, if there is a labor union or employer-sponsored healthcare plan already present, resources/expertise available through these sources might offer possible staffing, resources, intervention materials, or expert help. Third, it would be useful to conduct an assessment to determine the top five healthcare claims costs, the top five health needs/interests of managers and employees, the behavioral risk profile of the workforce (e.g., via a Health Risk Appraisal), and the important expectations that managers and employees have for this program. Make sure the most current literature from worksite-based research studies is carefully and critically reviewed. Fourth, develop a working plan that takes into account the assessment results and current evidence about what works, as well as realistic objectives for success. It is essential to obtain approval and encouragement for implementation from top management and the wellness committee or task force established at the worksite. A systematic and tailored communications plan and a festive kick-off event can help to get the program underway. Fifth, it is important to include as program components a menu of evidence-based health promotion program offerings that take into account different learning preferences, convenience, cost, time to participate, and any privacy/confidentiality concerns that might exist among employees.

The program, once implemented, should take steps to stay visible among both employees and managers. The program should include multi-level interventions that address work conditions, as well as the physical and social environment. Ongoing visibility can be aided by E-mail messaging, events, contests, print, video, online sources, classes, support groups, and other relevant methods. In order to identify evidence-based programs for possible program inclusion, one can review the most recent published worksite-based literature, the Community Guide to Preventive Services published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.thecommunityguide.org/worksite/), CancerControl Planet (<http://cancercontrolplanet.cancer.gov/>), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-sponsored Healthier Worksite Initiative (www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/hwi/index.htm), and other compendia of information about effective programs and policy interventions. Specific resources (handbooks) that include examples of small business success stories can be found at the Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA) (www.welcoa.org) or Partnership for Prevention (2001) (www.prevent.org/) Web sites. Finally, successful worksite health promotion initiatives include specific plans to evaluate the health outcomes at the worksite and employee levels, as well as the process of delivering these programs, so that employees and managers can talk about their experiences and the results of these endeavors. It is

important to find ways to periodically share the results with employees, the wellness committee members, and with managers. Similarly, it is important to work toward securing a budget (however small to begin with) and some portion of dedicated staff support for employee health promotion activities. Over time, individual training for health promotion program staff will build internal expertise. Successful programs will pursue all partnership opportunities in the larger community, and within their own company environment, so as to leverage small resources and expertise into successful outcomes.

Research to Benefit Practice

Ongoing research is needed to determine how to create structural, political, and economic incentives, as well as strategies for how best to motivate small business owners to adopt these programs, and then to help owners be successful once they embark on these efforts. Research is needed to decipher what the underlying and persistent barriers are to offering these programs and to determine how best to overcome identified barriers in the

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highly diverse and complex small business community. Divine¹⁵ recently found that small business owners deciding to offer employee health promotion programs were less motivated by financial arguments (e.g., the programs will address a business need or rising healthcare cost), but were more persuaded by evidence that the wellness programs actually work to improve employee health. Qualitative research is critically important to uncovering the root causes of why this problem has persisted for more than three decades. How to best “tailor” a menu of health promotion offerings to the small business environment continues to be a worthy research question. Because partnerships are central to overcoming some of the barriers to offering these programs in small businesses, future research on which partnerships are most effective, how to best characterize these partnerships, and how these partnerships can grow and be sustained over time seem to be critically important scientific pursuits. The role played by managed care organizations and other healthcare provider organizations needs further investigation. Research on the policy level that uncovers examples of legislation or incentives that work to increase small business adoption is clearly needed as well.

For the past 30 years, while worksite health promotion programs have proliferated, and many employees and companies

have benefited from these programs, small businesses and their employees have lagged behind and, in fact, have made very few strides toward offering health promotion programs for their employees. Because nearly 50% of American workers are employed in small businesses, we need to address this problem as a public health imperative. We have offered some of the plausible reasons why small businesses have not offered health promotion programs, noted some of the challenges and opportunities, have identified some potential strategies for success, as well as research

needs. As we move further into the 21st century, we must take up this challenge so that all workers can benefit equally from successful worksite health promotion efforts, regardless of whether they are employed in a corner convenience store with five employees or a Fortune 500 corporation. This public health challenge is one that we can begin to address with strong partnership models, a multi-level intervention strategy, and the political will to focus attention on this issue now. **NCMedJ**

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