

Employee fitness and its effect of employee health

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Abstract

As the obesity rate rises among Americans today to staggering rates employers are now looking for alternative ways to motivate employees to be the best worker they can be. The research that has been conducted is still in its infancy, but there is promising research being conducted by the health departments. So far research has shown that employee fitness does play a vital role in how the employee performs. Their fitness is directly related to work loss due to sick time and injuries in the workplace. Research is now showing the many benefits of simple fitness routines such as creating better team cohesion, better communication among employees and the added benefit of being able to deliver short safety messages during these routines. Not only do these new programs have many benefits for the employees, they are also benefiting the employer by reducing health costs through lower worker compensation claims and lower insurance premiums.

There is a lot of controversy and media coverage surrounding the health of Americans. The fact is that as adult Americans we spend as much as fifty percent of our adult lives at work. This is the number one underlining reason for the workplace to offer employees comprehensive wellness and health programs. These programs not only help the worker but they help the organization by reducing the corporations tax rates, increases worker productivity, reduces worker compensation claims, and builds camaraderie and leadership among employees. With all of these benefits why wouldn't an organization want to offer these programs to their employees?

Injury prevention in the workplace is the leading topic among safety departments in organizations today. Human resources also have the shared task to help figure out how the company can decrease the amount of injuries in the organization. Together with the two departments working together the overall goals should be how can we decrease the amount of workers compensation claims, reduce the percentage of near miss incidents, and improve the overall health of the organizations' workforce. According to the Surgeon General 60 percent of adults are overweight and out of shape (Macdonald & Westover, 2011). This plays a huge role in many of today's manufacturing and textile market place. There is no coincidence for the reason that the military and paramilitary organizations practice overall health and wellness of their prospective organizations. Critics of this idea will argue that introducing and incorporating fitness¹ into the daily work routine would be counterproductive. There is no need for this type of behavior as most companies do not have any job descriptions that require that sort of physical activity. The organizations that practice good physical fitness need it for their jobs and survivability. The fact is that the number of lost work days is 13 times higher, and the cost of medical claims is 7 times higher among the heaviest and out of shape employees compared to those of employees of normal weight (Macdonald & Westover, 2011). The answer to the statistic is personal fitness simply reduces the occurrence of movement related injuries and chronic health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity. The research is not suggesting every organization to be at the same fitness levels as military and paramilitary organizations. However, its important to incorporate employee wellness into the company's

1 Fitness – For the purpose of this article the word fitness and wellness are interchangeable. Fitness refers to the quality or state of being in good health especially as an actively sought goal (“Wellness,” 2015).

safety plan. Fred S. Drennan, (2003) shows that the lack of flexibility and strength is a primary risk factor for low-back and other soft-tissue injuries. These back injuries and other soft-tissue injuries account for more than half of all worker compensation claims today. The organizations effective safety program is not complete without addressing their workers flexibility and strength as preventive measures for musculoskeletal injuries (Drennan, 2003).

It is not enough alone to leave it up to employees to seek out and utilize the available resources that are provided to them in materials such as health pamphlets and access to gym memberships. Management must educate their employees about the important role that their flexibility and strength play in preserving their fitness and should include daily stretching as part of the employees' safety routine (Drennan, 2003). When integrated into the safety routine the employees will begin to value its importance and start to utilize these preventive measures to help offset the costs that are associated with workplace injuries. Such programs can help correct employees damaging postures, relieve chronic pain and may reverse injury or prevent costly surgery (Drennan, 2003). There is often much difficulty when integrating the beneficial wellness programs though. Many employees will not be able to do exercises the same as other employees are able to do. The important aspect is to begin with an exercise program that all employees can achieve without strain or pain then integrate that routine into the daily safety plan for the day. Many experts for example say to start out with simple stretches and upper body rotations. These exercises do not make the employees feel belittled in any way and many should be able to perform these without much strain. These simple exercises can also be done in the employees regular work clothes and without getting on the floor. The next benefit is that employees will be able to feel immediate results in the simple stretches because stretching feels good on the body.

The benefit to the employer is that their employees will quickly start having a better range of motion which prevents the soft-tissue injuries that is caused by the lack of flexibility.

Companies have a tough time in today's economy and every department has to justify their budgets. With budgets in mind workers compensation and healthcare costs are really the same side of the coin. They go hand in hand with each other when costs are concerned. The senior management should look at what is the best return on their investment in the long run. When workers compensation costs from back injuries, carpal tunnel syndrome, chronic pain and other musculoskeletal injuries account for half of the healthcare costs. Employers are now looking at what is going to maximize their return on their investment. This is when it becomes clear that improving the fitness level of the workforce by helping them adopt healthier lifestyles has a huge potential for cost savings (Drennan, 2003). The school district of Manatee County Florida when faced with 10% year over year increases in health care looked at how to reduce this cost to the organization and employees. What happened when they implemented HealthVantage, their health program, there was a sharp decline in costs. Now the county is looking at only 1% increase in costs year over year (Herbert, 2011). When integrating fitness, safety and supervisor leadership the return on investment is measurable in many areas most notably healthcare costs (Drennan, 2003). Employers can see the reduced incidence and severity of cumulative trauma disorders, their leadership is more skillful, their flexibility and strength is greater, 30 to 80 percent of participants adopt healthier lifestyles, the organizations' morale is improved and employees have the feeling that the organization cares, productivity is higher because of the healthier employees, and healthcare costs are reduced (Drennan, 2003). Organizations will be

more prone to accept budgets of this type once they learn and see the returns on their investments in ways that can be measured.

In 2008, more than 5000 workers died from occupational injuries and work related illnesses account for 49000 deaths annually. More than 4.6 million workers experienced nonfatal occupational injuries or illnesses in 2008 (Sorensen, 2011). This is only a portion of the costs that are associated with work-related illness and injury that are borne by employers, workers, and society overall. The health care costs are staggering in the face of employers today. For the employers that offer health coverage for their employees they are now scrambling trying to figure out ways to reduce these costs for both them and their employees. The Center for Disease Control has recommended that at least 75% of work sites offer a comprehensive work site health promotion program. Even though the CDC recommends this type of health promotional only seven percent of work sites offer any sort of health promotion programs (Sorensen, 2011). Glorian Sorensen, (2011) reports that physical activity provides a useful example of a health behavior that can be effectively influenced through multilevel work site health promotions. Only about thirty two percent of US adults have reported engaging in regular leisure-time physical activity, with even lower rates among ethnic minority low-income, and other underserved populations; rates are also lower when activity is objectively monitored (Sorensen, 2011). When rates of activity are lower like in the cases that Glorian Sorensen, (2011) report, the employees psychosocial stressors will contribute to obesity because these individuals are not relieving their stress in a positive way contributing to their overall health. The lack of positive stress relieving through regular physical activity can result in the individuals finding outlets of the psychosocial stress by smoking and heavy alcohol use. Employees will also have musculoskeletal disorders,

psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and job burnout (Sorensen, 2011). These are huge issues that face employees and their employers. In 2008 prior the health program in Manatee County School District the organization found that only 5 percent of the districts 5,200 employees were accounting for nearly 51 percent of the district's overall health costs (Herbert, 2011). Costs such as the aforementioned continue to increase the cost to the employer by increased health care costs, lost time at work, and lower productivity. Because these issues are on the rise the upper management of organizations are now asking themselves: how do we integrate these lower cost programs into our workforce and start seeing the return on our investment?

A common question is how do we integrate safety and fitness together in a manner where employees and employers will start seeing the difference in daily activities. The answer started with the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). NIOSH started a campaign and laid out the steps to a healthier U.S. Workforce. The campaign started on June 20, 2002 when President George W. Bush signed an executive order to promote personal fitness among the general public (Drennan, 2006). NIOSH took the lead in this initiative and later unveiled the Steps to a Healthier U.S. Workforce campaign to encourage workplace safety and health programs that focus on preventing work-related illness, injury and disability, and on promoting healthier living and lifestyles to reduce and prevent chronic disease (Drennan, 2006). This is a big first step where businesses are no longer going about this alone and they now have the backing of NIOSH on their sides. In the campaign they showed that the costs to American industry in lost productivity (due to workers compensation injuries, healthcare costs and low output when bundled together were more than \$16,000 per employee for 2002 (Drennan, 2006). The reports also showed that workers who lack basic fitness are also prime candidates to

experience musculoskeletal disorders, and excess weight and lack of abdominal strength stresses the lower back. This means that even though employees are demonstrating the proper lifting techniques in theory they in fact are not using the proper techniques for lifting. This is because when a person is overweight or obese and lacks the proper flexibility, when the person squats down to lift that heavy box they are lacking the proper flexibility in the hamstrings and quadriceps thus still putting the strain in the lower back for compensation of the poor flexibility. These numbers do not only affect the manual labor industry either. This study also found that people who are obese are three to five times as likely to develop problems that coincide with carpal tunnel syndrome (Drennan, 2006). There have been many efforts to help employees improve their health which often originates in the human resources' department. It is in the experience of Fred S. Drennan, (2006) that these efforts are often relatively passive and may include distributing brochures, hosting an annual health fair or providing internet access to evaluate personal health factors. There are two schools of thought as to how the industry should combine the safety department and the health department. One is to just combine the two under one umbrella, and the other is just providing employees more information about safety and health at home as well as at work. There is no right way of doing this but the latter is more of a passive way of promoting the outcomes that the organization wants to achieve. It is felt that for organizations to get maximum results they have to take a more aggressive stance as opposed to the passive. The aggressive stance does not mean for the company to act negatively toward the people who are not where the management would like to see them. It means that everyone from the workers to the upper management should take part in these programs. The CEO and or President must actively endorse the program by actively participating (Lindahl, 2011). This will

show that the company really does care about their individuals and is not practicing the “do as I say not as I do” practices. When management firmly links fitness and safety into training systems and the operational culture, participation rates can reach 100 percent (Drennan, 2006). If the supervisor is enthusiastic and supports a daily safety/fitness program employees will embrace it (Drennan, 2006). This is the aggressive approach that works and involves all employees from the top down. Not only should management participate in these daily safety routines but they should also educate employees about the importance of flexibility and strength in preserving their fitness and include daily physical conditioning as part of the daily safety routine (Drennan, 2006). In addition to just building strength and flexibility this fosters team building, good morale, cohesiveness, communication and productivity in a team based environment. Well-being also supports employees and their families in ways that enable the employee to support the business and its customers (Buer, 2015). Not only does this foster a great amount of benefits for the organization, employees also consistently report that daily stretching with their team builds stronger teams (Drennan, 2006). These are great secondary attributes from simple team exercises. The focus of integrated programs like the ones mentioned not only promote the employees fitness and health levels but are designed to deliver focused safety training such as hazard awareness and reporting, during the fitness routine. This link is a powerful justification for total participation. Organizations use this time to deliver short, scripted safety messages. It is imperative to ensure that as part of this health promotion routine safety is also included with regard to delivering the short scripted messages because safety competes with productivity, sales, profits, globalization, rising healthcare costs and many other issues that affect the company’s ability to survive.

Whether the organization is trying to promote safety or better working conditions by reducing work hazards, or trying to promote better worker health to better their workforces and have them be more productive. Having workers stay at work more throughout the year and having the workforce be more productive is a major concern of employers. Employers don't take it lightly when employees are missing work because of worker compensation claims. Employers don't like their workforce to experience employment burnout where employees become apathetic toward what they are doing and lose their sense of their competitive edge in the workforce. So how do employers take charge of these issues that are facing the majority of the workforce today? They are taking to integrating employee fitness with their safety program as a form of preventative safety. Prevention is the best form of safety just like with an employee who takes the time to weigh actions and consequences against their possible outcomes. Employees that are able to flex in the ways that create a better posture when lifting objects and the employee that is able to lift a bit more without straining there body is beneficial. When a company practices this preventative safety measure they are not only creating a better and more productive workforce, but they are building team work, creating a better atmosphere to foster higher moral within the organization. The employees are happier because they now feel that their company truly cares for them and they are not just a number in the production line. There are other advantages to, when companies practice these steps to a healthier workforce the employee insurance rates go down. A great example of insurance rate decreasing is when the College of Wooster in Ohio decided to take these measures while also hiring a personal wellness coach from the local YMCA for \$45,000 a year, the collage actually saved more than double the cost through lower health insurance premiums (Panepento, 2004). Not only can organizations save large amounts of money

on premiums, the organization might not have to pay as much in federal taxes when certain bills get passed in congress. These bills allow for a tax credit of \$200 dollars per employee for the first two hundred employees then \$100 dollars per employee after that. These are major incentives relating employee health and safety and it is no wonder why employers are now looking at these programs as better returns on their investments over the traditional ways of just passing out brochures or having employees filling out health assessments online. As mentioned earlier military and paramilitary organizations do not practice these programs just because their jobs require a fit workforce they just have an easier justification as to why they pay employees to stay healthy while employed with them.

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