



Living **WELL**

Some employers integrate wellness into off-the-job safety programs

By Kyle W. Morrison, senior associate editor

The No. 1 cause of unintentional death in the United States is not on-the-job transportation incidents – it's heart disease. The No. 2 cause is not related to contact with workplace equipment – it's cancer.

Combined, heart disease and cancer make up nearly half of all unintentional deaths each year in this country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Although these deaths may include people who are retired or otherwise not working, employees are not immune to these leading causes. With insurance premiums and employee medical claims at an all-time high – and causal factors to these diseases growing – some employers look to wellness initiatives to help lower costs and keep their employees healthy.

“When you're not 100 percent because you're suffering from allergies, or because your back hurts, or because you're overweight, you're more likely to pay less attention to what you're doing and more likely to have an injury” on the job, said Sharon Hodson, manager of global employee and worksite health at Moline, IL-based John Deere.

Workplace wellness programs are not a new idea, but a few employers have begun coordinating those efforts with ongoing workplace or off-the-job safety programs. Proponents of this combination of programs suggest it can lead to healthier and happier workers, which in turn lowers costs and increases productivity.

Do safety and wellness belong together?

Glenn Williams, safety manager at John Deere's world headquarters facilities, learned a few years ago at an off-the-job symposium why infusing wellness with safety was important. Presenters talked about how a workplace injury – such as a slip or fall – could be related to off-the-job behaviors and wellness. For example, the fall may have been caused by the employee's weak musculoskeletal system, which was the result of the worker's unhealthy diet.

“It became pretty clear to me that health and safety were two things that really did need to go down the same path,” Williams said. “It's pretty obvious we need to work as a team on this, and off-the-job safety can't be just safety.”

Two years ago, Williams' department moved to human

Leading causes of death in 2006

631,636 – Heart disease
559,888 – Cancer
137,119 – Stroke
72,449 – Chronic lower respiratory disease

Source: National Safety Council, “Injury Facts,” 2010 edition

resources from the engineering division. While the safety department still focuses on safety programs and human resources still focuses on wellness and health initiatives, the two share resources that address both departments' needs.

Off-the-job safety always has been part of John Deere's culture, Williams said, but for the first time it is turning into a more structured program. The company now has a global standard for the off-the-job safety programs it wants all of its factory units to follow.

Other employers are noticing the need to combine wellness with their pre-existing safety programs and are investigating how to do so. For some, the message of wellness has melded with other off-the-job safety messages.

“The average age of our employees has increased over the last five to 10 years; therefore, we are more susceptible to illnesses that affect our workforce,” said Bruce Cole,

Feature at a Glance

Health-related issues such as heart disease and cancer far outweigh the causes of work-related deaths, prompting some companies to focus their off-the-job efforts on wellness initiatives. Human resources departments are beginning to work with safety professionals to ensure employee wellness.

Key points

- Safety and human resources professionals cite a link between workplace safety and wellness.
- Management leadership and employee involvement are key to a successful wellness program.
- A “soft sell” of voluntary participation may help convince some employees to buy into workplace wellness initiatives.

Benefits of wellness programs

On Aug. 17, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor announced the results of a study that found companies that invest in wellness programs save money in the long term. The study examined a Midwest utility company that spent \$7.3 million on its program during a nine-year period.

In the same time frame, the company achieved \$12.1 million in savings from medical and pharmacy costs, time off, and workers' compensation.

The study shows that "a sustainable program will give you savings," said Dee Edington, principal investigator and U-M Health Management Research Center director.

The U-M study confirms what previous studies have found. A 2002 study published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* (Vol. 44, No. 1) found one large company's wellness program saved nearly \$225 in medical expenses per employee per year over the program's four-year period.

According to a review of 56 published studies on worksite health promotion programs published in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* (Vol. 19, No. 6), a well-implemented program can yield as much as 25 percent in savings on absenteeism, health care costs and workers' comp.

By the numbers

\$143 – Dollars of nationwide health care expenditures per capita in 1960.

\$7,400 – Dollars of nationwide health care expenditures per capita in 2007.

75% – Percentage of health care costs from preventable and controllable chronic diseases.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

global safety competency leader for Wilmington, DE-based DuPont. "DuPont has recognized that safety and wellness are naturally linked together, and we have started to focus on personal health as well as off-the-job safety."

A team at DuPont is discussing potential combinations of wellness and off-the-job safety, and is making resources available to employees so they can improve their personal health, according to Cole. Some of this already is occurring on a local level.

DuPont's off-the-job safety program is decentralized – leadership and coordination come from upper management,

but most of the work is done on a regional or site level through safety meetings or special activities. Some sites may have occupational health professionals, including nurses and industrial hygienists, who provide health education for employees, Cole said.

"The more localized approach is effective, as it enables us to target relevant issues in a specific area and work with our employees on a topic that matters to their daily lives," he said. Additionally, the local level provides a shared language and culture. For example, a national program to address motorcycle safety may have a different cultural significance in Asia – where motorcycles are a means of mass transit – than it would in the United States, where motorcycles are used more recreationally, Cole said.

Leading the way

Proper implementation and the successfulness of wellness initiatives depend on support from upper management. "It can't just be the employees coming up with an idea and trying to run with it," said Guy Braxton, director of safety at Dutch Valley Food Distributors Inc. in Myerstown, PA. "Everyone has to be involved."

Challenges from senior leadership can help send a powerful message, according to Williams. John Deere's CEO recently challenged employees to stay healthy so they can all attend the company's 200th anniversary in the year 2037.

"Just as in [occupational] safety, the leadership of the company must set the good example and be a part of it," said Kay Farrell, president and CEO of the National Safety Council, Greater Omaha Chapter.

Programming wellness

Farrell said support from the most senior levels of a company is important, but so is employee participation. Wellness programs are created for their benefit, after all. "You really need to survey your employees to learn what they want and expect from a wellness program – and keep them involved," she said.

Braxton quickly learned the value of employee input in such programs at Dutch Valley Foods. He originally spearheaded wellness activities, but soon developed an employee wellness committee to fill that role. "Not only is it easier, but it's a better approach because they bring more ideas to the table than what I was bringing," he said. Employees on the committee can tell Braxton what their needs are, and a program can then be developed to fit those needs.

Trying to figure out which program will elicit the most support from employees may be difficult, but casting a wide net – at least at first – might help narrow down what works best. Farrell also suggested trying to find out what information an employer can obtain from its insurance company to learn what types of problems – either health- or injury-related – are occurring in claims, and then focusing programs on those issues.

Some companies offer top-notch health and wellness options, such as fitness centers on-site or membership to health clubs. But other companies that may not have those options are using a variety of programs, including biometric screenings, blood tests, flu shots, safety and health fairs, first aid and CPR training, and smoking cessation groups.

These programs are offered free to employees, and some companies are looking into paying for screenings with medical insurance. Dutch Valley Foods currently is in talks to see if its provider will lower the company's deductible for workers if certain health criteria for employees are met. "If you, the employer, are paying \$1,000 a year per employee because of the medical claims, if you get that down to \$750 per employee, that's a nice savings," Braxton said.

At John Deere's corporate headquarters, the HR department introduced the "0-5-10-15" campaign. The voluntary campaign asks employees to avoid tobacco, eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, increase daily physical activities (such as walking 10,000 steps a day), and practice a stress-reduction technique (such as taking 15 minutes a day to "recharge").

Although this program may not work for every facility in the company across the globe due to cultural variances, Hodson said tools are available for facilities to implement the programs that work for them.

Implementation

Implementation of such a program can be as simple as looking in-house. Braxton found messages on healthy eating could easily be demonstrated at Dutch Valley Foods by showing employees examples of healthy products the company distributes.

Simple activities also can translate into a successful program. Dutch Valley Foods organized a competition to see who could walk the most number of miles. To encourage workers to walk daily, a map of Pennsylvania and Ohio was posted. Pins with employee names attached tracked the progress of workers as they figuratively walked from one state to the other.

For employees who are adamant about not conforming to a healthier lifestyle, Hodson said there are three components to getting the message of wellness across in the workplace:

- Changes to the environment, such as banning smoking on company property
- Peer pressure
- Constant messaging, programming and opportunities for participation

Echoing the need for such programs to be voluntary, Williams warned making the connection between workplace, home and health for employees is not necessarily a simple task or one that will happen overnight.

"We want this to be culture change, not a flavor of the month," he said. "You don't change culture with a memo. We know that these things tie together. Making them happen is the trick." S+H



Wellness tools

To help combat high insurance premiums and rising employee medical claims, some organizations offer employers tools to help workers adopt healthier lifestyles in an attempt to fend off chronic diseases.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a website dedicated to workplace health promotion, with the idea that employers should provide workers with opportunities for better long-term health.

"Effective workplace programs, policies, and environments which are health-focused and worker-centered have the potential to significantly benefit employers, employees, their families, and communities," according to CDC. The website provides a model for how workplaces can implement programs on health promotion.

Next month, the National Safety Council is expected to begin airing webinars that will touch on wellness. The webinars will be a bimonthly series, according to Tess Benham, the council's program manager of off-the-job safety and health initiatives. Additionally, an off-the-job resource website for employers will offer tools to help companies build or enhance their off-the-job program, Benham said.

 **Plus** www.nsc.org/plus
Learn more about these tools on workplace health programs.