

The Business Case for a 'Fit To Work' Program

Presented by Core Essentials

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Background:

Over the past decade businesses have seen skyrocketing health insurance premiums due to an increase in illness, injury and stress related conditions among employees. There have also been increases in associated hard and soft costs that include employee absenteeism, presenteeism (loss of productivity), low morale and high turnover.

Research over the past 10 years is showing that businesses that invest in well planned workplace wellness programs see a positive return not only in immediate bottom line costs but also in employee engagement which positively affects the culture, and ultimately the profits, of any business large or small. A summary of recent research can be found in Appendix A.

Wellness in the workplace has traditionally been the purview of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) programs. OHS programs however, focus primarily on occupational hygiene and safety. The new generation of workplace wellness thought takes employee health and safety a step further into the realm of proactive behaviour and interventions that affect employee mental, social and physical health. A report presented to the Conference Board of Canada (November 2000) entitled "More than just hard hats and safety boots: Creating healthier work environments," outlines 3 categories of workplace interventions to improve health;

- Physical work environment (e.g. ergonomics, injury prevention, hazard identification and control, emergency response programs)
- Health practices (e.g. healthy living programs addressing fitness, stress management/mental health, nutrition)
- Social environment and personal resources (e.g. workplace culture, work-life balance, employee empowerment)

Workplace wellness programs, such as 'Fit to Work' can address the health practices and often much of the social environment needs an organization may have. While 'Fit to Work' does not directly address OHS compliance, OHS Committees will quickly recognize that the implementation of healthy workplace interventions can have a positive impact on many of the issues inherent in occupational health and safety. Physically fit and mentally healthy employees are more engaged and aware employees who are less likely to be involved in workplace accidents. Employees who feel a sense of connection to their workplace and who feel valued by their employer are also more likely to remain in compliance with health and safety standards.

Core Essentials through 'Fit to Work' works with an organization to develop a comprehensive program that is supported by management, interventions that are embraced by employees, takes into account the resources available, and that provides not only for planning and implementation but also assesses outcomes.

Benefits of 'Fit to Work' for the employer:

- Reduced absenteeism
- Reduced presenteeism/increased productivity
- Reduction in health benefit premiums
- Reduction in WCB claims
- Increased employee engagement resulting in higher retention rates
- Adds to employer's 'attractor factor' when recruiting

Why should employers pay for workplace wellness...? Employers pay either way, but in the long run the research is showing that there are more benefits to the bottom line when businesses implement comprehensive workplace wellness programs than when they don't. It can be strongly argued that good employee health is directly translatable into good organizational and business health.

The size of investment into employee wellness need not be a barrier to implementation. A 'Fit to Work' program can be designed to address a business' needs and budget.

Benefits of 'Fit to Work' for the employee:

- Increased overall health (e.g. weight reduction, smoking cessation, improved fitness, better sleep patterns, improved nutrition, less illness, better ability to manage stress)
- Increased sense of self worth
- Fewer accidents and injuries on the job
- Renewed commitment and motivation at work/increased job satisfaction
- Improved relationships at work and home

While many employees have short term and long term disability insurance it is probably safe to say the few, if any, employees ever aspire to accessing this "benefit." Being disabled rarely improves an employee's quality of life and often means that they are cutoff from a healthy social network that employment provides. 'Fit to Work' strives to help at-risk employees reduce the likelihood of having to access disability benefits.

'Fit to Work' is not just about health improvement. It is also about keeping healthy workers healthy so they avoid the possibility of eventually entering the at-risk/high cost group of employees.