



**CDC Workplace Health  
Resource Center**  
Make Wellness Your Business

# What Businesses Need to Know About Workplace Health Promotion



What is Workplace Health?  
A Summary of the Research.



National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
Division of Population Health



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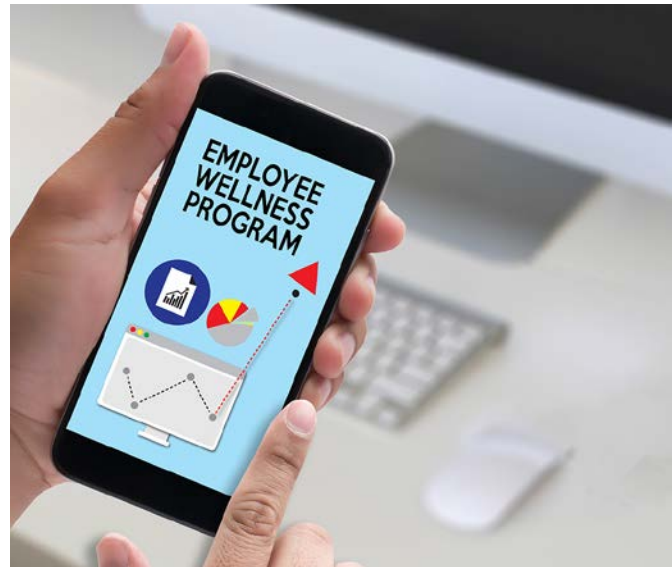
# What is Workplace Health? A Summary of the Research.

## Introduction

A truly healthy workplace is one where employees, managers, and senior executives work together to improve the physical and mental health and safety of workers, while at the same time strengthening the organization.<sup>1</sup> Employers have the authority to set up policies, programs, and practices that help achieve a healthy workplace.<sup>2,3</sup>

Employers want healthy workplaces because:

- **It is the smart thing to do**, from a business performance perspective. Research has shown that companies with exemplary workplace health programs are more competitive and successful over the long term.<sup>1</sup>
- **It is the right thing to do**, from a business ethics and corporate social responsibility point of view (i.e., “I want my employees to be healthy because I care about them.”).<sup>1,4</sup>



Scientific research has uncovered a few key ingredients to create successful workplace health programs; see the section below titled, “The Workplace Health Solution.”<sup>5–10</sup> This overview summarizes the research on workplace health programs to help business leaders and others learn more and be able to start a new program or improve a current one.

## The Costs of Employees’ Health for the Workplace

The average employee spends most of his or her weekday waking hours working—at an employer’s site, from home, or elsewhere. The place where one works can affect (both positively and negatively) a variety of health behaviors and conditions, including:

- Physical activity<sup>11–22</sup>
- Nutrition<sup>22–30</sup>
- Obesity<sup>22,31–34</sup>
- Tobacco use<sup>35–39</sup>
- Sleep problems<sup>40–42</sup>
- Blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar screening and management<sup>43–49</sup>
- Social connectedness<sup>50–54</sup>
- Stress, mental health, and depression<sup>55–60</sup>
- Heart disease<sup>61–68</sup>

Each of these behaviors and conditions can have major effects on businesses. For example, lifestyle risk factors (e.g., poor diet, lack of physical activity, smoking) and their resulting chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, heart disease, cancer) are the leading drivers of health care costs for employers.<sup>69–71</sup> Chronic health conditions cost employers in two ways: direct medical costs and indirect losses. For example, employees with diabetes cost employers nearly \$8,000 more per year than they would without diabetes (\$13,700 vs. \$5,800 per year, on average).<sup>76,77</sup>

**Direct medical costs** are defined as costs to a business (or health insurance company) spending money on items and services such as doctor visits, medications, hospital services, and medical testing.<sup>72-74</sup> Direct medical costs for preventable conditions such as low back pain, high blood pressure, and diabetes drive up employee medical claims and insurance premiums, which are at an all-time high and continue to rise.<sup>70,71</sup> For example, obese employees cost employers \$4,000 more per year than healthy weight employees (\$8,000 vs. just under \$4,000 per year, on average)<sup>78</sup> and smokers cost employers over \$2,000 more per year than nonsmokers.<sup>79</sup>

**Indirect costs** are defined as losses caused by health problems, such as **absenteeism** (when employees miss work because of health issues) and **presenteeism** (when employees are at work, but their performance is limited).<sup>74,80</sup> Common examples of indirect losses includes **productivity losses**, which are the joint impact of absenteeism and presenteeism, and cost employers an average of \$1,685 per employee each year.<sup>81,82</sup> In the U.S., indirect losses total over \$260 billion each year.<sup>80,83,84</sup>

## The Workplace Health Solution

The workplace is a significant and often underused setting to promote health.<sup>5,87,88</sup> Employers can provide access to health-related activities such as blood pressure screenings and healthy cooking demonstrations at the worksite. Employees might not otherwise have access to these activities outside of work.<sup>89</sup>

Because employees spend most of their weekday waking hours working, there is ample opportunity to provide them with awareness building programs, skills, and tools to modify unhealthy behaviors; motivation to participate in programs through the use of incentives; and environmental supports for a healthy lifestyle.<sup>82</sup>



Research shows that high-quality workplace health programs do work. They improve health and impact relevant business outcomes.<sup>1,3,90-98</sup> These high-quality programs, also known as **comprehensive workplace health promotion programs**, include five key elements:<sup>6,90,99-101</sup>

- 1. Health education**, teaching workers healthy skills and behaviors along with information about health conditions. Health education can include posters, pamphlets, emails, classes, podcasts, and webinars. Many large health organizations, such as the [American Heart Association](#), [American Diabetes Association](#), and [American Cancer Society](#), provide free educational materials to employers.
- 2. Supportive social and physical environments**, showing the organization cares about employee health by using practices that promote and support healthy behaviors. Employers can demonstrate this level of care with adequate resources for program success, including funding, staff, space, and time (e.g., encouraging participation in optional group walking breaks, where employees walk together for 15 minutes during the day).
- 3. Integrated programs** that combine sharing of data, strategies, staff, and other resources by the organization's benefits, safety, and human resources departments. For example, advertising a strong employee wellness program when seeking new hires can help recruitment efforts.

4. **Links** to related services that promote employee health and well-being, like [employee assistance programs \(EAPs\)](#) that help employees with problems affecting their mental health (e.g., stress, substance abuse, or family problems).
5. **Health screenings** (e.g., weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose, depression, vision, hearing) followed by counseling and education on follow-up care. Screenings should be performed according to [U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommendations](#) and for those at risk.



### Elements of a Comprehensive Workplace Health Program

For illustration purposes, below we trace all five elements through one example weight loss program.

- Health education could come from a [class or seminar series on healthy eating](#) along with [posters detailing healthy eating habits and portion control](#) in the cafeteria or break room. (Note, posters alone have a minimal impact and should be used as part of a comprehensive workplace health program.)
- Supportive social environments could come from employers [encouraging staff to eat lunch together, away from their desks](#).<sup>102</sup> Eating together can help promote team bonding and healthy nutrition at the same time.<sup>102</sup> Supportive physical environments could come from offering mostly healthy food and snacks in cafeterias and vending machines. North Carolina's Eat Smart Move More program provides [sample policies and plans that support healthy eating environments](#).
- Integrated programs could combine workplace safety trainings with overweight and obesity education by showing that overweight employees are more likely to develop musculoskeletal disorders and be injured while at work.<sup>33,103</sup>
- Links to related services that promote health and well-being could include EAPs that connect employees to dietitians or weight loss clinics. EAP leaders can also be trained to help reduce stress and associated stress eating.
- For worksite health screenings, employers could ask vendors to provide resources (including educational materials, contact information for appropriate weight loss programs, and the opportunity for follow-up checks) for people seeking to lose weight.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) encourages all employers to offer comprehensive workplace health programs.<sup>6,105,106</sup> In 2010, the CDC Community Preventive Services Task Force found that comprehensive workplace health programs improve health behaviors (such as physical activity and not smoking), biometric measures (such as blood pressure and cholesterol), the overall health risk profile of workers, medical use, and workers' productivity.<sup>104</sup> These findings come from a systematic review of select comprehensive workplace health programs that included assessment of health risks with additional interventions that also had evaluation data on outcomes. Exhibit A lists the outcomes of interest along with the Task Force's findings given the number of studies reviewed and the magnitude and consistency of results demonstrated by these rigorous evaluations.

## Exhibit A. Summary Results and Team Consensus from a Systematic Review of Selected Comprehensive Interventions<sup>1</sup> for Worksite Health Promotion<sup>104</sup>

Outcome		Number of studies	Consistency of results	Magnitude of effect	Finding
Alcohol use		9	Yes	Variable	Sufficient
Servings of fruits and vegetables		6	No	0.09 serving	Insufficient
Percent fat intake		13	Yes	-5.4%	Strong
Percent change in those physically active		16	Yes	+15.3%	Sufficient
Tobacco use:	Prevalence	23	Yes	-2.3 pct pt	Strong
	Cessation	11	Yes	+3.8 pct pt	
Seat belt non-use		10	Yes	-27.6 pct pt	Sufficient
Diastolic blood pressure		17	Yes	-1.8 mm Hg	Strong
Systolic blood pressure		19	Yes	-2.6 mm Hg	
Risk prevalence		12	Yes	-4.5 pct pt	
BMI		6	Yes	-0.5 pt	Insufficient
Weight		12	No	-0.56 pounds	
Percent body fat		5	Yes	-2.2 pct pt	
Risk prevalence		5	No	-2.2%	
Total cholesterol		19	Yes	-4.8 mg/dL	Strong
HDL cholesterol		8	No	+0.94 mg/dL	
Risk prevalence		11	Yes	-6.6 pct pt	
Fitness		6	Yes	Small	Insufficient
Estimated risk		16	Yes	Moderate	Sufficient
Health care use		6	Yes	Moderate	Sufficient
Worker productivity		10	Yes	Moderate	Strong

For the best chance of success, employers should create a comprehensive program that addresses the items listed in the above table following scientifically based recommendations such as those in the [guide on the CDC Workplace Health Model](#).<sup>90</sup> While comprehensive workplace health programs are likely to achieve desired outcomes, it takes time to plan and implement strategies to meet the health needs and interests of employees. Employers should use health risks assessments to identify potential health concerns and then engage employees to identify short- and long-term solutions for prioritized issues. One-time programs, also called random acts of wellness, such as annual walkathons or one-week weight loss competitions, often do not produce lasting and meaningful improvements in health as shown in the exhibit above. They also do not result in cost savings.<sup>90,96,107–109</sup> These offerings are often under-supported, narrowly focused, and short-term. They lead to minor or no health improvements, and lead employers to be skeptical about the effectiveness of workplace wellness programs in general.

<sup>1</sup> The comprehensive interventions noted in the 2010 publication by the CDC Community Preventive Services Task Force represent studies that had evaluation findings on the effectiveness of the assessment of health risks with feedback when combined with additional workplace health interventions (e.g., health education, incentives).

## The Benefits of a Strong Comprehensive Workplace Health Program

There are four major categories of benefits from comprehensive workplace health programs: employee health and well-being improvements, return on investment (ROI), value of investment (VOI), and business improvements.

### *Employee Health and Well-Being Improvements*

The research shows comprehensive workplace health programs lead to improvements for a number of outcomes, including health behaviors (e.g., smoking, diet, physical activity), health measures (e.g., weight loss, body fat reduction, blood pressure reduction), and quality of life (e.g., increased life satisfaction, increased job satisfaction, reduced stress).<sup>3,91,98,104</sup> With the right program, workplace health promotion efforts can positively affect a large number of modifiable risk factors that often lead to chronic disease.

One of the ways workplace health programs help to improve employee health is by encouraging employees' appropriate use of health care services.<sup>90,94,96,97,111</sup> Appropriate use means increased preventive care, such as regularly scheduled medical screenings aligned with [U.S. Preventive Services Task Force guidelines](#).<sup>112-114</sup>

### *Return on Investment*

**ROI** is the ratio of monetary benefits divided by the costs.<sup>115,116</sup> In mathematical terms,  $ROI = \text{health care cost savings} \div \text{costs of the program}$ .<sup>115,116</sup> If the benefits are greater than the costs, the business will realize an ROI greater than 1, and the business will save money. For example:

- A 2:1 ROI means that for every \$1 invested in the program, there was a \$2 return. This is a positive ROI, and represents savings for the business.<sup>116</sup>
- A 1:1 ROI means that for every \$1 invested in the program there was a \$1 return. This is a cost neutral outcome, meaning money spent for the program was then returned in reduced health care costs or increased worker productivity.

A growing body of research shows comprehensive workplace wellness programs that use an evidence-based approach enjoy widespread support and engagement by employees. With rigorous evaluation, these programs save companies money and lead to better health for employees.<sup>3,12,93,94,96-98,104,108,109,113,117-125</sup> Specific ROIs can vary, depending upon the elements of the program and how the ROI is calculated, but reviews suggest an average savings of between \$1.20 and \$4.60 for every dollar invested.<sup>90,104,123,124,126</sup>

### *Value of Investment*

While ROI analyses only consider financial impacts, **VOI** considers both monetary and other important business outcomes, such as increased job satisfaction, improved company image, increased team-effectiveness, higher employee morale, and attraction and retention of top talent.<sup>109,127-129</sup> As one researcher put it, "What's the value of people coming to work with a smile? What's the value of having people on the phone responding to your customers in a good mood, who can solve problems because they're there, they're present,



and they're working with attention to detail? What's the value of individuals working well together in teams?"<sup>130</sup>

To calculate VOI, employers can administer annual satisfaction surveys, look at turnover records, and conduct internet searches to examine company reputation. Some employers do not want to formally track VOI outcomes. Instead, they want to see improvements in employee well-being for themselves.

Next Jump, a small e-commerce company in New York City, promotes health by offering healthy snacks, encouraging employees to exercise, and providing opportunities for co-mentoring. Through their Talking Partners program, employees "meet, vent, work" in an effort to address stressors in their home and/or work life, increase self-awareness, and improve judgment when it comes to making important decisions.<sup>131</sup> As a result, the program produces great value in terms of employees' physical and mental health and work productivity.<sup>131</sup> The company's reputation is so strong that it regularly receives thousands of applicants from top-tier engineering schools for about 10 new job openings per year and turnover rates are significantly below industry average.<sup>131</sup>

Turck, a manufacturing company in Minnesota, offers a workplace health program with flexible workday schedules, group stretching and walking breaks, and a smoking cessation program.<sup>4,132</sup> Company leaders strongly support the program, saying that they invest in their workers' health "because it is the right thing to do."<sup>4</sup> As a result, turnover rates are near zero, medical costs are down, and job satisfaction is nearly 90 percent.<sup>4</sup> As Turck CEO Dave Lagerstrom put it, "If you go into [workplace health promotion] merely to save money, you are on the wrong track."<sup>4</sup> In other words, VOI can be more important than ROI for many businesses.

### *Business Improvements*

Overall improvements in employee health can lower rates of absenteeism (when employees miss work because of health issues) and presenteeism (when employees are at work, but their performance is hindered by less than ideal health), which can improve employee productivity.<sup>108,133–135</sup> When companies commit to improving employee health and well-being, their workers are healthier, more present, and fully engaged so they can conduct business as efficiently and productively as possible. As a result, the companies have consistently outperformed stock market averages.<sup>136–138</sup> For example:



- A study that looked at the stock performance of C. Everett Koop Award winners from 2000–2014 showed the stock values of these companies grew by 325 percent compared with the market average appreciation of just 105 percent.<sup>137</sup>
- Another study of companies with award-winning workplace health programs found that those organizations outperformed the S&P 500 by 79 percent, meaning a \$10,000 investment in those companies in 1999 would have turned into nearly \$18,000 by 2012. By contrast, investing in the average company would have returned the same \$10,000.<sup>136</sup>

While research on the relationship between workplace health and stock market performance is relatively new, the results are promising—businesses with comprehensive workplace wellness programs consistently



outperform their peers. Healthy employees can help make businesses more competitive, regardless of the business' size or industry type.

## Establishing a Culture of Health

A culture of health within an organization is key to the success of a workplace health program. A workplace with a culture of health values and favors employee health.<sup>139–145</sup> Establishing such a culture extends beyond singular activities like health seminars or walkathons. Instead, a culture of health is part of daily company life and considers employee health when making decisions. Creating a strong culture of health requires support from leaders, policies that promote employee health, and a work environment that allows employees to take care of and feel responsible for their health.<sup>140</sup>

This section explores the key elements that go into creating a culture of health. These elements are based on research conducted on businesses that have had great success with their workplace health programs.

### Leadership Support



A successful workplace health program starts with [commitment from leadership](#). Leaders who support workplace health make sure their programs have the needed staff and resources, and combine health and wellness into their overall business objectives.<sup>98,146,147</sup> Senior managers can coordinate health, safety, and productivity management programs. They can also deliver messages the whole company hears and act as role models (e.g., if employees see the boss taking time to walk during lunch, they will think it is okay for them to walk too).

Business leaders should first examine the real world benefits (both for employees and for businesses) demonstrated by other employers. Leaders should also learn about the many ways [their leadership impacts employee health](#). For example, scientists found strong leadership behaviors and communication about employee health can [lower the incidence of heart disease](#) among workers.<sup>148</sup> Leaders should also network with [peers](#) they can rely on for [guidance and support](#).

### Employee Engagement

A workplace health program will be effective only if workers engage actively with the program. [Active engagement](#) means employees participate in the programs offered, and are involved in the design and leadership of programs. Employees who feel empowered and responsible for their health will be more likely to participate in individual health programs, as well as to take ownership of their health and the workplace health program.<sup>98</sup> For example:

- [Survey employees](#) anonymously to find out what benefits and programs would appeal to workers (e.g., yoga classes, off-site gym memberships), what health issues to address (e.g., mental health, managing diabetes), and what workplace factors affect their health (e.g., stress, lack of time for or access to physical activity).<sup>149</sup>

- Recruit volunteer [employee wellness champions](#) to help design, implement, and update workplace health programs and activities.<sup>150</sup> These employees serve as peer-leaders, helping to generate bottom-up program support.

### *Communication Between Leaders and Employees*

Leaders who want to keep clear channels of communication should first get help from volunteer [employee wellness champions](#), who can help spread health messages, organize small group discussions, and provide more personal, one-on-one support to employees.

Quality communications follow “the 4 Cs” rule:

- Clear (plain and simple)
- Concise (short)
- Consistent (no mixed messages, dependable)
- Constant (frequent and regular)

Messages and channels change, but these should always be reflected in communications.

You can use [multiple channels and chances to communicate](#). For example, provide mobile apps to remind employees to stand up and move away from their desks from time to time; put posters in strategic places to boost movement (e.g., “Use the stairs for a workplace workout!” signs in front of elevators); and use posters and signs to encourage healthy snacking.<sup>17,156–159</sup>

### *Programs Tailored and Targeted to Employees’ Needs*

If a workplace health program is already in place, [find out \(or assess\)](#) which programs are popular, what employees like and don’t like about those programs, and what barriers are keeping workers from participating more fully.

Certain subgroups of employees may require special adjustments to the wellness program to fit their needs. For example:

- Workers with low levels of education or who speak English as a second language may need help reading and interpreting health posters or require information translated into their primary language.
- If employees can earn a reward for walking 30 minutes per day, five days per week, employees who use wheelchairs should be able to earn the same reward by doing a similar amount of physical activity aligned with their abilities.
- Workers not comfortable with technology may not want to use activity monitors (e.g., trackers). Instead, they may be more comfortable logging their activity on a website.<sup>141</sup>

Targeting improves communication efficiency by sending information only to subpopulations with certain risk factors. Consider whether you need to share information about a smoking cessation program with all employees, or whether men need to know when the mobile mammogram truck will be on campus. Targeting can help prevent people from being inundated with emails and tuning out communications.

Employers seeking to use targeted communications should be careful that this does not call out individuals and be seen as coercive or discriminatory. A best practice would be to use a health plan or vendor with access to employees’ personal information as the messenger, and not have targeted communications come directly from the employer.

## Smart Incentives

Incentives are popular and are an effective way to boost employee participation, engagement, and motivation.<sup>11,38,98,99,120,144,161–165</sup> For example, employers with an incentive for participation report a 23 percent higher participation rate than those without incentives.<sup>144,161,166</sup> Incentives can be monetary (e.g., gift cards, cash bonuses, monthly reductions in insurance premiums) or nonmonetary (e.g., public praise, lunch with senior executives, recognition letters, trophies).<sup>167</sup>

The value of incentive programs depends on how the incentives are timed, distributed, and framed, but business leaders can use smart incentives to supercharge their effect.<sup>164,168</sup>

[Smart incentives](#) use information from behavioral economics—the study of psychology as it relates to financial decisions—to get the most out of the incentive. For example, some smart incentives take advantage of research showing that employees are more motivated by immediate rewards rather than delayed ones. Knowing this, employers should provide small, but meaningful rewards on a regular basis (e.g., a small weekly cash bonus for meeting physical activity goals) rather than just a single, large reward (e.g., premium adjustment) at the end of the year.<sup>164</sup>

In addition, employers should take advantage of different delivery methods that boost employees' excitement for incentives. For example, employees will be more excited to receive a \$100 check in the mail than a \$100 discount on insurance premiums.<sup>164,168–170</sup> Also, holding lotteries for valuable rewards and services (e.g., spa weekend, bike tours, restaurant certificates at healthy food outlets) are also motivational devices, when offered for individuals or teams.

## How Much Should I Spend on My Incentive Program?

The answer depends on the goals and budget of the health program. Incentives should be relatively cost-neutral for the employer—meaning that over time, the cost of the program does not exceed the savings of the program. In addition, incentives should not be so large as to seem that employees must participate.<sup>120,144,163,171,172</sup> A 2012 review estimated that the average cash value of incentives ranged from \$152 to \$557 per employee, per year.<sup>108</sup> A 2017 survey found that large companies spent an average of \$742 per employee on incentives, up from \$651 in 2016 and \$521 in 2013.<sup>173</sup>

Smaller employers may find personal rewards to be equally effective. Nonmonetary personal incentives, such as praise in newsletters or at meetings, trophies, health-related items (e.g., gym bags), certificates, and celebrations, can motivate employees.<sup>7,174,175</sup> Incentives not related to health care, such as t-shirt giveaways or gift cards to fast food restaurants, are generally not effective in changing long-term behavior.<sup>141,161</sup>

Employers should also be aware that paying people to improve their health is not everything needed to create a healthy workforce.<sup>176</sup> Incentives can have a powerful boosting effect to encourage employees to try something new, but the incentives usually have to be part of a larger, comprehensive workplace health program to create lasting health improvements. Long-lasting change is more likely to occur when employees find internal motivations for maintaining health—for instance, “I eat right and exercise so I can live long enough to see my daughter get married,” rather than, “I eat right and exercise so I will get \$100 at the end of this year.”

## A Healthy Workplace Environment

The workplace environment can be grouped into two categories: the physical environment and the psychosocial environment. Both have a major effect on employees health.<sup>3,177,178</sup>

- The **physical environment** is defined as everything around employees while they work, such as lighting, noise, food, and space.<sup>179</sup> A healthy physical environment might include both indoor and outdoor space for physical activity, such as open and attractive stairwells, open rooms for yoga, marked walking paths, and basketball courts. Other examples of healthy physical environments include workplaces with healthy snacks options in the vending machine or an on-site café with healthy offerings to support good nutrition. Lastly, a healthy physical environment has clean air to prevent respiratory problems.<sup>179</sup>
- The **psychosocial environment** includes policies and programs to improve employees' overall health and well-being, including employees' stress, resilience, freedom, empowerment to make decisions, and social support. Policies improving the psychosocial environment may include allowing workers to telecommute, thereby cutting down on the stress of commuting; encouraging employees to not check work email on weekends; and allowing flex-time during the day so employees can schedule physical activity when it is most convenient. Some policies, such as walking clubs and healthy lunch gatherings, promote friendship, social support, and physical health at the same time.<sup>3,141,180</sup>



To promote a [healthy workplace environment](#), employers should examine their physical and social environments and identify features that support or get in the way of healthy behaviors.

For ideas, see the CDC workplace health program webpage on organizational level assessment and the [CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard](#).<sup>181,182</sup> These guides provide questions employers should ask themselves about their workplace environments. In addition, employers may [ask employees for their perspectives](#) on the workplace environment. Employees can share environmental barriers to healthy behaviors they have experienced or suggest changes to organizational policy to promote a culture of health.

## Measuring and Evaluating Successes

Measuring and evaluating program results has helped build the evidence base showing workplace health programs can be effective at improving employee health, and support the business case for maintaining and growing these programs.<sup>183,184</sup> Employers should examine their own workplace health programs to see if they are achieving the expected improvements in health outcomes, worker productivity, and cost savings. [Measurement and evaluation](#) also help identify problem areas, so employers can improve their programs over time.<sup>183,184</sup>

Employers can collect data related to environmental and health outcomes, program processes, and financial and resource investments and savings. Each relates to one or more type of evaluation:<sup>183,184</sup>

- **Needs assessment** data to establish a baseline and to inform the types of programs, activities, and policies needed to improve the health of employees.
- **Process** data to track and monitor what and how well programs, activities, and policies are being implemented, as well as to track the degree to which employees are aware of, participate in, and are satisfied with program offerings.
- **Outcomes** data to examine changes in employee health behaviors and overall health, changes within the workplace environment, and changes to the company overall (e.g., worker productivity, employee retention, job satisfaction).
- **Economic** data to help determine the cost, **cost-effectiveness** (the minimum amount of cost to achieve a goal),<sup>185</sup> and **cost-benefits** (whether the benefits of a program exceed the costs)<sup>185</sup> of the program because of improvements in employee health and changes in health care utilization, absenteeism, and presenteeism.

CDC offers guides on the types of baseline measures employers can collect, including [employee data](#), [organizational level data](#), and [health care cost data](#). Baseline data serve as a starting point or benchmark for comparison against future health and business trends and improvements. If you already have a workplace health program, you should still collect data to use as a starting point.<sup>183</sup> CDC provides a [free guide](#) that describes how to evaluate a workplace health program, and provides [a tool](#) to help measure and evaluate the quality of programs in place.

One key component of proper measurement and evaluation is establishing process measures. **Process measures** examine the activities completed (or not completed) during program design and implementation.<sup>184</sup> Process evaluation includes documenting and examining:<sup>184</sup>

- What was done (e.g., activities or programs conducted, materials developed or circulated).
- Who received the information or participated in the activity.
- Quantity in terms of the number of sessions held, number of posters displayed, or number of individuals who participated in an event.
- Impact in terms of cost-effectiveness, population health improvement, and organizational benefits.
- Worker satisfaction with the information distributed to employees or activities conducted.

Process measures can help identify whether a program struggles because it was not properly set up (e.g., there were too few educational pamphlets available) versus other factors (e.g., the employees did not have time to read the educational pamphlets). Process measures also help employers identify areas they can improve to help the program grow stronger (e.g., make the education pamphlet available across different platforms like print and e-newsletters).

**Outcome measures** include short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of the program on employee health and on the business.<sup>184</sup> For example, short- and medium-term (i.e., zero to two years) health outcomes might include improvements in physical activity, stress management, diet, or smoking habits. Long-term (i.e., three to five years) health outcomes might include reductions in the number of employees at risk for depression, diabetes, or respiratory problems.<sup>183</sup> Short- and medium-term business outcomes might include decreased absenteeism and presenteeism, and increased employee morale. Long-term business outcomes might include reduced health care spending and net positive returns on investment.

## Conclusion

Employers face the dual threats of rising chronic disease rates among their employees and rising health care costs for their businesses. However, you can protect the health of employees and your organization by creating comprehensive workplace health programs. Key ingredients help ensure a successful workplace health program, including:

- Provide plenty of leadership support.
- Engage employees in the design and running of the program.
- Tailor the program to employees' needs and desires.
- Communicate frequently with employees.
- Create healthy physical and social environments.
- Continually improve programs by measuring and evaluating successes and challenges.

The [CDC Workplace Health Resource Center \(WHRC\)](https://www.cdc.gov/WHRC) is a one-stop shop for organizations to find credible tools, guides, case studies, and other resources to design, develop, implement, evaluate, and sustain workplace health promotion programs. Visit <https://www.cdc.gov/WHRC> to learn more.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### *What Will Be My ROI?*

The scientific research shows well-designed workplace wellness programs can help businesses save money, or at least break even, while improving employee health.<sup>3,12,93,94,96–98,104,108,109,113,117–124</sup>

A large, high-quality literature review published in 2014 looked at ROI findings from 51 studies. The overall average ROI was \$1.38 returned for every dollar invested.<sup>96</sup> For example:

- A 2012 review of published studies found ROI ratios ranging from \$1.65 to \$6 per dollar spent.<sup>11</sup>
- A 2005 review of 56 studies found an average reduction of about 25 percent in sick leave costs, health plan costs, and workers' compensation and disability costs.<sup>186</sup> A 2012 update of this study reported, "It is reasonable to conclude that worksite health promotion represents one of the most effective strategies for reducing medical costs and absenteeism."<sup>113</sup>

When considering ROI, it is important to note even though the programs in most studies saved money, it does not mean all programs will. It is also important to remember ROI results can vary depending on when the ROI is calculated (i.e., returns may not show up in the first year or two of a program) and how the ROI is calculated (i.e., which specific costs and benefits are included in the ROI calculation).<sup>108,109</sup>

Finally, employers should recognize VOI is a more complete way to look at program results than ROI. One limitation of ROI analyses is they look only at factors that can be converted into dollars and cents. Strong workplace health programs can produce many benefits not easily monetized. For example, improvements in employee morale, job satisfaction, and company image may result from a strong workplace health program, but not show up in an ROI calculation.<sup>109,127–129</sup>

### *How Long Will It Take a Workplace Health Program to Show Results?*

Program outcomes depend on a number of factors, including the health conditions of interest, the initial health status and motivation level of employees, and the level of support for the program (i.e., employee engagement, budget). Preventing and addressing chronic diseases is typically a lifelong process. Major health and financial results may not be seen for several years.<sup>108,187</sup> Here are examples of goals employers can set and reasonably hope to achieve with a quality workplace health program:

- **Short-term (after one year):** High participation rates in all program offerings, increased physical activity levels, improved employee morale, decreased absenteeism, and improved presenteeism.
- **Medium-term (after two years):** Improved health risk factors (e.g., reduced percent of the population that smokes or has a poor diet), improved mental health, increased number of employees reporting good or excellent health status, continued progress from year one.
- **Long-term (three to five years):** Increased health care use for prevention services (e.g. regular doctor's office visits, regular dental checkups), reduction in disease prevalence (e.g., reduced number of employees with diabetes or back pain), reduced emergency health care use, positive (or at least neutral) ROI, positive VOI, continued progress from years one and two.

### *What Are the Legal and Ethical Issues Surrounding Workplace Health Programs?*

Laws addressing workplace health programs are constantly changing, so employers should consult with a legal expert for advice. While there are many resources on the CDC Workplace Health Resource Center, it should not be considered a substitute for professional legal advice.

Beyond laws, there are important ethical matters related to confidentiality, civil rights, and rights of the medically disabled to consider when starting a workplace health program. To help avoid potential legal and ethical problems:

- Follow the workplace health promotion guidelines provided by the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and the Transamerica Center for Health Studies' Workplace Wellness Employer Guide.<sup>7,188–192</sup>
- Protect the confidentiality and privacy of employees. **Confidentiality** refers to the duty of anyone entrusted with health information to keep that information private.<sup>193</sup> **Privacy** refers to the right of an individual to keep his or her health information private.<sup>193</sup> Confidentiality is important to ensure workers do not fear harassment, discrimination, or revenge if they do not participate or get the desired results. For small companies, this may mean collecting less information, such as not collecting demographic information (e.g., race or gender) in surveys, to make sure employees cannot be identified by their answers. Another option may be to hire an outside company to keep results anonymous.<sup>194</sup> Any information collected on an employee's health status or program results should not affect his or her employment status.
- Make sure that involvement is voluntary, and that there are no penalties for not participating.<sup>163,195–198</sup> Incentives or penalties may be effective for promoting health behavior change, but they may also present unwelcome problems if employees believe they are being forced, or that the incentives or penalties are applied unequally.<sup>162–165,172</sup>
- Offer reasonable accommodations so that those who cannot participate (e.g., it is against an employee's doctor's orders, or an employee is in some way disabled) are not penalized or they have another way to earn incentives.<sup>199</sup>

### *Will I Be Overstepping My Bounds as an Employer?*

A 2015 survey found that 59 percent of employees believe employers should have a role in improving the health of their workforce. The majority of employees offered a wellness program, chose to participate.<sup>200</sup> According to this recent report, it seems that most workers want their employers to have a workplace health program.

Many business owners view employees like family. The top reason small employers (2–14 employees) offer wellness programs is “to improve the overall health of employees,” more so than “to reduce employee health care costs” or “to improve employee productivity.”<sup>201</sup> Well-designed programs involve employees in the design and implementation process. This helps ensure the company forms the proper program boundaries at the start, while also meeting employees' needs and wishes.



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