Workplace Health Promotion in Small- and Medium-Size Businesses

Ten Strategies to Improve Employee Health and Well-Being
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Introduction

This report highlights 10 strategies to help your small- or medium-size organization employ workplace health policies and activities that align with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Workplace Health Model. For your convenience, the strategies and resources are easily accessible to help you build a sustainable workplace health program.

U.S. adults working full-time spend an average of 8.5 hours at work per weekday, making the workplace a key location to encourage healthy behaviors, attitudes, and actions. Workplaces of any size can implement activities and policies to improve employee health outcomes, increase job satisfaction and productivity, and lower the need for health care services and prescription drugs. While wellness programs are available to workers at more than 75% of large companies (1,000 or more employees), nearly half (47.1%) of U.S.-based, private sector employees work at small- and medium-size businesses (500 or fewer employees), where programs are less likely to be in place. For example, only 34% of companies with 50 to 100 employees have wellness programs in place, and they are available at only 56% of employers who have 101 to 500 employees. Thus, encouraging health promotion in small- and medium-size organizations is important for improving our nation’s health.

Workplace Wellness for Small- and Medium-Size Employers

Common Challenges and Emerging Evidence for Success

Starting and maintaining a workplace health promotion program may seem challenging for small- and medium-size employers. A survey of 1,000 U.S. owners and decision makers of businesses and organizations with fewer than 100 employees found that only 22% offered a workplace health program; although 60% said that they believed such a program would be worth the investment. Smaller organizations reported several barriers. See Exhibit 1 for suggestions on how to overcome such barriers.

One benefit of being a small employer is the ability to have more autonomy and decision-making power than larger employers. For instance, small employers can more easily create a vision for their workplace culture and focus it on health and safety.
Exhibit 1. Reported Barriers Can Be Hidden Opportunities for Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported Barriers</th>
<th>Opportunities for Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human resources staff and experts who know how to design or implement a health promotion program may not be available.¹¹</td>
<td>• Use free informational resources and toolkits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Think big but start small. Develop realistic goals for the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial investment may seem too great¹² or difficult to justify.</td>
<td>• Remember that everything moves the project along.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• You can try many free strategies, such as providing health tips during meetings or in newsletters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Evaluation can help you see how your program is paying off in employee participation, health outcomes, and return on investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some health promotion vendors don’t see the profit benefit of working with smaller organizations.¹³</td>
<td>• Reach out to local or regional chapters of nonprofit organizations, business health coalitions, community associations, and smaller health promotion vendors. They may be more motivated to serve smaller employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Many local and state public health departments also provide technical assistance to employers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory safety-related programs already take up your money, time, and labor.¹⁴</td>
<td>• Coordinate efforts between health and safety promotion, recognize where they overlap, and get the most bang for your buck.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite such challenges, studies show that small- and mid-size employers can reap financial benefits with programs that improve employee health.¹⁵,¹⁶ For example, five years after a Seattle employer launched a nutrition program, its blue-collar workers were continuing to eat more fruits and vegetables.¹⁷ Additional studies noted reductions in the body mass index (BMI) of employees in hotel¹⁸ and school settings¹⁹ for up to two years after they participated in workplace obesity-prevention programs. These and other small- and mid-size employers demonstrate that best practices yield comparable health benefits to those larger employers achieve.²⁰
The CDC Workplace Health Model

A successful workplace health program promotes a culture of health, creates a supportive environment that encourages healthy behaviors, and provides opportunities for employee participation. Some small- and medium-size organizations have noted a lack of employee interest, difficulty overseeing programs, and concerns about privacy as barriers to offering workplace health programs.

The CDC Workplace Health Model provides a framework to help you use strategies, opportunities, and resources to full advantage across your program’s lifecycle. The model divides the lifecycle into four phases:

1. Assessment
2. Planning & Management
3. Implementation
4. Evaluation

Over time, you can revisit each phase to reassess and strengthen your program. Use this report, combined with the steps and outcomes from each phase of the CDC Workplace Health Model, to structure, maintain, and develop your workplace health program.
Ten Strategies for Success

You can leverage several opportunities across all phases of the CDC Workplace Health Model framework to guide your program to success. As a small- or mid-size employer, your program development may be rather streamlined, with fewer layers of management to engage for support compared with larger companies.

Don’t try to tackle all of your identified needs at once. For the greatest success, use the following 10 key strategies across the lifecycle of your workplace health program:

1. Create a culture of health.
2. Ensure leadership commitment.
3. Set specific goals and expectations.
4. Develop strategic messages and communication channels.
5. Secure employee interest and participation in program design and implementation.
7. Use effective screening and referral tools.
8. Provide smart incentives.
9. Implement the program effectively and efficiently.
10. Perform measurement and evaluation activities.

These strategies are described in detail on the next page, with tips for developing and maintaining a targeted program to meet your needs. Each section also describes how to use resources effectively and how to track progress over time.

1. Create a Culture of Health

Take the lead in improving your employees’ health by creating “a wellness culture that is employee-centered; provides supportive environments where safety is ensured and health can emerge; and provides access and opportunities for employees to engage in a variety of workplace health programs.”

Key elements include a physical and social environment that promotes health and well-being, leaders and managers who empower employees to weave healthy activities into their workday, coworker support, and employee participation in developing the wellness program.
Here are a few ideas for creating a culture of health in your organization:

- Commit to a healthy workplace in your mission statement. Emphasize this message regularly. Let employees know that they can participate in wellness activities at work and they will be more likely to participate.
- Modify the built environment (i.e., the physical components of the worksite, inside and out, from desks and natural lighting to walkways and trails) to encourage healthy behaviors. For instance, healthy foods and drinks in the vending machines and a water bottle filling station can encourage positive nutrition habits. Walking trails promote physical activity.
- Incorporate wellness goals into your annual performance metrics. This can boost participation in your program. Show that you value your employees! Allow them to participate in wellness activities as part of, rather than in addition to, their normal job responsibilities. For example, allow creative staff members to use work time to create signs publicizing a wellness event.
- Create best practice policies and programs at work that emphasize health and safety. This includes providing access to health insurance benefits.

2. Ensure Leadership Commitment

Leadership support is tied directly to your workplace health program’s success. Employees want to feel valued. You can support them in many ways that do not require a lot of time or money. For example:

- Take a few minutes during meetings to highlight recent workplace health activities and encourage employees to participate in upcoming events.
- Hold walking meetings to help everyone get in extra steps whenever possible. This activity helps maintain a culture of health at the worksite.
- Be present at all or most wellness-related events to demonstrate your commitment and the organization’s wellness program. As a bonus, you get the health benefits of the program.

3. Set Specific Goals and Expectations

A clear program goal will help you get employee buy-in. It will show employees how your program meets their needs. A key step in setting and managing these goals is to think big but start small. Success with smaller scale activities can generate support for, and engagement with, the program as you plan for longer term, more impactful strategies.

A well-defined strategic plan is the foundation for all of your efforts. You can base the plan on information from the assessment phase, such as employee needs and interests. For each objective, outline the rationale; success milestones; and your short-, mid-, and long-term goals for the program. In addition, define team and employee roles for each aspect of the program. This helps employees feel a sense of ownership and encourages accountability to keep the program moving forward. Review your strategic plan at least annually, and update it as needed.
4. Develop Strategic Messages and Communication Channels

When crafting messages or communicating about your program, provide employees with answers to critical questions: How does the program work? How does the program benefit me? When does the program start? Consider five key communication principles:

1. Design communications based on well-defined objectives to educate, motivate, secure buy-in, and build trust.
2. Tailor content for the average employee—at an appropriate reading level with no jargon.
3. Distribute messages several ways, such as emails, posters, and company intranet sites. Choose the modes of communication based on your objective. For example, emails and posters may drive participation in a luncheon, while a one-on-one meeting may be necessary to motivate a behavioral change.
4. Be thoughtful about the timing and frequency of communications to avoid overwhelming employees with messages.
5. Remember to gather feedback and input from employees.

You can apply these key principles in several ways:

- Place posters and fliers in common areas, such as break rooms, to generate buzz about your activities.
- Use methods such as podcasts, meetings, and emails to distribute messages in a way that allows all employees to interact as they see fit. Emails or podcasts are important for including employees who work from home or may work in smaller, regional offices.
- Leverage informal, in-person opportunities to communicate about the program, activities, and offerings. Input shared about a recent event while at the water fountain could provide more candid information than that received in a typical survey, while a quick mention about new healthier food options in the vending machine could encourage healthy choices.

5. Secure Employee Interest and Participation in Program Design and Implementation

Active employee participation helps set the stage for program success—including better health outcomes and work productivity. In the planning and management phase of your wellness program, you can create strategies to boost employee participation:

- As a first step, ask about employee interests, opinions, and feedback. Design a program to meet employee needs.
- Form a wellness committee with staff from all divisions and positions in your organization. Committee members can lead the early phases of assessment and planning to address both employee and organizational needs—and make sure that the program has the needed financial support.
- Turn wellness committee members into program champions! They can encourage participation by attending events, sending emails, talking to employees, and distributing promotional materials to generate interest.
• If you can afford it, hire a dedicated workplace health coordinator (part- or full-time). Or you may want to select a vendor to administer the program, or even join a small business wellness cooperative to pool resources.

• When practical, involve your employees’ family members in your workplace health activities. Including family members helps to create a culture of health beyond the workplace, and it is an effective strategy to sustain positive behavior change.31

6. Commit to Best Practice Interventions

The CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard32 describes best practice interventions. It offers ideas on how to implement them to make it easy for your employees to participate in your wellness program. For example:

• Schedule events during times when employees can participate, and hold activities in convenient places.
• Make healthy choices an easy option in your vending machines.
• Bring flu vaccine clinics onsite.
• Provide a range of options—such as interactive activities, independent readings, and recorded materials—that address a particular health topic or behavior activities.

Many of the suggested best practices do not require special expertise or tools, are low-cost, and can be integrated with other activities, such as those related to employee safety.

7. Use Effective Screening and Triage Tools

A good workplace health program provides employees with information about their own health. To do this, you can offer onsite or offsite screenings and options for follow-up. For example, annual health risk assessments or other screening surveys can provide feedback to help employees understand their health needs and be motivated to participate.

An aggregate summary of employees’ data, presented in comparison with national benchmarks, highlights the health status and needs of your organization. This information gives you a sense of which elements of a workplace health program to focus on first, given your available resources.

Consider using free online tools. As an example, the American Heart Association’s My Life Check® tool asks simple questions to provide employees with their unique “Heart Score” and offers advice in seven areas for improving their health. While the survey tool does not provide any summary information to the employer directly, the Heart Score could motivate your employees to participate in program activities.

Focus groups or brainstorming sessions during staff meetings can also motivate people in your organization to think about how the workplace health program can help them set and meet their personalized health goals.
If you have the resources for a larger effort, you may want to explore vendors that offer online health risk assessments. You may also check whether your health insurance plan provider offers access to an assessment or makes such a tool available at a reasonable additional cost.

8. Provide Smart Incentives

Incentives can motivate employees to meet their goals and participate in your program. It’s a good idea to reward positive actions rather than penalize a lack of involvement or achievement. You can tier the incentives you offer, with varying levels of reward depending on individual or group accomplishments. Remember that there are many kinds of incentives, not just financial. In addition, accomplishments can relate to achieving a health goal, as well as participating in, or completing, a health program.

In smaller organizations, recognition of achievements during meetings or a call-out in a monthly newsletter may be just as effective for encouraging involvement as a cash-based reward. If you offer financial rewards, make sure that the dollar value is reasonably low to ensure that employees participate primarily to improve their health.

9. Implement the Program Effectively and Efficiently

Workplace health programs should be tailored to the culture of your company. They should be flexible to accommodate your employees’ changing needs and feedback—with room for fun, fresh ideas.

Consider using existing resources and materials that are available to promote health and safety in the workplace during the implementation phase. This can help make your programs more affordable in the long term.

The CDC Workplace Health Resource Center (WHRC) was developed to help small- and medium-size organizations find resources to plan, implement, and maintain workplace health programs. Use the targeted search features to quickly identify materials to support the program across the Workplace Health Model lifecycle. Visit the WHRC (https://www.cdc.gov/WHRC) to find resources, toolkits, tools, and templates to get started.

- Don’t reinvent the wheel, but use existing materials and resources from credible sources. There are a number of free toolkits available online that outline activities for specific chronic conditions and typically include materials such as educational fliers, which can be distributed as part of a program.
- Promote services already available through the company’s health plan, if available. Launch informational campaigns to encourage employees to use benefits and services (e.g., offsite gym membership reimbursement to promote physical activity, services for mental health and substance abuse issues).
- Make small changes at the workplace. Use a conference room for lunchtime yoga sessions, move healthy vending machine options to eye-level, post signs that encourage employees to take the stairs, and so forth.
Think beyond the walls of the workplace. Promote community activities or services, and tailor your program to complement them. You could promote a local race by holding a series of practice runs or walks at lunch. Consider giving a small financial incentive to offset the cost of registration or a post-race breakfast for participating employees and family members.

Partner with other employers or organizations (e.g., professional associations, chambers of commerce) for access to cheaper health insurance products and services, share community-wide data, and create common strategies to address population health improvements.

10. Perform Measurement and Evaluation Activities

To get the most benefit from available resources, be creative in identifying existing information around which to design your program. Take advantage of publicly available materials, and focus on promoting services and offerings you may already have in place. Below are examples of how small- and mid-size employers can make the most of the resources they have during the assessment and evaluation phases.

- Understand the landscape of workplace health programming already in place at your worksite. The CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard is a free tool to help you assess and improve your worksite health program every year.

- Determine the unique needs of your employees through surveys, conversations, or observations. Repeating these types of assessments annually can allow you to benchmark progress, contribute to decisions about future programming, and support requests for more resources.

- Use existing data (e.g., injury records and sick leave) or determine new indicators to identify potential process and outcome measures.
  - Process measures look at how well workers used or participated in the programs, services, and activities that you offered, and what resources went into making them available. These measures are important for examining the quality of the program to determine which activities to continue, and whether employees like a specific modality. For instance:
    » Use sign-in sheets to track the number of employees who participated in an activity, such as a lunch-and-learn or walking meeting.
    » Count the number of brochures you gave out at an event or the number of employees who received smart incentives for participating in the wellness program.
    » Count the number of employees who participated in a biometric screening.
    » Use an online or in-person survey to determine the percentage of employees who were satisfied with a particular program or event.
    » Monitor the purchase of healthy food options from the cafeteria or vending machine.
  - Outcome measures look at the short- and long-term achievements of your program. Short-term outcomes occur as soon as or shortly after your program ends. Long-term outcomes include indicators of employee health change and financial results.
» Health outcomes are useful for measuring short- and long-term successes, but also require collecting sensitive information. Therefore, consider the following:

- Use a third-party vendor to administer an anonymous survey to gather health information from your employees.
- Leverage information about health care or tobacco use that may be available from your insurance provider in a way that maintains employee privacy.

» Measures of job satisfaction, employee attrition, and absenteeism, when evaluated over longer periods, can reflect on the workplace health program.

» Annual changes in health care expenditures, in particular when assessed within higher risk populations (e.g., employees diagnosed with, or at risk for, chronic disease), provide insight into the success of your workplace health program.

These activities set the stage for a successful workplace health program and inform the rest of the program lifecycle. In particular, assessment and evaluation help to ensure that your program achieves its mission. You can use the resulting information to determine what works and how to improve your program.

Conclusion

The strategies in this report are designed to help you launch and maintain a successful workplace health program, even if your business is small- or medium-sized. Despite the challenges you may face, the smaller size of your organization provides opportunities that larger organizations may not have—for instance, a warm, family-like environment where key leaders are visible company-wide. In addition, your smaller size makes it easier to tailor programs to meet your employees’ needs. For example, you may be able to start a program more quickly because decision-making is more centralized, and a small but tight-knit wellness program committee can drive change. Since 2013, hundreds of organizations like yours have benefitted from using the CDC Workplace Health Model as a guide to creating successful programs to achieve their long-term goals.

CDC’s Workplace Health Resource Center (WHRC) is a one-stop shop for organizations of all sizes to find credible tools, guides, case studies, and other resources to design, develop, implement, evaluate, and sustain workplace health programs.
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