

Understanding Workplace Health

Why Workplace Health?

With over 15 million Canadians spending more than half of their waking hours at work, many workplaces are beginning to look at the health of their workplace. “Integrating workplace and human resources practices into the business strategy of the organization is often regarded as a key ingredient to success”.¹

There is increasing evidence indicating that

- the work people do and their work environments affect health, and
- employers can play a significant role in improving the health of their employees.

Promoting health in your workplace doesn't have to be complicated, expensive or time consuming. It's a matter of making a commitment to workplace health, finding out what kinds of initiatives your employees want, developing a plan, and putting some activities in place.

Benefits to Employers and Employees

Many research studies over the past few decades have shown that the workplace has a powerful effect on the health of workers.² Focusing on workplace health has many benefits to the employer, employees and the community.³ Organizations implementing workplace health programs may benefit from:

- Increased productivity
- Fewer insurance and worker compensation claims
- Less absenteeism
- Decreased accidents
- Reduced staff turnover
- Lower costs related to recruitment, training and orientation
- Improved staff attitudes towards the organization and higher staff morale
- A more receptive climate for, and the ability to cope with, workplace changes

Today's workforce is changing. Work environments are becoming more stressful, which affects the health of employees, families, communities and the health care system. A commitment to workplace health from organizational leaders will help workplaces to attract and retain top performers, allow them to remain competitive and to be recognized as an employer of choice.^{4,5}

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What is a Healthy Workplace?

Traditionally, workplace health has focused on the safety of the physical work environment of employees. Recently, workplaces have begun to recognize the impact health lifestyles of employees have on the work environment.

To optimize effectiveness and impact on the workplace and its employees, a Comprehensive Workplace Health Promotion program should strive to improve employee health through addressing these three broad components of workplace health:

- **Health & Safety** – This addresses work-related injury, illness and disability within the workplace by focusing on environmental and chemical hazards in the workplace. Examples include ergonomics, safe lifting, employee violence, work pace, air quality, etc.
- **Lifestyle** – These initiatives are designed to support and encourage healthy lifestyle practices. Examples include smoking cessation, healthy eating, physical activity, stress management, substance use prevention, etc.
- **Cultural/Social Environment** – Elements of the cultural/social environment include leadership style, management practices, the way in which work is organized, employee autonomy, control and social support.³ Activities could address the following issues: balancing work and family, staff satisfaction and morale, organizational communication, employee training and development, flexible work environment, employee recognition and involvement in decision-making.

Categories of Workplace Health Promotion



Illustration taken from: The Health Communication Unit, (2004). *Introduction to Comprehensive Workplace Health Promotion*. University of Toronto, Centre for Health Promotion
<http://www.thcu.ca/Workplace/infoandresources.htm>

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Project Health – Supporting Healthy Workplaces

Health is an important concept of our daily lives, both at home and in our workplace. The health of employees and their workplaces is important to success and growth within the business environment. A growing number of employers are increasingly recognizing the importance of establishing and implementing a Comprehensive Workplace Health Promotion Program. Employees who feel they are “healthy” have increased productivity, use fewer sick days, have improved work attitudes, and have increased incentive to stay with their particular job.

The “Handbook for Healthy Workplaces” was developed as part of the Region of Waterloo Public Health workplace health initiative, entitled Project Health. Project Health supports the development of sustainable workplace health initiatives by providing resources, tools and information to address specific topic health needs of all employees.

This Handbook was created to assist workplaces in the development and implementation of workplace strategies and policies relating to the health topics, as outlined in the handbook. The topics and strategies selected by organizations should reflect employee interests, needs and concerns.

Promoting healthy lifestyle practices in the workplace can be simple and inexpensive. The Project Health workplace team is here to help workplaces whether they are just getting started or are looking for more ideas and support for their current workplace health plans and activities.

Workplace Health Promotion Strategies

This Handbook is designed to support workplaces and their goal to create a healthy workplace by using of a variety of health promotion strategies that can influence workplace health.

Effective initiatives should include a combination of the following health promotion strategies:

- **Awareness Raising** – activities that increase employee awareness on a variety of health related topics in order to help them make healthy lifestyle choices. For example: newsletters, bulletin boards, flyers or paycheck inserts.

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- **Skill Building** – activities that provide employees with the skills needed in order to change and support positive behaviour. Examples include walking groups, “Lunch and Learns” and training opportunities.
- **Creating a Supportive Environment** – ongoing, sustainable activities, which encourage participation in changing health practices and behaviours and strive to make it easier for employees to make healthy choices. For example: on-site physical activity centers, healthy cafeteria food choices, providing bicycle racks.
- **Healthy Workplace Policy** – workplace policies that are designed to support healthy lifestyle choices. For example, catering for meetings policies, vending machine policies, breastfeeding policies. These policies help to clarify roles and expectations between employees and employers.

Categories of Workplace Health Promotion and Example Activities ⁶

	Occupational Health and Safety	Voluntary Health Practices	Organizational Changes
Awareness Building	e.g. raise awareness about the health risks associated with certain hazardous chemicals.	e.g. raise awareness using company newsletter about the wide range of health benefits of being physically active (and the detriments of being inactive).	e.g. raise awareness about the importance of providing input to management about job content/issues/concerns
Education/Skill Building	e.g. provide demonstrations and training on how to handle hazardous products.	e.g. assist/teach employees to set small, realistic physical activity goals.	e.g. provide information on the best ways to give constructive feedback to management.
Environmental Support	e.g. provide necessary safety equipment and safe facilities.	e.g. provide fitness facilities in the workplace.	e.g. provide child care facilities.
Policy Development	e.g. mandate rigorous assessment of possibly hazardous materials before employees are exposed to them.	e.g. allow employees to start work early or stay late to compensate for a slightly extended lunch hour which allows time to exercise.	e.g. policies that allow employees a certain amount of work-time each year to pursue professional development

Comprehensive workplace policies demonstrate an organizational commitment to employee well-being and to the corporate values of health. Examples of this could include an overall Healthy Workplace Policy supported by policies on specific health topic areas (i.e. physical activity, health and safety, employee recognition), a healthy workplace vision statement, and a mission statement.

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This Handbook is structured according to different topic areas and includes strategies for implementation. For each topic, you will find:

1. Background information about the topic/issue, and importance of individual and workplace health.
2. Goals for which your workplace can strive.
3. Getting started: A comprehensive list of ideas/strategies/activities your workplace can implement.
4. Helpful resources – including resources from Region of Waterloo Public Health, available community resources, and website links related to the topic area.

Project Health's team includes Public Health Nurses, Public Health Nutritionists and Public Health Planners who can provide information on a variety of health topics outlined in this Handbook, and can assist in establishing and supporting workplace health initiatives. Creating a workplace that has a positive balance of work, family, and social supports will benefit our entire community.

References

- ¹ Gunderson & Morley. (2002). Rethinking Productivity from a Workplace Perspective. CPRN Discussion Paper no w/17.
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- ³ The Health Communication Unit. (2004). An Introduction to Comprehensive Workplace Health Promotion. Centre for Health Promotion: University of Toronto.
- ⁴ Yardley, J. (2002). Measuring Key Drivers of Employee Satisfaction: An HRM Strategy, CEOG presentation, Workplace Health Research Unit, Brock University.
- ⁵ Duxbury, L. (2002). Work-Life Balance: Rhetoric Versus Reality Part One – The Problem. Presentation at Wellness in the Workplace Conference, Niagara Falls, November 21, 2002.
- ⁶ The Health Communication Unit. (2003) THCU's Approach to Workplace Health Promotion . Retrieved from, http://www.thcu.ca/THCUgrant/Documents/Yr_3_Workpalce_Project_Our_New_Approch.doc



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