



Simple Wellness Solutions

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a wellness program
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Reuters

Making workplace wellness work

By: Michael B. McCallister (January 24th, 2011)

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The World Economic Forum meeting this week in Davos, Switzerland, will explore ways to improve our citizenry's health.

Increasingly, WEF participants are focusing on workplace wellbeing. Several major corporations, including Humana have created the Workplace Wellness Alliance to better understand the link between employee wellness and productivity. Healthy work environments are essential to a business's bottom line.

But healthy workplaces are not a given. One-third of the U.S. workforce suffers from preventable diseases in any given year, according to The Milken Institute's 2007 report, "An Unhealthy America: The Economic Burden of Chronic Disease." These chronic diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, mental disorders and cancer, trigger an annual economic loss estimated at more than \$1 trillion. For the entire world, the WEF and World Health Organization estimate that figure to be at \$2 trillion.

Historically, chronic disease is driven by just a few risk factors and behaviors, such as smoking, inactivity, poor diet and stress. Half of those who die from a chronic disease each year are in their productive years. Encouragingly, workplace wellness programs that address lifestyle changes and promote health prove to be very beneficial, according to a 2008 joint report by the WEF and WHO. Indeed, these programs have demonstrated clear returns on investment (ROI) with cost savings of up to \$4 for every \$1 invested.

Still, it has been difficult to justify deploying massive corporate efforts against the risk factors for chronic disease. In part, this is the case, because not much common wisdom exists about the best approaches for addressing chronic diseases. Consequently, most companies have followed one or more of the following strategies:

- Assume it is someone else's problem
- Invest in significant individualized programs and justify them on the basis of good employee and responsible management — but without seeking to recover a specific ROI
- Participate in broad private-sector advocacy and community support activities that seem to move the needle in the right direction

This is where the new fourth strategy enters: To join with other corporations to mount a collaborative effort against the problem of chronic disease. Collaborative action greatly improves the effectiveness of systems that combat chronic disease. It proves especially valuable when common targets and metrics are selected for the programs that work against the chronic disease risk factors.

Metrics collection helps identify employee behaviors and conditions that pose the greatest danger to health and productivity. It's also important in creating a business case for wellness interventions. Updating the metrics baseline regularly allows progress to be tracked, which helps prove the ROI for wellness investments to company leadership. Further, the metrics baseline created by member companies provides a central source for benchmarking.

This is how the World Economic Forum's Workplace Wellness Alliance is approaching its mission. Boston Consulting Group and Humana are leading the effort for battling chronic disease in the workplace through organizing, analyzing and measuring global wellness.



Now, as the world joins this effort, a broader Alliance can tackle the tough and complex issue of chronic disease that impedes economic productivity. And it can set out to deliver significant, sustaining impact.

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