

Workplace wellness programs are gaining in popularity

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



Mounting evidence shows that workplace health and wellness programs offer tremendous benefits for

businesses and their employees, with increased energy, morale and confidence, and with reduced injuries, health care costs and long-term disability. Healthier employees also mean reduced absenteeism and increased productivity.

Escalating health care costs are

of great concern for employers, especially small businesses, which are trying to provide the best possible coverage they can afford for employees.

According to Web site preventdisease.com, preventable illness makes up approximately 80 percent of the burden of illness and 90 percent of all health care costs.

Companies struggle with ways to combat massive increases in annual insurance premiums that reduce profit margins and hamper growth. Many are finding workplace health promotion as a long-term solution for helping to keep costs down.

The Wellness Councils of America (welcoa.org) reports that more than 81 percent of business-

es with 50 or more employees have some form of health promotion program — the most popular being exercise, stop-smoking classes, back care programs and stress management.

While large companies tend to be the early adapters and are leading the way, providing us with excellent examples of how workplace wellness programs are reducing costs, workplace wellness programs can benefit all businesses: big and small. These programs help you protect your most important asset: your employees.

Here are some of the benefits you can expect to receive.

- **Reduced absenteeism.** Healthier employees spend fewer days away from work, saving the company in downtime and temporary-hire costs. Reports on corporate wellness programs show tremendous results, with many reports of reduced absenteeism in the 15-20 percent range, providing a significant return on investment for every dollar spent.

- **Reduced health care claims.** Preventable illness makes up approximately 70 percent of the total costs of illness. Because many of these costs are linked to health habits, it is possible for employers to take aggressive action toward reducing health care utilization and containing costs by implementing a health promotion program. On average, it costs employers \$1,500 more per year to insure an obese employee than it does someone of average weight (this includes medical services, expenses, premiums, etc.). Studies also show that employees who exercise as little as once a week incur health care costs that are one-third to one-half lower than those who don't. Many companies have found that offering programs that assist employees with health-related lifestyle changes reduced the number of medical claims and resulted in savings.

- **Reduced employee turnover.** Company-sponsored wellness programs send a clear message to

employees that management values them and their well-being. Healthy employees also tend to be happier and not as restless to leave, resulting in less employee turnover and reducing the costs of recruitment and new personnel training.

- **Improved productivity and morale.** Worker productivity is a key factor to a company's success and profitability. Workplace wellness programs are shown to improve productivity and morale, positively impacting the bottom line. Reports of increased productivity and morale note levels as high as 75-80 percent.

- **Excellent recruitment and retention tool.** With our critically low unemployment, businesses are looking for new ways to attract and retain employees. Workplace wellness programs are shown to be attractive benefits to potential and existing employees.

For those currently offering workplace wellness programs, please share your stories with us at

the Maui Chamber of Commerce at info@mauichamber.com. We would like to hear about your programs and results.

For specific workplace wellness program studies and cost-saving examples, please visit Web site http://preventdisease.com/worksite_wellness/worksites_wellness.html.

Workplace wellness programs are growing in popularity because they work!

In summary, businesses are experiencing lower health care costs, reduced absenteeism, higher productivity, reduced use of health care benefits, reduced worker's compensation/disability, fewer injuries, increased morale and loyalty.

Workplace wellness programs are an investment that over a short period of time can improve your bottom line!

■ *Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.*