

Workplace Health for a Healthy Place to Work



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Introduction

Like it or not, “most of us spend up to 60% of our waking hours in the workplace”!¹ Agree or disagree with this statement by the BHF Well@Work project, we cannot argue that the workplace is another place to target employees’ health and wellbeing.

Corporate Health – Why should we address this?

As an individual and healthcare professional, we are all fully aware of the cost of ill health. The workplace is an excellent environment to tackle health inequalities and promote wellbeing.

It has often been quoted that the “NHS should be an exemplar of workplace health – it employs 1.4 million”.² There are a number of initiatives running in the NHS. For example, they have set up the website www.nhs.uk/Livewell/WorkplaceHealth offering various pieces of advice and tools from stress tests to advising on how to avoid those mid afternoon energy slumps!

The NHS staff from Birmingham East and North have already exemplified how easy it is to support a healthier lifestyle. Following on from the findings late last year from Steve Boorman's review on public health,³ the NHS joined a programme called BENEFIT⁴ in which they encouraged their staff to improve their own health in the workplace. To date BENEFIT has helped more than 725 employees become fitter, lose weight and have healthier lifestyles, with health risk assessments and cardiovascular screenings taking place, hundreds of pedometers handed out and individually tailored programmes given to members. This is a prime example of how easy it is to support health in the workplace, and also leading by example. Organisations such as NHS trusts are lucky to have the expert knowledge at their disposal.

Increase your workplace's return on investment and productivity

Findings from the Dame Carol Black report 'Working for a Healthier Tomorrow' discovered that "Costs of sickness absence associated with working age ill-health are over £100 billion a year"² – a cost any business can ill afford in these already challenging times.

Due to the recession and other financial constraints, companies are eagerly investigating routes to cost cutting whilst still maintaining a maximum business performance. Cost cutting does not need to be about redundancies and stationery supplies. Consider getting the most from your employees by harnessing their ability and productivity through education surrounding their health and mental wellbeing.

Supporting your colleagues and/or employees will also strengthen and enforce existing Government commitments, including 'Change4Life'

The Government has already recognised that we should be investing more energy and care around the way we bring up the youth of tomorrow by launching the 'Change4Life'⁵ campaign aimed at educating children and young families. Although, should we not be educating ourselves first as adults?

As dietitians, nutritionists and healthcare professionals, we can provide a valuable and credible source of expertise and a resource that has the potential to improve the health and wellbeing of employees in both the NHS and other companies.

Simple steps to implementation and education

Small changes in diet, like eating the recommended '5 A DAY', are all very well to suggest and are indeed quite easy to promote within the workplace as there are many sources of free literature on eating your 5 A DAY from the NHS 5 A DAY website.⁶ The question is, however, are people actually aware what constitutes one portion of the recommended 5 A DAY?

By understanding this simple question you are already beginning to educate yourself and your colleagues on how they can ensure they feel 'well' emotionally and mentally. As we know food (and fluid) has many direct links with our own mental alertness!

Health checks

Health checks are simple to perform as long as undertaken by a professional in private and comfortable surroundings for the participant. Health checks can include anything from a simple blood pressure check through to measuring an individual's height and weight to calculate their body mass index. Other checks can include cholesterol or glucose screening.

ACHN along with hundreds of other participants, in both the public and private sector, annually support the Blood Pressure Association's 'Know your numbers week'⁷ – a campaign designed to raise awareness of high blood pressure as a silent killer. In fact, "1 in 3 adults in the UK has high blood pressure and only a third are aware they have the condition."⁸ Alarming facts when you realise the potential danger this silent threat can cause, including "narrowing of the arteries and blood vessels in the body which can lead to damage to the brain or heart."⁸ A health check is a simple and straightforward event to organise.

New Year – new you

January is commonly denoted as the ideal time to start those 'New Year Resolutions' but all too often we are aware that the duration of these good thoughts begins and stays lodged in the New Year and unfortunately not much time past it. All too often people take up new gym memberships and benefit from only a few months worth of usage, or even begin a diet ready for the coming warmer months, and again it may only last out till the end of February when those Easter eggs begin to creep back on to our supermarket shelves.



This need not be the case, though. The motivation is evident and people generally appear to have the desire to improve themselves and their way of life, what other reason would they have to start these 'resolutions' to begin with, other than the desire to improve and help themselves?

Aside of the physical conditions, losing weight or attaining a goal you set yourself, can also be extremely mentally stimulating, which in turn can counteract more serious conditions related to health. "Stress, anxiety and depression have been linked with heart disease, a seven year study suggests that it is not a person's mental state that damages the heart and arteries, but the behaviours it produces."⁹ If we can begin to change these behaviours, we are overcoming a major hurdle to improving the health of Britain's working age population, not to mention possible weight and/or lifestyle enhancement.

The structure and support to achieve

What we need to do is provide people with a structural base for access to 'Support' and encouragement. "The promotion of a healthy workplace helps companies to increase their productivity and to become more competitive."¹⁰

Why do groups, such as slimming clubs, work so well? It is because people are offered the opportunity to get together and share their goals, learn from one another and progress to the next stage of success. All of these things the workplace can provide as long as the system and structure is in place for it to succeed. The management and any support systems such as HR and Occupational Health should all be bought into the mix to support and work towards a shared goal.

The workplace is an ideal environment to be able to instigate these initial changes and support and encourage its employees, in turn reaping the rewards this 'leaner and keener' team can offer. "The commercial benefits of taking action on workplace health are clear, as healthy employees can be nearly three times more productive than those in poor health."¹¹ As well as this, employees are more likely to be attracted to remain with, and value, a company that obviously values them – this is human nature.

Piece by piece

Simple steps such as swapping the board room biscuit tin for a fruit bowl alternative, starting lunchtime walking meetings to encourage staff to take a break from their screens, or even inviting a healthcare professional in to educate your team(s) and support them with the goals will go a long way to starting a chain reaction in keeping your company ahead of the times.

These things will not only help colleagues feel motivated and more mentally stimulated because they are achieving their goals, but they will also have a positive effect on their business output too. With "£1.5 billion a year spent on sickness absence related to obesity",¹² wouldn't you like the opportunity to be able to dramatically decrease this percentage equivalent in your workplace?

Making health approachable and enjoyable

Maintaining a balanced diet, eating the recommended allowance of fruit of vegetables and ensuring you get enough exercise to keep your body functioning at its best can seem like a lot of hard work, not to mention extremely daunting and time consuming for one individual. But this need not be the case. If employers can support their staff with the motivations and signpost them to the support, the employee is much more likely to take up the offer.

There are many ways in which you can encourage yourself and others to opt for a healthier lifestyle and in turn reap the rewards both physically, emotionally and mentally. Firstly, though, you should be sure to address the differences between one-off events and sustainable change.

As we have discussed before: sustainable change needs the support and structured environment to be able to nurture an individual's, or a group of individuals,' desire to learn and change.

'Health Checks' or 'Health Road Shows' are a great one off event to trigger an employee or colleague to think about their health, as this simple trigger can be all that is needed to continue the good work. But it is essential that this one-off event can lead to more sustainable actions for the future, and the workplace should be keen to support this again, by repeating the checks (possibly annually) or following it up with other structured health advice.

'Eat Well' courses can be invigorating ways at starting or indeed helping you to initiate weight management classes for your workplace, or tackle some of the sensitive issues such as cancer. We know that up to 50% of cancers can be preventable through diet^{13, 14} and "Losing 10% of your weight lowers blood pressure, improves blood sugar control and lowers total cholesterol."¹⁵

Solution to the theory

Workplace health is simple to implement, as long as you have the experience and the capability to support it, and the benefits stretch much further than an individual or personal level. We hope you will now take the time to invest in creating a healthier, more productive team for the future of our working age population.

ACHN

AC Health and Nutrition (ACHN) is a cutting edge company, offering clients access to sound, qualified and professional advice in the realms of nutrition and dietetics.

To date, initiatives have included corporate health seminars, business and conference presentations and workplace health checks. This is not to mention the fact that ACHN is working with some of the country's most prestigious names advocating workplace health.

ACHN have provided this support and credible and experienced healthcare professionals to hundreds of workplaces across the country, and the feedback has been eye opening. One district council based in the south east of England reported findings that for every pound (£) they invested in the health of their workforce, they benefitted from a £32 return on investment. Aside of the business acumen, the employees also reported to enjoy and really benefit from the health advice that they were offered.

Alison and the ACHN team have proven experience at offering such events to address the why's, how's and what's surrounding the maintenance of an optimum diet. The team can also provide specialised or bespoke workshops to suit your business needs, such as 'Eating for Diabetes'.

Want to be part of the team?

ACHN are currently recruiting for dynamic and qualified individuals to join the team and spread the message of good health even further afield. Do you think you have the passion and enthusiasm to work with others in both a business and professional manner? If so, they would like to hear from you!

Please contact Alison Clark by emailing: Alison@achn.co.uk or telephone 07787 568279. Please send a CV and accompanying letter with any written or electronic communication as this will speed up the response time to your enquiry.

For more information you can also visit: www.achn.co.uk or follow us on Twitter for lots of free and helpful nutritional advice and tips: www.twitter.com/ACHNltd

References: 1. British Heart Foundation (2006) Well@Work Project. 2. Dame Carol Black (2008), Working for a Healthier Tomorrow. Accessed via: <http://www.workingforhealth.gov.uk/Carol-Blacks-Review/> 3. NHS Health and Wellbeing, The Boorman Review. Accessed via: <http://www.nhshealthandwellbeing.org/index.html> 4. New Report Looks at NHS Staff Health (2009/10) [News article]. Network Health Dietitians; 10; 50: 6. 5. Change4Life. Accessed via: www.nhs.uk/Change4Life 6. 5 A DAY website. Accessed via: <http://www.5aday.nhs.uk/topTips/default.html> 7. Blood Pressure Association. Know Your Numbers Week. Accessed via: <http://www.bpassoc.org.uk/microsites/kyn/Home/AboutKYN/BPbasics> 8. Blood Pressure Association. Know Your Numbers. Blood pressure - the basics. Accessed via: <http://www.bpassoc.org.uk/microsites/kyn/Home/AboutKYN/BPbasics> 9. Blood Pressure Association (2008). Blood pressure news – It's what you do, not how you feel that damages heart and blood pressure. Accessed via: <http://www.bpassoc.org.uk/mediacentre/Bloodpressurenews/Itswhatyoudoonhowyoufeelthatdamagesheartandbloodpressure> 10. Shephard RJ (2002). Issues on worksite health promotion. A personal viewpoint. Quest; 54: 67-82. 11. BBC News (2009). Workplace illness 'to get worse' Quote from Dr Natalie-Jane MacDonald: Bupa health insurance [online news article]. Accessed via: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7971792.stm> 12. Dept of Health (2004). Choosing Health. Accessed via: <http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PublicHealth/ChoosingHealth/index.htm> 13. World Cancer Research Fund / American Institute for Cancer Research (2007). Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective. Washington DC: AICR. 14. World Cancer Research Fund / American Institute for Cancer Research (2009). Policy and Action for Cancer Prevention. Food, Nutrition, and Physical Activity: a Global Perspective Washington DC: AICR. 15. NHS Choices – Your health, your choices Website (2010). Accessed via: <http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/loseweight/pages/bodymassindex.aspx>