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Case Study of a Healthy Workplace Initiative

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Early Career Researcher Project: Case Study of a Healthy Workplace Initiative

OVERVIEW

With increasing demands of modern life reducing society's standards of health and wellbeing, individuals have fallen victim to competing demands at work and home. This lifestyle has subsequently resulted in profound detrimental effects on health and wellbeing at individual, workplace and community levels. This direct effect has been reflected through workplace injury and disease, estimated at over 7 billion dollars per year in Australia (LaMontagne et al., 2006). A study aimed at identifying the health profile of Australian workers (Medibank Private and Econtech, 2005) has revealed that 62% of Australian workers are overweight, 50% are totally inactive and almost half have poor diets. Additionally, over half the Australian workforce is overwhelmed and stressed, and 56% are in a medium to high risk range for factors associated with smoking and excessive drinking.



To address these major concerns and reduce injury and disease, the promotion of positive, healthy lifestyle initiatives is essential. Given that most adults spend at least half of their life working (Klein, 2005), it makes sense to consider the work environment as an important setting to address health and wellbeing issues. It is well noted that the happier and healthier an organisation's employees are the greater their effort, contribution and productivity is within the workplace (Fisher, 2003).

Previous research has revealed that Australian employees are highly appreciative of the implementation of healthy workplace initiatives, with minor programs shown to have positive effect on employee attitudes toward an organisation, in addition to their co-workers, both immediate and supervised (Australian Human Resources Institute, 2000). Therefore the aim of this study was to explore the impact of corporate wellness programs in Australia, in particular the current practices employed by a large, national, multi-brand retail group in the sports and leisure industry. This research intended to identify any existing practices employed by the company, as well as examine and evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and/or implementations. Furthermore, this research may provide other Australian companies with vital knowledge to improve the health and wellbeing of their own employees through suggested techniques and methods, thus moving a step closer to achieving a healthy, sustainable society.

RESULTS

Overall our results revealed that despite over half the employee sample being aware of the healthy workplace initiatives employed by their company, only a quarter of the sample were actively involved in these initiatives. This perhaps indicates a need for the company to restructure methods for informing employees about health and well-being opportunities. Interestingly, almost all participants expressed a desire to improve their health, however the greatest reason for non-involvement was time-restriction. As expected, employees who actively participated in the healthy workplace initiatives offered by the company were more satisfied with their job and had greater work/life balance. This is consistent with previous literature and supports the general assumption that employees participating in healthy workplace initiatives are healthier and less likely to occur sickness-related injury.

Perhaps of greatest importance is that insight into the initiatives found to be beneficial by employees was obtained, enabling recommendations for future implementations to be made. For example, it was revealed that employees perceived all current initiatives to be only somewhat beneficial. However when presented with a range of hypothetical initiatives derived from other corporate wellness programs, low-cost healthy food and discounts for alternative therapies (e.g., massage, acupuncture) were seen to be most beneficial. This is a promising finding as research has shown a positive association between the availability and consumption of healthy food in the workplace (Bandori et al., 2010). A number of other recommendations were also provided.



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