Workplace Wellness In the UK

WHAT WORKS@WORK: BRITISH HEART FOUNDATION AND WORKPLACE WELLNESS IN THE UK

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) Health at Work website gives practical information and materials to help employers improve wellness at the workplace. Launched in July 2009, the online resource is based on evidence and experience accumulated through a number of the heart foundation's initiatives.

Workforce health: crucial to health and economy

For nearly a decade the BHF has recognized the potential of the workplace for promoting cardiovascular health. “Workplace wellness is much more than a health issue,” said Peter Hollins, Chief Executive of the BHF. “Most businesses know that investing in employee health is good business, and the government recognizes that maintaining the health of the workforce is crucial to the nation’s health and economic wellbeing. We work with both the government and the private sector to explore this potential.” Starting in 2001, the BHF reviewed evidence about what is effective in workplace wellness. It organized seminars and workshops and through the Think fit! project developed practical resources to help coordinators develop activities promoting physical activity in the workplace.

Well@Work: testing what works

To assess the effectiveness of different approaches to workplace wellness, the BHF led a three-year project called Well@Work. Growing out of the 2004 White Paper Choosing Health, Making Health Choices Easier, the project was funded by the Big Lottery Fund, Sport England and the Department of Health. It involved 32 employer organizations to engage a potential workforce of 10,000 employees in settings as diverse as factories,
offices, health facilities, a prison, local government offices, a call centre, voluntary organizations and different types of small and medium-sized enterprises. Focusing on cardiovascular disease risk factors of physical inactivity, smoking and unhealthy diet, the Well@Work project tested the impact of different approaches including pedometer challenges, health checks and campaigns promoting fruit consumption. The project was evaluated by the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Loughborough University. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods and using consistent methods across projects, evaluators identified which approaches worked and were well accepted by employers and employees. They found that:

- pedometer challenges increased participants’ step counts by a third
- active travel schemes significantly increased participants’ time spent cycling or walking to work
- promotion of healthy diets upped employees’ fruit and vegetable consumption, increasing the number who met recommended levels by 10%.

Confirming the impact

“Well@Work showed that workplace wellness works,” said Ceri Jones, BHF Programme Lead for Heart Health Resources and Community Support. The Well@Work project confirmed what we had been saying and served as a basis for recommendations on concrete steps that the government, health services, employers and employees could take to make workplaces healthier.” These recommendations include:

- offering tax incentives for employers who invest in workplace health
- designing buildings that encourage employee physical activity
- designing healthy workplace initiatives and including sport in them
- integrating health checks and health trainers into workplaces.

Engaging management and employees

Most groups that have developed workplace wellness programmes agree on the basic principles. Getting management buy-in is important, and to do that, the project needs to fit into the bigger picture of the business strategy. “With workplace initiatives’ potential to reduce sickness and absenteeism, improve staff retention, and enhance company image, it is not too hard to align most workplace initiatives with the business strategy” said Lisa Purcell, Project Manager, Heart Health Resources and Community Support, who has been involved over the years with BHF workplace health projects. “Management needs to show its support and get visibly involved. They also need to get regular feedback on programme successes. It is essential to have strong coordination not only with management but between all stakeholders, all the more in externally-funded programmes like Well@Work. And of course, employees are the other essential group. Surveys, assessments, working groups, health checks, suggestion boards and departmental meetings are ways to get employees motivated and involved in both planning and implementation and to ensure that programmes are tailored to meet their needs. Individual employees who champion the programme can really drive participation – often they come forward on their own because they are interested. Depending on the
workforce involved, unions can also be very important for getting employee support and participation.”

**Successes and challenges**

Not surprisingly, the ease of implementation is an important success factor. “We have found that on-site competitions are particularly effective, as are one-off events. These are easier to organise, often inexpensive, and don't require a big commitment from employees. Competitions involving physical activity are particularly popular with both employees and employers and can often fit into events organized for other reasons. Team challenges also work well, especially if they do not go on for too long. Sometimes prizes and incentives help to motivate teams, but really it seems that it is the motivation of working toward something in a group that is more important. Weight-management classes are popular and health checks often motivate employees to get involved in other aspects of wellness programmes. Inexpensive changes to the general environment also work well, things like providing bike storage at the worksite or offering healthier foods in the work cafeteria. There are barriers to workplace wellness, as well. Especially in small worksites, space limitations and a lack of facilities for showering or changing can hamper efforts to promote physical activity. The location of a business can determine whether active transport is possible or practical. Lisa Purcell said “Interventions that are on-site, cheap and easy to get involved in will be more successful and sustainable, for both employers and employees.” she concluded “one of the main strengths of the workplace as a site for prevention is that it is convenient.”

**Linking with the community**

The Health at Work project is now working to strengthen links between workplace initiatives to BHF community events like runs, cycling races, swimming competitions and mountain hikes. “We want to help develop activities at worksites, but we also want to use the workplace as an entry point to involvement in activities in the community,” explained Lisa. Purcell. “We are looking for more ways to get interactive with workplaces”.

**Leveraging World Heart Day**

Designed to support engagement in CVD prevention at the workplace, the 2009 World Heart Day theme is “Work with Heart.” Charmaine Griffiths, Head of Press, explained how BHF is using World Heart Day to promote its workplace wellness initiatives: “Leading up to World Heart Day we have a two-week drive to promote workplace health initiatives, when British Heart Foundation staff are phoning the Human Resources or Occupational Health departments in 250 companies in the UK to engage them. The theme on Workplace Wellness makes World Heart Day a good hook for media work to support the drive.”

**Useful links and further information:**

- [BHF Health at Work website](#)
• Summary report and call to action
• Full evaluation