



Discussion Paper

HEALTH AND WELLNESS FOR THE GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE

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June 2013

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Health determines much of the quality of one's life, including how much success he or she finds in the workplace. Poor health makes it nearly impossible to be engaged in one's work or to be as productive as possible. Healthy people are much more likely to be successful in the workplace than those who are not as healthy. Health also affects one's self-esteem, so a healthy employee likely possesses more confidence than an employee whose health is lacking; confidence leads to better decision-making, which leads to better outcomes. Implementing a workplace health and wellness program gives employees the chance to become empowered about their health. Ask most people if they want to be healthy, and the answer will be yes. Finding the time and energy to live healthfully can be a major hurdle to those wanting to improve their health, which is why workplace wellness programs are so important. When employees have the chance to take charge of their health, they usually do so, and a healthy team equals a successful team. Stress, obesity, heart disease, lung cancer, and other health problems can cause workers to struggle to concentrate and be productive; giving them the chance to be healthy gives them a better quality of life and gives your organization a better chance of success.

Many different pieces come together to make the whole that is complete health and wellness. Stress is one of the biggest and most common hurdles to wellness. One of the best ways to reduce stress levels is to ensure that the work environment is a positive one. Work environments can have an immediate effect when workers enter the building, and agencies should strive to make the work environment positive from the moment workers step into the office. A positive work environment might be energetic (but not frantic), peaceful, or even intense and fast-paced; as long as stress and tension are not the first things felt when employees walk into the office, the work environment is probably on its way to being a healthful one.

Another factor that takes a lot of stress off of employees' shoulders and can build the foundation for a positive work environment is how helpful their organization is in enabling them to balance their work and home lives. For example, new parents—mothers and fathers—need the option of paid leave; all parents deserve the option to pick up their kids from school, new moms need a friendly, private space in which to pump milk if they so choose, parents should have childcare options, and the list of needs goes on. Giving employees the options they need to balance their lives lets them know they are appreciated and increases an agency's chances of retaining them. Having a greater balance also reduces stress, which could help decrease health costs for an organization. Helping employees by providing flexible options helps the agency as a whole and makes attaining complete wellness easier for employees.

Telework is a great way to give employees flexibility. Our highly connected world makes it easier than ever for most employees to telecommute at least part-time. With the right amount of engagement, workers can actually be more productive working from home than in the office. Commuting can be stressful, as can office politics, and

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stress is bad for one's health, so telecommuting has definite health benefits. A happier, more productive employee means better quality work and a more efficient, productive overall organization. Those who telework also report having better work-life balance. Enjoying a sense of balance in one's life contributes to lower stress levels and higher happiness levels.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter points out in a December 2010 *Harvard Business Review* column, "Remote work has underutilized potential. It should be a no-brainer enshrined in public policy. It would cut traffic congestion and air pollution, save energy, make it easier to drop kids at school or care for them at home." Kanter does not miss the health benefits of telework, either: "Workplace stress has health consequences, draining the economy in other ways even when companies show high profits." In addition to having a workplace health and wellness program, allowing and encouraging employees to telework some days is another way to cut healthcare costs for an organization. Maintaining productivity while telecommuting is not the only benefit, as greater levels of happiness and mental and physical health also come with remote work—benefits that could make an organization better as a whole.

Another important way in which work-life balance needs to be addressed in many agencies is the amount of vacation time employees' use. Many private and public sector employees are skipping vacation time in favor of working instead. This trend, however, is both bad for those who opt to skip vacation and bad for the organizations for which these overachievers work. Everyone needs a mental break every now and then, and if employees fail to take that break, they are giving themselves and their jobs the short end of the stick. Working too hard without the balance of playing (or resting) makes workers prone to burnout—or at the very least, not working at their most efficient, productive level possible. Employees cannot be their most engaged selves at work if they are always depriving themselves of vacation time. Even if workers do not go away somewhere for vacation, simply resting at home or spending time in a nearby park can do wonders for their mental state. They will return to the job refreshed and recharged.

Managers, in particular, may worry that their team will be unable to handle the workload in their absence, but whatever does not get done while they are away will still be there when they get back, and most tasks really can wait—the world is not going to end if some things get pushed back a few days. All work and no play leads to some major stress. Not only is stress a major block to getting engaged in one's work, it also makes employees more irritable and too much of it is bad for health, leading to major problems if not dealt with on a regular basis. Employees need to realize that it is imperative they take vacations, for their own sake and the sake of their agencies.

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Americans use much less vacation time than their European counterparts. It seems that not only do they take fewer vacations, but they also do not use their vacation time wisely. Not taking enough vacation time is enough of a problem in and of itself as discussed above, but if employees continue to work while on vacation, it only adds to the problem. Just as workers need to be fully engaged in their work in order to be as productive, efficient, and creative as possible, they need to be fully engaged in their vacation in order to reap the benefits. They will not de-stress and refresh as much as needed if they continue to check emails and attend conference calls while “on vacation.” The quality of one’s time away is vital to getting the most out of it and coming back to work rejuvenated. Workers are not doing anyone any favors if they are still working while on vacation. Vacation time will only make employees better at their jobs. Their families will appreciate their full engagement in the vacation, too, and harmony in the family is important to one’s overall wellbeing.

So now that it is established that wellbeing is essential to one’s quality of work, the question is what can HR staff do to secure funding and leadership commitment for health and wellness programs? In light of how many agencies (public and private) are facing budget cuts and/or freezes due to sequestration, this is certainly a question of concern. The best way to convince an agency that it should implement or continue a wellness program is with relevant data. Wellness programs have a very positive Return on Investment (ROI). Presenting the numbers along with the many other benefits—such as improved employee retention, reduced absenteeism, and others—makes for a solid case. If relevant data is used to paint a clear picture of how investing in a wellness program will pay off, it will be difficult to turn down such a beneficial investment.