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Wellness Lessons from Transportation Companies

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Stress, nicotine use, sleep apnea, obesity and lack of information are significant barriers to wellness in commercial drivers/operators. Many wellness programs ask the individual driver/operator to lose weight; exercise more; and monitor blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol and other such indicators of health. However, in most cases, little is done to change the environment or adopt structural interventions.

Study Methods

Brief case studies of transportation companies are provided. The authors interviewed representatives of the Union Pacific Corporation (rail transportation), Con-way Freight (trucking transportation) and the Utah Transit Authority and document the actions these organizations have taken to promote employee wellness.

Findings

UNION PACIFIC CORPORATION:

Making exercise equipment mobile in box cars increased convenience of use for mobile railroad employees. Though the circumstance is unique to a railroad, convenience of opportunity for exercise is essential for people that travel. Companies that require employees to travel could offer gym coupons, exercise DVDs for use in hotel rooms, and encourage ongoing monitoring of walking through the use of pedometers.

The company collaborates with other corporations, organizations and universities devoted to controlling health care costs. The National Business Council on Health has been active since 1974 attempting to address health insurance related issues.

Occupational health nurses support users through wellness programming, assist in the prevention of injuries, and respond to injuries and illness when they appear. The strong relationships of the nurses to users were pivotal to the program's success. Nurses encourage and support users in their wellness activities and enhance communication. They are employees of the railroad representing the corporation's employee health and safety program in addition to wellness. Because they are employees, they are part of the culture and plugged into the communication of the organization as opposed to an outside contractor that may not be as attuned to the organization.

A critical metric is return on investment. There is always the risk of programs being fads, but that has not been true of HealthTrack, which is clearly part of the railroad's business strategy.



CON-WAY FREIGHT AND WELLNESS COACHES USA (CF):

The wellness program generated quick results with a reduction in workplace injuries and related worker's compensation costs of 80 percent, and a 75% corresponding reduction of lost work days. Participation was very high—of the greater than 95 percent of CF's employees who completed health risk assessments, 80% met at least six times annually with health coaches to assess progress. Competition and incentives built excitement and increased employee participation. Stretching is also emphasized at CF to reduce injuries common to freight companies.

Effective coaching builds on trust between the employees and the coach. Sometimes employees worry that information might be shared with others or some start with an assumption that management is simply furthering its own agenda. Trust builds along the way through effective engagement where the coach shows interest in, on site, face-to-face contact and then uses effective techniques so that the employee can see results.

THE UTAH TRANSIT AUTHORITY (UTA):

UTA lists its Wellness program as a standard benefit for both administrative and bargaining unit (that is, unionized) employees. UTA's approach also builds community through team sports and it provides discounted tickets for assorted family activities to promote healthier families. The remedy for a host of problems begins, and sometimes ends, with weight loss. All of its bargaining unit employees must submit to a DOT physical every two years and if their health is an issue they will be taken out of service.

Union distrust relates to the DOT requirements. Bus operators cannot have excessively high blood pressure or out of range glucose. HIPAA laws protect confidentiality, but coaches are obligated to refer drivers with health problems to a physician.

Policy Recommendations

Wellness is a holistic approach to lifestyle change. Given the generally poor health of commercial drivers, weight loss, smoking cessation, stress management, regular monitoring of vital signs, exercise, proper eating, and getting enough sleep are important to health maintenance. The two specific items we chose to highlight were the following:

1. Erectile dysfunction mitigation could prove to be a powerful motivational factor. It should be included in the promotion of wellness programs.
2. Not hiring tobacco users, where legal, will dramatically improve wellness.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

The report is expected to be published at the end of September 2011. For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1028.html