

Run your Wellness Initiative the Right Way: Avoid the following costly mistakes.

- 1. Not finding out what your staff think.**
- 2. Making wellness mandatory.**
- 3. Trying to please everybody.**
- 4. Paying lip service to wellbeing (the token gesture).**
- 5. DIY wellness.**

Ten years ago, many people would have questioned whether “wellness” was a word. These days it’s a hot topic, and the subject of boardroom discussions around the world. With the CBI estimating the cost of ill health to UK industry at £13bn each year, it’s an issue that isn’t going to disappear any time soon.

In addition to sickness absence, the modern phenomenon of “presenteeism” - where people are at work, but unproductive - is costing businesses a fortune. Stephen Bevan, director of research at The Work Foundation, reports that whilst 3-5% of the workforce are off sick at any one time, a further 25% are in work but operating below par.

The good news is that studies consistently show that a properly administered wellness programme pays very real dividends (ROI up to 400%) in terms of increased profitability and lower overheads.

The need for action is clear, but how do you avoid wasting time and money on ineffective policies and programmes?

This guide, in association with our Corporate Wellness Action Plan (also available free from our website) will help you to navigate these new territories and get the best out of your investment.

Read on to discover the most common mistakes, and find out how to avoid them.

Not Finding Out What Your Staff Think.

Once you’ve made the decision to introduce a wellness initiative, it’s critical to find out what your team are concerned about, interested in, and feel would be useful.

Rob Woollen, Corporate Wellness Manager for Right Way, explains: “Our initial consultation with our clients is only a starting point, where we find out what will suit industry needs and the organisation’s culture. We never make any decisions on the detail of the programme until we’ve got the responses to our online survey asking staff for their opinions and ideas.”

Just because a manager loves Boxercise, for instance, doesn’t mean that her team will. Giving the staff a say in how the initiative is put together also

increases their engagement in the scheme, increasing the likelihood of making lasting changes.

Making Wellness Mandatory.

Being “well” is, by definition, good for us. But forcing employees to take part in fitness days, classes and seminars won’t produce the results you’re hoping for. Instead, it’s more likely to alienate staff and strengthen unhelpful behaviours. The best results come from schemes that allow team members to exercise free will and judgement, with a helping hand in the form of widely available information on the benefits of healthy living.

Another effective idea is to use health and fitness events as a reward, helping to reinforce the impression that healthy living is a desirable choice. Given that so many people feel that their boss should be helping to encourage good living, a personal training voucher or relaxing therapy makes a far more sensible reward than a magnum of Champagne! And compared to a “Night at the Dogs”, for instance, a team-building fitness event is far more likely to create beneficial working relationships - and less likely to end in tears!

Trying to Please Everybody.

One of the pitfalls of staff consultation is that the results can be very wide - ranging. Make the scheme too restrictive, and you won’t get the level of engagement discussed earlier. On the other hand, if you dilute your resources too much, you’ll find a dismal return for your efforts.

Rob Woollen remembers: “An employer wanting to put on an exercise class got survey results showing that three types of exercise were equally popular. They insisted on running a 12-week programme, putting each type of class on once every three weeks. The result was poor attendance, and a negligible increase in reported activity levels at the end of the quarter.”

Although you have to recognise the need to take employee needs into account, it’s important to find a balance. In practice, most people who would attend an exercise class are fairly likely to do so whatever the style. Right Way recommends that a class should be run for a minimum of 12 weeks to allow the instructor to build rapport and establish confidence in a basic range of techniques. If things go well, you can always add a further class later on.

Paying Lip Service to Wellness (the “Token Gesture”).

A recent survey carried out for us by independent research company, Coleman Parkes, found that a third of employees considered that their employer only made a “token gesture above the legal requirements” towards their health and fitness. A corporate wellness programme that is started half-heartedly is doomed to failure.

In order to make a difference, a programme needs to be taken seriously, with a financial commitment to match. Kevin Sellars, a wellness consultant from Right Way, has this to say: “Many companies are now allocating budgets for wellbeing, but because it’s a bit of an unknown quantity, these tend to be small [relative to employee numbers]. Yet they still want the majority of the staff to have access to some sort of wellness service. With an unrealistic budget, spread too thinly, it’s inevitable that no real results will arise. A far better way to spend the money is on a small-scale, but comprehensive pilot scheme to allow sensible evaluation of the benefits.”

Unless the programme is properly planned and funded, the business benefits are likely to be negligible. With a realistic budget, you will see a return on your investment in terms of reduced sickness absence, higher motivation and improved productivity.

DIY Wellness.

The Right Way experience tells us that client input is invaluable in designing a corporate wellness programme. However, HR professionals shouldn’t be expected to be able to design and deliver the programme themselves.

Their role is key in providing information on business needs and an insight into the company culture, but they are unlikely to have a full understanding of the many issues surrounding efficient programme design, let alone the specialised knowledge required to deliver effective health and fitness guidance and training.

An organisation that tries the DIY approach is risking the safety of their employees, and is also unlikely to get staff to take the programme seriously. There really is no substitute for specialist knowledge.

As Rob Woollen puts it: “A good wellness consultant will pull together all the knowledge gained from staff and management, and will then use their specialist expertise to create an effective programme customised for each organisation. A truly successful wellness plan is one that combines the needs of the business with the needs of individuals, and gets as many people as possible engaged and involved.”

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