

Dynamic Duo

Health and Safety Combination Helps Control Costs

By Charlee Beasor

Peanut butter and jelly. Wine and cheese. Abbott and Costello. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Rocky and Bullwinkle. Woodward and Bernstein. This list might seem random (OK, it is random), but chances are you've heard of these famous pairings. It's hard to think of one without the other. Many employers are developing their own successful combination – safety and health – and it's one that can increase the productivity of its workers.

“Over 10 years ago, compared to today, it was very separated and segmented. Safety came and did one thing, HR did benefits,” says Spencer Milus, RN, executive vice president of RepuCare Onsite, a provider of employee health and wellness services.

“I think, over the years as health insurance premiums have risen and there are higher deductibles, the other thing we're seeing is the higher cost of work comp claims and incidents. As those have gotten more attention and these costs are rising, more employers are connecting the dots – the health of employees impacts their safety.”

Simply put: Someone who is unhealthy will cost his or her company more through health insurance claims and can be more prone to injury on the job, with a longer recovery time. All of this leads to a less productive workforce.

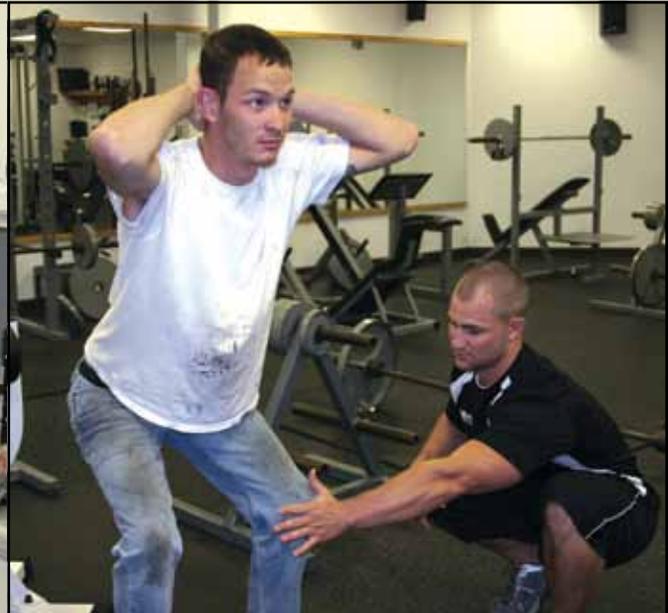
Cost and culture

Everyone has days when they don't feel well or when their eyes droop at the slightest lull in the day. If employees don't have energy because they're not giving their bodies the right kind of nutrition and exercise, that can lead to disaster in the workplace.

“Accidents can happen when people don't feel good, are not well, are obese, not as happy as they could be, not as positive, not producing as much and not doing the quality of work they would if their health was better,” offers Mark Middlesworth, president of injury prevention specialist organization Ergonomics Plus.

“These things are difficult to measure, but if someone ends up with a work-related musculoskeletal disorder and enters into the treatment realm, now the company has to replace that worker and re-train someone to do the job the injured person would have done,” he states. “And there is a significant cost as well. There is a huge cost in administrating work comp claims;

Nurse practitioner Cassandra Kern listens to Jasper Engines & Transmissions associate Jason Hulsman's lungs during an assessment at the on-site medical care hub Jasper Health WoRx. Dr. Frank Hopkins observes and Suzanne Gogel, RN, takes patient information. Trainer Luke Gard works with new hire Jacob Jarvis in an on-site fitness facility as part of the company's work conditioning program to combat workplace injuries.



the HR department has to process the paperwork. Quality, productivity – all those things factor in.”

Though the concept sounds easy – help employees conquer safety by emphasizing health (and vice versa) – the execution isn’t always such a breeze.

A true buy-in from the top and dedication to the program is necessary to make an impact, Middlesworth says.

“We are making a shift in our company culture that is permanent, that is a way that we do business, the way we treat and care for our team members. And it cannot be a flash in the pan ... how discouraging is that to the team?” he affirms.

“It has to be a change in the culture. It’s DNA related, really. I look at the policies. If I go in and do an audit of a health and safety program, a policy on the bulletin board means very little to me. You need to put that on paper. But you really know what the true culture is when you walk out where the people are with respect to health and safety. They’ll tell you. That’s how you know.”

Milus seconds that thought.

“I get asked all the time, ‘I have a wellness program, don’t I?’ It continues to evolve and get more sophisticated,” she indicates. “Where most programs fail is being ‘events’ versus truly impacting the culture. ... There’s a big difference between events and cultural change.”



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*– Spencer Milus, RN
RepuCare Onsite*

The time is now

Milus has noticed a shift over time of how organizations treat their health and safety initiatives and programs. Instead of companies having health and wellness in one silo and safety in another, she’s starting to see employers connecting the two groups.

“We’re in a day and age – with the financial costs of work comp care as well as medical insurance – that instead of safety running safety and HR running HR initiatives, that unification between safety and HR folks is the next generation,” she asserts.

Changing employee behaviors is at the core, however. For Muncie glass container manufacturer Saint-Gobain (with that portion of the business branded as Verallia North America in 2010), tackling the unhealthy and unsafe behaviors from the get-go is of the utmost importance.

“We lead off every meeting we have with safety. Safety is No. 1,” states Scott Grau, director of compensation, benefits and HR programs. “We’re in manufacturing; there are a lot of physical things our employees need to do. There is a physical, but also behavioral piece to it. A lot of safety is behavioral-related incidents. It’s the same thing with the issues on (the) health and wellness side: smoking or diet or all those (health-related) issues: How do we change behaviors across those types of things?”

Verallia’s health and safety initiatives are tied together in an annual global effort.

“That’s an international event going on with all the other plants in North America and the world. It links wellness and safety together that day. We do some biometric readings, blood drives, mammograms. We have had some success in

early detection in a number of significant things in those health and wellness initiatives. It’s saved a life or two and paid for itself pretty quickly,” he adds.

Grau also emphasizes the importance of keeping an eye on the mental health of employees.

“Anger is one letter short of danger. It could be anger at work; it could be anger at home. It can impact both safety and health and wellness. We try and reinforce our EAP (employee assistance program). It may not be business related (stress, depression, etc.), but it could go both ways. There is a connection there for mental well-being,” he acknowledges.

“Once you start talking about it, it’s amazing how much

people talk about it. There’s a lot of presenteeism and a lot of that goes with mental and financial well-being. All those things are part of what we as employers try to make sure we’re addressing.”

Making the connection

Taking it a few steps further, Jasper Engines & Transmissions opened Jasper Health WoRx in February, which serves as a hub to connect health, wellness and safety.

Employees can visit the on-site locations to receive medications and much more. Acute, episodic, chronic, wellness and work-related services are offered, and a collaborative effort in education and preventative health screenings is the focus.

Living or working in a rural setting – particularly the Leavenworth (Crawford County) location of Jasper Engines – often makes going to the doctor difficult and having on-site access is important and attractive for its workforce, says Linda Goepfner, director of wellness, safety, benefits and corporate people services.

She relays the story of a woman in the company who was at one point taking a bottle of ibuprofen per month because of her constant pain.

“About a year and a half ago, we talked her into participating with us; she’s lost over 50 pounds the right way. She buys better food, but more importantly her doctor has taken her off of the medications and she goes up and down stairs, feels so much better and has energy,” Goepfner declares. “There are huge success stories, not just about what they’ve accomplished, but what they can do here. But more importantly, the overall health and well-being of the individual is even bigger.”

Safety first

“You have to put your money where your mouth is. Wellness and safety and all that together, all those programs have to work together and work safely together,” asserts Jason Pieper, Jasper Engines safety director.

Jasper Engines has reached the Star Level in the Occupational Health and Safety Administration’s Voluntary Protection Program (VPP), as well as the Merit Level at the Leavenworth site.

“Since we’ve gone down this journey, we’ve added 33 safety managers, folks that are internal and involved in production, existing folks that are well involved in the health and safety (aspects),” he says.

The company has added on-site occupational therapy, on-site deep muscle massage therapy, a twice-daily stretching program and is working on a trial program that includes a wellness trainer and a four-week new hire conditioning program. That program is now being expanded into a second division and new hire injuries are down from 8% to 3%.

Identifying safety and health as core values and staying consistent will take companies to the next level, Middlesworth suggests.

“I think once things are established and underway, goals are set, committees are formed, then it’s just a matter of staying the course and being consistent, and staying proactive and driving continuous improvements in the process,” he reflects.

Personal responsibility

As much as emphasis is placed on employers providing opportunities for health and safety at work, employees should also take responsibility for it in their personal lives.

“Whether it’s a chronic condition or not, another big red flag out there is that we are very much a sedentary lifestyle nation. People aren’t exercising, not eating well, not as physically active as we were 50 to 60 years ago. People don’t have a strong core; they’re not used to lifting. It’s the couch potato effect. That can absolutely risk the workplace,” Milus declares.

“(Obesity) is the No.1 cost driver related to work comp injuries, in Indiana and nationwide. We are the only country in the world where obesity and poverty are tied hand in hand.”

Dr. Marian Klaes of Klaes Clinic in Seymour relays that many chiropractic patients aren’t healing as quickly as they did in the past. She attributes the slower healing, in most cases, to poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle.

“You go in and are angry at the employer, but when do you start thinking, ‘What can I do for myself?’ ” she asserts.

A strong core is especially important for those in manufacturing, agriculture and other physically-demanding occupations. But solid body mechanics are important for workers in all professions.

“Proper spinal alignment adds strength to the spine. If there isn’t proper alignment, you’re more prone to injury,” Klaes contends. “An example is an individual who is in the office and on the phone a lot; they keep their head tilted to one side. If you’re switching sides or wearing a head set, that can prevent injuries.”

She offers that employers have a unique opportunity to play an important role in the health and wellness of their employees – and it often requires making just a few simple changes.

“Listen to your employees. If people come in and are chronically saying, ‘This hurts,’ sometimes it’s the way the workstation is arranged. . . . Those things go a long way to employee comfort. If employees feel good, you’re going to get more out them. A good working environment makes a lot of difference.”



Ergonomics Plus athletic trainer Tara Chase demonstrates utilizing proper body mechanics while lifting.

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Spencer Milus, RN, RepuCare Onsite, at www.repu-care.com

Mark Middlesworth, Ergonomics Plus, at www.ergo-plus.com

Scott Grau, Saint-Gobain (Verallia North America), at us.verallia.com

Linda Goepfner and Jason Pieper, Jasper Engines & Transmissions, at www.jasperengines.com

Dr. Marian Klaes, Klaes Clinic, at www.klaesclinic.com