

Employee wellness programmes can have significant financial benefits

According to a 2013 South African Stress and Health Survey (SASH), the total annual cost to the country in lost earnings due to employees being absent from work is estimated at R40bn per annum (equal to 2.2% of the GDP).



Vuyokazi Lekhelele

With employee absenteeism costing SA businesses billions each year due to reduced productivity, implementing employee wellness programmes (EWPs) can have significant financial benefits for businesses. This is according to Vuyokazi Lekhelele, executive consulting psychologist at organisational psychologist consultancy Work Dynamics, who says that employee absenteeism is considered to be an indicator of poor organisational health and is directly associated with disengagement and poor morale.

“Employee absence levels often provide a very accurate depiction of the overall health of an organisation. Absenteeism however, is retrospective or ‘reactive’ to a bigger issue and the cost and loss in productivity associated with employee absenteeism calls for a more proactive stance that is focused on prevention.”

No generic approach

She points to a survey conducted by Canadian-based organisation, Officevibe, which indicated that companies that implement EWPs can expect a 28% reduction in sick leave. “Unfortunately, there is no ‘generic’ approach when it comes to EWPs, so organisations may benefit from conducting some internal research to gauge employee attitudes and preferences.”

Lekhelele explains that a well researched strategy ensures the highest likelihood of success and utilisation for an EWP. “Typical wellness interventions range from health and fitness programmes, health screening, smoke cessation support and creating wellness incentive programmes. There are a wide range of EWPs that institutions can choose from, these would include in-house wellness programs on a small scale as well as outsourced wellness initiatives, such as psychological consultancies, where the primary focus is on the psychosocial and mental well-being of employees.

Role of management

She stresses the importance of the role of management with regards to employee wellness and explains that it extends far beyond facilitating policy development on wellness issues, but includes endorsing and supporting the programme. “When management participates in the programme, employees will usually follow suit and buy into the benefits of the programme. Employee participation is after all a prerequisite for any successful employee wellness initiative.”

“Forming external partnerships with HR and psychology consulting firms has become an essential factor in fostering business growth and refining company moral, as the financial benefits of a successful programme far outweigh the initial investment,” concludes Lekhelebana.

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