

BUSINESS

To run a business more responsibly, start with employee health

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Sitting around a conference-room table, a group of executives paused during a quarterly-earnings call to review a line chart. They are proud of steady improvement — especially with the chart's sharp uptick over the last 18 months.

But what are they looking at? New clients? Total revenue? Profit?

You may not have guessed employee health. Although, a small and growing group of forward-thinking CEOs are doing just that.

That is because there is untapped business potential in worker health and well-being. As we rethink what it means to be a corporation, employee safety, health and well-being should be front and center.

A workforce that is safe, healthy and well is arguably one of the most important assets for any company. Years of research, locally and nationally, show us that it is linked to better financial performance in the marketplace and supports the overall economy and community vitality.

Local proof

As part of our longstanding partnership with the Center for Work, Health and Well-Being at Harvard's Chan School of Public Health, we worked with three Minnesota manufacturing companies to measure and assess their policies, programs and practices related to workplace health and safety. We also implemented tactics to improve these areas. Over the course of one year, all three companies reduced or eliminated safety hazards with help from onsite safety walk-throughs accompanied by an occupational medicine physician. Using scorecards from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other metrics, each company improved their employees' health and nutrition behaviors. Feedback from focus groups noted there were fewer injuries, too, which saved money. Plus, employees started thinking differently about safety.

The progress was particularly apparent for Plymouth's Turck, which had embarked on building a culture of workplace health and well-being by putting their people first.

Over 10 years, Turck became a national best-practice company for employee health and well-being. It added wellness incentives, implemented more flex time for employees, and promoted healthy nutrition and physical activity among its workers.

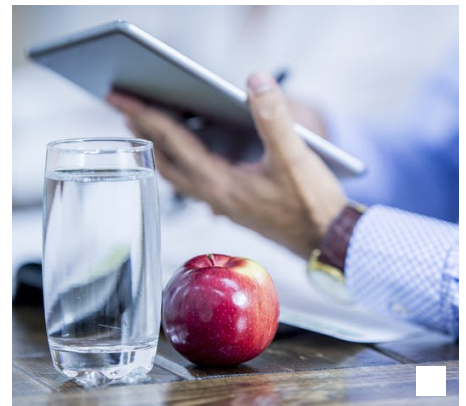
As a result, job satisfaction now exceeds 90%, behavioral health visits are down, workers' compensation claims are down, and employees are committed to the company's mission, purpose and values. In an industry where the average employee turnover is around 13%, Turck enjoys an employee turnover rate of less than 1%.

Total worker health

Looking at the entire corporate community, it is possible we are near a tipping point.

Just last month, one of the most prominent groups in business — known as the Business Roundtable — said the role of a corporation is to benefit all of its stakeholders.

Rather than simply benefiting shareholders, this association of chief executives stated that a corporation has an explicit duty to benefit its suppliers, customers, communities and employees.



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An apple and glass of water are on top of a desk. An office worker is using a tablet computer.

While it may seem insignificant, this enlightened approach actually flips decades of business practices on its head — and has real potential for improving health along the way.

Interestingly, not long after the concept of shareholder primacy bloomed in the latter part of the 20th century, so too did a new area of study called total worker health. Public health, occupational medicine and other researchers started to explore the intersection of business practices, employee health and well-being, and the bottom line.

As the above data suggest, they are all related.

The healthy bottom line

Total Worker Health, as described by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, is about connecting workplace efforts to build an environment where worker safety, health and well-being are optimized to improve performance for both the workers and the company. Research shows companies that are recognized for building a culture of safety and health also appear to be high performers in the marketplace.

In a study that tracked stock performance over 14 years of companies that had received the C. Everett Koop National Health Award, the Koop Award-winning companies' stock values appreciated by an average of 325% compared with the S&P 500 index of 305%. This is just one example of how socially responsible organizations that make safety, health and well-being a priority can boost performance.

Admittedly, companies that want to operate in a more socially responsible way will need to make some investments. But the forward-thinking business leaders that start with employee health and well-being will create a positive ripple effect across the communities they serve.

Then, they too may soon find themselves leading a quarterly-earnings call, pausing proudly to review a steadily improving chart that shows healthier employees and a healthier bottom line.

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