Support Health and Well-Being for a Successful Return to Work

By Roy Maurer

June 9, 2020

The health, safety and well-being of workers will be more of a priority as they begin the process of returning to their workplaces across the country.

That's according to David Osborne, the CEO of Virgin Pulse, a workplace wellness company with 7.5 million users across 190 countries. Osborne spoke with *SHRM Online* about how employers' focus on health and wellness will change after COVID-19 and what steps HR should take now to facilitate a successful return to work.

SHRM Online: What are some of the ways that workplace wellness programs might transform in the weeks and months ahead?

Osborne: First and foremost, we are seeing health and wellness programs take on heightened importance within organizations. Those that have wellness programs today are able to leverage them immediately to educate, inform and engage employees on how to manage their health, well-being and safety right now.

We are seeing clients utilize their well-being programs to promote healthy habits and safety, specifically in the context of COVID-19.

From communicating and connecting people with relevant benefits information and EAPs [employee assistance programs], to helping employees build new healthy habits, to promoting programs that facilitate

David Osborne, CEO of Virgin Pulse

total well-being, companies are able to provide critical information and resources their employees need immediately. These companies are ahead of the curve in terms of supporting their employees.

In terms of what we are expecting in the future, we will see demand for health screening as people come back to their offices. People are staying out of gyms and doctors' offices right now, and that will lead to health consequences down the road that employers are recognizing they need to prepare for today, including obesity, hypertension, diabetes, coronary disease, anxiety and depression.

Employers will look to incorporate tools and programs like digital therapeutics and coaching to support increases in chronic conditions. As people continue to cope with anxiety, stress and depression, the desire for a human coaching connection will continue to grow. We will see increased utilization of telehealth. We will also see demand for integrated tools that facilitate safe return to the workplace. Employers will also lean in more to EAPs.

🔒 SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

SHRM Online: What steps in the health and wellness context can HR take now to facilitate a successful return to work?

Osborne: Be empathetic. Everyone is experiencing this world of uncertainty in a different way, and everyone has different needs, anxieties and concerns right now and requires support in different ways. Meet people where they are. Returning to the office will be ideal for some people and scary for other people, and a handful of people will say, "I'm not doing it."

Communicate more intentionally and even more than before, and proactively communicate your post-COVID-19 plans and phases for ensuring a safe return to the workplace. Business will not be as usual. Every office, state and country will have different return-to-workplace guidelines, so office communications may need to be tailored for each location.

Be mindful of the massive mental health toll this situation is taking on people and how they are dealing with it. Make sure employees are aware of the well-being resources and mental resilience programs available to them, including EAPs, to help them manage in a healthy way. Coaching sessions and meditation are great resources for mental health.

Physical activity is also essential for mental health and helps reduce stress. Encourage employees to focus on their physical health. Sleep, nutrition, physical activity, focus and so forth all suffer in times of crisis. Get people moving. Make it fun and inclusive. Well-being challenges are a great way to promote physical activity and social connection. Managers can also encourage Zoom workouts and team workouts. Sitting is often called "the new smoking" and significantly impacts cardiovascular health. Physical activity during this time at home is critical for ensuring people maintain their health beyond COVID-19.

Encourage teams to check in regularly. Daily stand-ups are a great way to take a daily pulse check of your team and keep people connected and engaged while working remotely.

To ensure you are establishing a safe workplace for your employees to return to when the first phase of nonessential workers starts back to the workplace, take steps today such as:

- Implementing social distancing guidelines and new workplace protocols for meeting spaces, kitchens, keypads, visitors and updated floor plans.

- Providing protective gear.

- Administering daily temperature screens and symptom checks.

- Making tools accessible that allow employees to attest to their health every day (https://community.virginpulse.com/vp-passport-return-to-the-workplace-solution) so they are invested in building new healthy habits and creating a culture of health.

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