

Inclusive wellness

To achieve a national healthy workplace agenda, health promotion efforts and resources must be directed to employers of all sizes

NEARLY ALL OF THE WORKPLACE HEALTH RESEARCH and writing out there is about large and medium-sized employers. When was the last time you heard or read about a small employer committed to employee health and wellness? Lacking is an inclusive approach to workplace wellness. To be inclusive, more attention and resources must be directed to small employers.

Most businesses in Canada have fewer than 100 employees. According to data from Industry Canada, 48% of the country's private-sector workforce is made up of companies with fewer than 100 employees. Companies with between five and 49 employees account for 36% of the private-sector workforce.

In March 2006, federal and provincial/territorial labour ministers adopted a joint statement emphasizing the importance of healthy workplaces to Canadian society. The ministers pledged to promote safe and healthy workplaces through consultation, research and information sharing, and agreed to collaborate on joint projects. They also emphasized that a change in workplace culture is at the core of this agenda, and promised to encourage employers, workers and unions to look at innovative policies and practices to make these changes possible.

Achieving the ministers' goal will require workplace health resources that can be applied to all types and sizes of organizations, including small employers. Canada's future economic prosperity depends on healthy small businesses that can grow and create high-quality jobs.

Overcoming challenges

Of course, targetting small businesses comes with its own set of challenges. Small employers are diverse—from neighbourhood restaurants and small-town gas stations to non-profit agencies and big-city law firms—so they are difficult to target for health promotion.

Also most health promotion resources are geared toward large organizations with human resources departments or wellness committees—supports that small companies rarely have, if ever. For small employers things like fitness club memberships and employee-assistance



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programs can be expensive and impractical.

The other challenge is that not much is known about the workplace health needs of small businesses. Some insights can be gleaned from the results of a pilot project jointly conducted by Health Canada and the B.C. Ministry of Health. The pilot project, Health Works Here, involved the dissemination of print and Internet-based health promotion resources to more than 300 small B.C. employers with 50 or fewer workers. The employers were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the resources, which included smoking-cessation tools and information on nutrition, pregnancy and stress management. They were also asked to describe some of their own workplace health initiatives and share their needs. Here's what the study found:

- There is a clear need and readiness on the part of small employers to act on health promotion information.
- Most small business owners and managers believe that creating a healthy workplace makes good business sense.
- Employer-initiated health promotion in these companies tends to be basic, such as providing employees with a refrigerator and lunch room.
- Safety and work-life balance are considered important com-

ponents of a healthy workplace and there is interest in having resources on these topics.

- Lack of time is the greatest barrier to taking action on workplace health, followed by a perceived lack of employee interest.
- The usefulness of the resources provided through the pilot project varied considerably, highlighting the need for a wide range of workplace health tools for this market.

Small workplaces are fertile ground for health promotion.

While the study results are not representative of all small organizations, they offer a glimpse into the workplace health needs and practices of small employers in Canada. Clearly, they have a lot to gain from workplace health promotion.

Small workplaces are also fertile ground for health promotion. Based on national surveys, employees in small workplaces have higher trust in management, report more open communication between management and staff, and have a greater say in workplace decisions—all preconditions for creating a healthy work environment.

Policy-makers and workplace health providers should reach out to this underserved market. They could start by adapting ex-

isting wellness resources to small workplaces, communicating to these employers the benefits of low-cost initiatives, and building networks with organizations such as local chambers of commerce. When it comes to creating healthier workplaces, nobody should be left behind. ■

Small employer resources

Health Canada

Small Business Health Model and Guide to Developing and Implementing the Workplace Health System in Small Business. These resources outline seven basic steps for workplace health promotion. www.hc-sc.gc.ca

National Quality Institute (NQI)

Healthy Workplace for Small Organizations: 10-Point Criteria and Self-Evaluation Tool adapts the NQI approach to small workplaces. www.nqi.ca

Wellness Council of America (WELCOA)

The Art of Implementing a Great Workplace Wellness Program in a Small Business Setting provides a detailed 10-step approach tailored to U.S. organizations. www.welcoa.org



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