

Study shows benefits of keeping workers healthy

Eagan firm details productivity losses to unhealthful workers

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Do healthy workers get more work done?

Employers have bulked up their wellness programs assuming that the answer is yes. Hard evidence has been lacking.

Now an Eagan-based company that runs wellness programs for companies has put a dollar figure on the issue. In a study published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, the firm asserts that helping workers get healthier can whittle away the cost of lost productivity.

The study, conducted by StayWell Health Management and wellness expert John Riedel, found a strong association between unhealthy people and productivity loss.

Companies see a 3.4 percent productivity loss for even the healthiest employees, but that balloons to 24 percent for people who have a number of unhealthy behaviors, such as a high use of alcohol and unmanaged stress.

Employers see a \$1,472 productivity loss from a healthy employee, while a more typical employee averages \$5,952 in lost productivity. Back pain, stress and depression were the three main drivers of lost productivity cited in the study. Back pain accounted for 5.7 weeks of lost productivity each year. Mental well-being and stress accounted for 2.4 and 1.1 weeks of lost productivity respectively.

The researchers argue that bolstering health among employees can save business big money: If 100 people were to eliminate three unhealthy conditions or behaviors, an employer could see annual savings of \$448,000.

Lost productivity was measured on the

job, not by the number of absences. To measure productivity, individuals were asked how much their health problems limited them during the workday. Researchers compared those responses to "health risks" such as smoking or unmanaged stress through health assessment and wellness screenings.

The research included data from 106 companies across five industry sectors and represented responses from 772,000 individual employees.

Intuitively, it's known that keeping employees healthy is the best way to reduce health care costs, Riedel said. But there hasn't been much data showing that people with healthy lifestyles are significantly more productive than unhealthy people.

Until now, much of the research has been around the impact of chronic health care conditions on total health care spending, not on how lifestyle influences productivity on the job.

"If you have a healthy employee versus one who is not, how do you put a dollar sign on the difference between the two? That has been difficult," said Bill Whitmer, chief executive of the Health Enhancement Research Organization, a Birmingham, Ala.-based employee health-management research group.

Employers increasingly want to know about the cost of unhealthy employees.

StayWell's clients include companies in the ailing auto industry, which have timed down to the second the amount of labor time it takes to produce a car or truck. "We want to be able to quantify it at a level of sophistication that these lean production specialists understand," said Paul Terry, StayWell's CEO and one of the study's authors.

Volvo North America has had a program for about five years to help its 10,500 employees live healthier lives. The company has onsite fitness coordinators at its plants, fitness centers, weight-loss competitions, and screenings for blood pressure and cholesterol. Food in the cafeterias has become more nutritious. People who meet health standards get insurance discounts.

The company's own studies found that for people who do even one thing in the wellness program, medical costs are decreasing, said Jeffrey Burtaine, Volvo's corporate medical director. For everyone else, they're going up.

The research from StayWell simply confirms what Burtaine already suspected. Having data makes the results real for the engineers who run the company. "The good news is, in the worst economy my company has ever seen, wellness survived."