The health of our region is critical for our future economic growth. At the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, workforce health and productivity have become significant areas of focus as we consider factors that impact our economic competitiveness. To better understand this issue, our Research Center has analyzed various facets of health competitiveness. A commissioned report by FTI Consulting’s Center for Healthcare Economics and Policy identified the economic costs that chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes and obesity have on our region’s economy. More than half a billion dollars is lost annually in the Nashville region due to worker absenteeism and lost productivity stemming from these conditions. Fortunately, focus on employee health and wellness can yield positive results for individual employees, for businesses and for the region.

To learn more about the economic cost of health conditions in the Nashville area, view our Nashville Region Health Competitiveness Initiative: 2017 Report.

Businesses can be proactive in ways that are not costly but deliver important gains in employee health. For example, employers may partner to help their employees manage existing health conditions, and they can also promote healthy choices that prevent the onset of poor health.

The American Heart Association emphasizes the importance community partners such as businesses can play in prevention efforts: “Healthcare delivery must move beyond the clinical environment by partnering with
employers, schools, community-based organizations and public health agencies to reach large segments of the population and address the problems that contribute to poor health.”

Supporting employee health and wellness can be a powerful competitive advantage for businesses in a tight labor market. As older workers retire, businesses across the country are finding it difficult to fill needed positions. A strong culture of health can help attract and retain the most sought-after talent in the region.

To read more about the intersection of health and the regional economy, view our 2017 Nashville Region’s Vital Signs report.

Focusing on employee health and wellness may be new for your business, but it doesn’t have to be overwhelming. The following tips will help you maximize your efforts to create a healthier workplace.

**LEADERSHIP**

Make health a part of your company culture

Before creating an employee health program, determine if it is a priority for your business. **CEO and senior-level involvement is important, but employee health must be a stated priority to impact real, lasting change.** Research shows that integration with company culture is a key element for creating a successful, comprehensive employee health promotion program.

Businesses, large and small, can take steps to align health with their business priorities and company culture. Small businesses and start-ups may move more quickly due to increased flexibility, fewer stakeholders and the chance to make health a priority from the beginning.

All types and sizes of businesses will struggle implementing effective employee health and wellness programs if they lack C-level buy-in. **Building a culture of health is most effective when that culture is reflected at the top**
and supported among employees or “champions” throughout the organization. A CEO’s focus on improved health, personally and with colleagues, serves as a powerful testimonial for a firm’s entire employee base.

Barge Design Solutions, Inc. is a national engineering and architecture services firm based in Nashville. The firm, led by President and CEO Bob Higgins, has made the health of its employees a top priority. After several years of focus on well-being and making healthy choices, the employee-owned company is seeing results. The firm recently received a national award, the Go356 Inspire Health Award from Humana, for reaching a significant milestone for employee health. The firm has seen a big drop in high-risk lifestyle factors and a similar increase – 10 percentage points – in low-risk lifestyle factors. Barge Design Solutions, Inc. emphasizes a sense of ownership and empowerment across all levels of management – characteristics that translate to a culture of health that has become a national model.

“Several years ago, we made the decision to invest more in the health of our employees,” says Higgins. “This was not just about cost-savings – although, as engineers, we measure everything. We were looking for a way to recruit and retain our team members by showing them that we care about their health, happiness and well-being. Since that time, we’ve seen significant improvement in the overall health of our 370 employees. Individual success stories – from quitting smoking, to weight loss, to achieving personal exercise goals – keep us all energized to continue supporting each other and reaching milestones. As an employer, it is very affordable to help make the healthy choice the easy choice for our employees. We work better together and for our clients. We just moved into a new building with built-in bike racks, showers and healthy food options, and we believe the success we’ve seen is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Questions to ask yourself:

How can you implement the example of Barge Design Solutions, Inc. in your own businesses? Does your business structure or plan align with goals for employee health?

For small businesses: Start thinking about employee health now so wellness can be incorporated into your business plan and goals as your company grows.

For large businesses: C-level leadership should be educated on the benefits of investing in employee health so they can lend their support to health and wellness initiatives. Resources include the Chamber’s recent study: “Employer Health and Wellness Initiatives in the Nashville Region: An Environmental Scan” and our 2017 Vital Signs Report.

DESIGN

Design a program that empowers employees to get healthy

Once you’ve made the decision to design and implement an employee health and wellness program, an initial assessment of employee needs and interests is a great place to start.

From there, you can begin building a program that encourages employees to make healthier choices through regular communication, making healthy choices easier, involving their family or community, and offering incentives that reward participation.
Communication:

Like any new project or initiative, your employee health program can’t succeed unless you communicate regularly with your employees about making healthier choices. Some examples of communication include:

- A dedicated website, webpage or newsletter with information on healthy living, such as nutrition, exercise, quitting smoking, mindfulness and meditation for stress relief, etc.;
- Regular in-person meetings, including “lunch and learns” on specific topics around health and wellness;
- Physical signs around the office or workspace that encourage stretching breaks or taking the stairs; and
- Enlisting the help of health experts to provide in-person or digital communication about how to improve health and prevent chronic illness.

Get creative about your communication and stay consistent for the best results.

Make healthy choices easier:

When healthy choices are the default option, employees will be more likely to make them. Here are a few ways you can make healthy choices more attractive for your employees:

- Remove sugary sodas and juices from vending machines or cafeteria options to encourage consumption of healthier alternatives;
- Ensure catered employee meals are balanced and nutritious;
- Opt for providing sweet snacks like fruit in favor of the empty calories in pastries or candy;
- Make stairwells more inviting to increase usage;
- Provide a refrigerator, microwave and food prep space and supplies to encourage employees to bring in food from home rather than ordering out;
- Offer the use of reusable water bottles, and make water readily available, to increase water consumption; and
- Have exercise equipment available in common spaces and encourage physical activity whenever possible.

There are plenty of ways to make your office a place where healthy choices are easier and more attractive.

Involve family and community in the program:

Having a support system can make healthy behavioral changes more lasting and effective. Designing a program that includes family members can be a great way to keep your participants motivated. Here are some ways you can include family members and the community in your program:

- Offer workshops and invite employees’ family members to attend;
- Hold physical activities in public spaces and encourage community participation;
- Extend programming to employees’ spouses;
- Provide family counseling services for stress relief, nutrition or general health; and
- Involve other local businesses in your program to improve the health of the wider community.

Having the support of family and friends can give your employees the help they need to stay on track.
**Offer incentives that reward participation:**

One way to increase the chances that your employee wellness program will succeed is to offer rewards or incentives for participation. These can take many forms, including:

- Discounts on health insurance costs paid by the employee;
- Specific recommendations for improvement so employees know where to begin;
- Gift cards or cash prizes for improving key health metrics;
- Celebrating employee success by publicly acknowledging improvements;
- Vacation or paid time off; and
- Contributions to a Health Savings Account or Health Reimbursement Account.

Vanderbilt University Medical Center has built an employee health program that incorporates incentives into its structure.

“Vanderbilt’s award-winning Go for the Gold faculty and staff health promotion program, now in its 15th year, was developed to identify health risks, modify or improve those risks, and build social support to improve health,” says Bridgette Butler, Vanderbilt’s Health Promotion Coordinator. “Financial incentives are offered based on program completion. These incentives can be used toward health plan deductibles or Vanderbilt Recreation and Wellness Center Membership.”

Building a successful employee health and wellness program depends on making sure you communicate your message clearly and regularly, encourage healthy choices, involve employees’ support systems and reward employees who participate.

Questions to ask yourself:

How can you empower and encourage employees to make healthier choices? How can you reward participation in employee health programs?

**For small businesses:** Start with small initiatives that don’t involve a large upfront investment. These small changes can quickly add up to significant health results for your employees.

**For large businesses:** Consider offering substantial rewards for employees that participate in health and wellness programs. The more people that participate, the better the results can be.

**VALUE**

Recognize the multi-faceted returns on your investment in employee health

The ROI on employee health and wellness programs may not be as straightforward as other areas of your business. In fact, your investment in employee health may benefit your business in ways that aren’t immediately apparent or easy to measure.
If you can find ways to measure the success of your employee health program, including returns on your investment, you’ll be more likely to stick with it and continue receiving the benefits of investing in employee health.

One important aspect of determining the success of a program is identifying metrics you want to track and deciding how you can measure results.

One way to do this is to identify the areas in which your employees need the most help or support and target those areas for improvement first. By focusing on a few metrics, you can more easily track the results of your efforts.

There are two types of health interventions that your health promotion program may include:

- **Disease management**: Helping employees with a chronic disease remain compliant on taking their medication and improving self-care knowledge and abilities; and
- **Lifestyle management**: Helping employees make healthier lifestyle choices in areas like weight control, nutrition, fitness, stress management and smoking cessation.

Though both kinds of intervention produce results, some studies show that the positive results of disease management can be easier to track than those of lifestyle management, and may lead to larger financial returns. Our research team identified studies that found that disease management interventions had a return on investment ranging from $1.46 to $1.76 for every dollar invested. Lifestyle management financial returns were harder to quantify.

Still, both kinds of intervention led to reductions in absenteeism and reduction of health risks. The cost savings for reducing absenteeism are between $1.50 and $3.50 for every dollar spent on health promotion.

Other benefits of improving employee health include increased retention in a tight labor market, being more competitive in attracting the best talent and helping employees be as productive as possible.

**Metro Nashville Public Schools** has seen interesting and unique returns on their investment in employee health.

“Metro Schools is committed to investing in our employees’ health. Our MNPS Employee & Family Health Centers, operated by Vanderbilt Health, as well as our new Employee Wellness Center, provide so many benefits to Metro Schools – most importantly in improving the health and well-being of our staff, our retirees, their spouses and families,” said Executive Director of Employee Benefits David Hines. “In addition, we benefit through reduced employee time out of work, reduced need for substitutes and lower health-care costs due to easy availability of preventative and early healthcare and fitness facilities. Our students also benefit because studies show when teachers are absent from the classroom, student academic performance decreases and students are less engaged in school.”

**Some ways you can track employee health improvement include:**

- Monitoring the usage of health benefits and sick leave over time, both by individuals and as a whole;
- Holding regular check-ins on specific metrics to see how employee health is progressing, and possibly offering rewards for improvement;
- Considering using wearable technology, like fitness trackers, to encourage and track physical activity; and
Tracking turnover rates, since lower turnover is correlated with improved employee health.

With consistent tracking efforts, you can make sure your health and wellness program is on the right path and make changes if something isn’t working.

Questions to ask yourself:

What results should I track to determine success? What returns on investment are valuable to my business, beyond just dollars saved?

**For small businesses:** Think about how you can measure your ROI in employee health – reduced absences, faster project completion, etc. – and quantify results in a way that everyone can understand. Seeing clear results can increase buy-in from all sides.

**For large businesses:** Measuring ROI on employee health programs and initiatives is necessary to understand where your dollars are best spent. Consider creating a dashboard that tracks all the metrics associated with employee health and zero in on the most effective ways to boost productivity, reduce absences and, of course, save money.

**IMPACT**

Get involved with the public health discussion

Health care is a hot topic. As chronic, preventable illnesses become more common, employers can play a big role in helping workers improve their health outcomes through programs like the ones described in this publication.

We want to empower local businesses, small and large, to join the discussion about public health and share their experiences addressing employee wellness.

One of the most salient intersections between policy and health right now is the impact of transit on workforce health. Inadequate transit solutions limit access to care for low-income residents, and many Middle Tennessee workers face the negative health effects associated with long commuting times.

**Gresham, Smith and Partners** (GS&P) is an architecture and engineering firm headquartered in Nashville. In addition to its strong focus on employee health, the firm is helping to lead the way to design solutions that help our city continue to grow as a desired place to live, work, play and invest.

“Our commitment to design solutions which result in community vitality begins with an investment in the health and well-being of our employees. From wellness benefits, the physical work environment and programs designed to support greater flexibility, including alternative work schedules and transit-incentive programs, we encourage healthy lifestyle choices and advocate for the importance of work/life balance,” said Al Pramuk, Chairman and CEO of GS&P. “Public policy decisions, like the upcoming transit referendum, will have a significant long-term impact on our community. It is our responsibility to be involved in these discussions and advocate for a comprehensive transit solution which supports an enhanced quality of life for our employees.”

The truth is, the health of our region is an economic issue. If we do not support our workforce in making healthier decisions, our economy will suffer. Currently, chronic illnesses cost our economy hundreds of millions
of dollars every year. If we can work to improve the health of our region’s talent, we can help ensure the continued prosperity of the Nashville area.

Questions to ask yourself:

What role does my business play in improving the health of Nashville workers? How can I contribute to the public good by promoting employee health?

For small businesses: Get involved with the conversation. Small businesses can be leaders in creating a business community that prioritizes health.

For large businesses: Consider how your office can contribute to creating a healthier built environment in Nashville, especially if you are constructing your own facility.

We encourage business owners to find something in the community that they are passionate about so they can help make the changes necessary to keep Nashville’s economy booming.

Resources

If you are not already a Chamber member, consider joining. Our mission is to create economic prosperity by facilitating community leadership. Being a Chamber member provides exclusive ways to get involved in shaping our economic and community development, including advocacy on important issues, relationship-building with top area executives and leadership opportunities that influence our regional priorities.

In the meantime, here are some resources that you can use to start an employee health program, evaluate your current initiatives and join the discussion on public health:

- **CDC Workplace Health Promotion Tools**: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer free tools for companies that want to start an employee health program, or evaluate their current efforts toward employee wellness.
- **“Small Starts for Work” from Healthier TN**: This tool helps companies set up employee wellness programs, and recognizes companies that have made a commitment to improving employee health.
- **American Heart Association’s Workplace Health Solutions**: The AHA offers a suite of science-based, evidence-informed tools to help you build and maximize an effective workplace culture of health.
- **Get Fit TN**: A collection of resources to calculate the cost of and address health problems including obesity, diabetes and smoking.
- **Healthy Workplaces, TN Department of Health**: Resources and tools centered around creating a physical environment that encourages healthy choices, including the “Active Building Guidelines” released in 2017.
- **Nashville Civic Design Center’s “Shaping Healthy Communities”**: An initiative to build Nashville as a healthier community by focusing on the health consequences of the built environment.