EHSToday®

Building the Business Case for a Total Worker Health® Approach

A majority of organizations today offer (and incentivize) wellness programs[1], and for good reasons. When workers participate in wellness programs absenteeism decreases, employees make healthier choices and retention rates improve.

However, even the best wellness program is only a starting point to sustainably supporting a productive workforce. The ultimate objective should always be to implement a Total Worker Health® approach.

What does Total Worker Health® actually mean?

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Total Worker Health® (TWH) is a mix of policies, programs and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with promotion of injury and illness–prevention efforts to advance worker well-being. [2]

A TWH approach prioritizes a hazard-free work environment, while bringing together all aspects of work in integrated interventions that collectively address worker safety, health and well-being. Worker well-being is an integrative concept that characterizes quality of life with respect to an individual's health and work-related environmental, organizational and psychosocial factors.

There are five key elements to any comprehensive Total Worker Health® approach. Deployment needs to include:

Demonstrating Leadership—A commitment to worker safety and health needs to be found at all levels of the organization

Designing Work-flow—Designing work environments that eliminate or reduce hazards to safety and health, while also promoting worker well-being

Promoting Employee Engagement—Throughout program design and implementation, workers need to be included in the deployment process

Ensuring Confidentiality—The privacy of workers needs to be maintained

Integrating Relevant Systems —To advance worker well-being

[1] RAND. "Incentives for Workplace Wellness Programs." 2015.

[2] DHHS. "Fundamentals of Total Worker Health Approaches: Essential elements for Advancing Worker Safety, Health and Well-Being." December 2016.
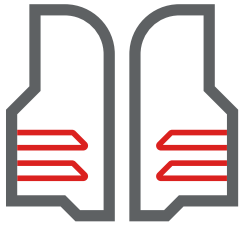
Why should companies care about Total Worker Health®?

TWH can help a company move beyond traditional occupational safety and health protection programs. Traditional programs primarily concentrate on ensuring that the work environment is safe and that workers are protected from the harms that arise from the work itself. TWH moves beyond the traditional EHS protection program and into a more comprehensive approach into a well-rounded work environment.

With a heavy focus on consultation, communication and continuous improvement, the TWH approach acknowledges that work holistically impacts health in numerous ways. Examples include job-related factors such as wages, hours of work, workload and stress levels, interactions with coworkers, access to paid or unpaid sick leave, and health-enhancing work environments. All these factors influence the well-being of workers, their families and their communities.

The TWH approach focuses on how the workplace environment can both mitigate threats to worker health and safety and enhance overall worker well-being. When an organization embraces the TWH approach to worker well-being, it is dedicated to identifying, assessing and controlling physical, psychological and organizational hazards. Its successes are a direct result of involving stakeholders from across the organization to solve problems that can affect employee health.

Starting Point for Total Worker Health® Success

While implementing and maintaining a TWH program involves multiple components, there are a few key areas where any organization can make significant progress and begin showing return on investment.

Facility Design

When a company is creating or renovating a facility, it is important to consider how the facility design effects employees and their physical health. Without a proper design, a physical work environment can (sometimes quietly) have a negative bearing on worker health.
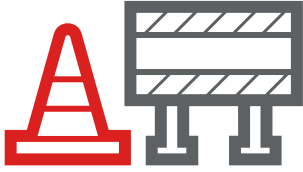
Work environments can include hazards and exposures spanning from chemicals, to biological agents, to noise and indoor air quality issues, each of which can create significant wellness issues for your employees.

When a company considers worker health during the workflow layout, ventilation, and material handling planning process, it can lead to significantly better short- and long-term results. By using smart design principles, organizations can eliminate potential issues before workers ever enter the workplace.

Addressing indoor air quality is a prime example. Particulates, chemicals from building materials, mold and an array of other allergens can negatively affect the health of anyone primarily working indoors. Fortunately, a little forethought and adherence to smart design principles can play a meaningful role here.

In addition to using green building materials and selecting the right ventilation systems, there are a number of actions companies can take to improve their indoor air quality. For example, organizations can install sensors to perform real time monitoring of air contaminants such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and particulate matter. These sensors can provide alerts to proactively manage indoor air quality issues during construction projects or renovation activities that could impact workers in other parts of the building. Another, more conducive option, is to have a Certified Industrial Hygienist conduct an indoor air quality evaluation.

Workflow layout is another area where organizations can quickly eliminate potential facility design problems. Simply rearranging process stations can lessen the likeliness of physical strain. Remember, this is where worker insights can play a meaningful role in designing or redesigning new process lines.

Encouraging and **rewarding team leaders** and employees who take the initiative to improve work processes, **reduce work stress or improve the quality of work life** can prove instrumental in identifying potential workflow improvements.

Job Design

Taking the time to understand how people are actually doing their job - instead of being reliant on beliefs, can shine a bright light on opportunities to improve worker health. When an organization instills good design principles early on into a job design verses later in the lifecycle of the organization, it helps avoid situations where employees acclimate to potentially unhealthy practices.

Of course, when a job is already underway, the key to successfully building health and safety measures into the existing processes, such as ergonomics, is to first understand the problems. For instance, take a close look at injury data, productivity bottlenecks, jobs that employees avoid including increased absenteeism on the day undesirable jobs are scheduled, observations of people doing the work, 3D modelling and errors, mistakes, omissions, patterns in defects or quality issues. Paying attention to these aspects is crucial when conducting a root cause analysis, and accurately determining where the problem exists within current processes. Without a root cause analysis, it is easy to apply the wrong solution because of an inadequate understanding of the problem. In some instance, seemingly minor changes can result in dramatic improvements for long-term worker well-being.

Important focus areas to consider reviewing when addressing job design include fatigue and stress prevention, work intensification prevention, safe staffing, overtime management, healthier shift work, reduction of risks from long work hours, flexible work arrangement, and adequate meal and rest breaks.
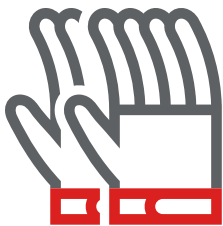
Understanding the Best Practices for Implementation
Align Efforts with Organizational Needs

Understandably, each element of the TWH program has its place in a comprehensive deployment schedule. However, aligning implementation efforts with individual organizational needs is crucial, especially early in the process. When performing risk assessments with stakeholders, start by selecting the models and tools that make sense for your organization; whether they are qualitative, quantitative or a combination. Consider organizational, psychosocial factors that may affect exposure. Conduct employee and management interviews for additional insight into these factors.

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Conducting a gap analysis provides the baseline numbers needed to accurately identify key areas of need. There are various self-assessments available to help organizations identify where to start the implementation process. If interested, BSI can provide you with a simple snapshot with priorities based on risk level.

Obtain Widespread Involvement

For a program to realize its true potential, it is crucial to secure organizational support and resources. The approach cannot be top down – nor bottom up. Active bidirectional communication at all levels is essential. Senior leadership support is crucial when justifying resource dedication (time, tools, training and money). User buy-in is equally important if there is any hope of sustaining a solution over time.

Remember, each group (from executive team members and middle management to night shift workers and road warriors) can play a meaningful role in developing and maintaining sustainable TWH.

Always involve members of worker groups that are **disproportionately vulnerable to safety and health risks,** in the program design and implementation.

These night shift workers, off-site staff members, and lower-wage workers have different perspectives and needs. However, their input and access to services and program elements is equally important.

Be Strategic Throughout Deployment

Success is often far more sustainable when it occurs in steps or stages. When organizations start with quick wins, it can establish buy-in at various levels, and sets the stage for more complicated changes. As the implementation progresses, brainstorming solutions including soliciting feedback from end-users not only keeps everyone engaged, it can result in interesting solutions that otherwise may not surface. With each solution, apply the hierarchy of controls, designing out the issue as much as possible and the testing the idea before attempting a widespread rollout. This approach allows the implementation team to see a solution in action and make any needed iterations before making dramatic companywide changes.
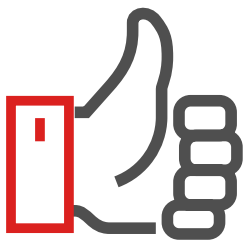
Seek Out and Emulate Proven Successes

There are plenty of success stories when it comes to NIOSHA's Total Worker Health® program implementations – each demonstrating greater focus in specific areas. For instance, one company may have utilized consultants to help them fully redesign organization work processes. Finding success stories can provide helpful insights into approaches that work as well as common pitfalls.

The Next Step

When embracing a TWH approach, organizations should keep in mind, it is not a one-and-done solution. Instead, it is an on-going journey with the ability to continually evolve as the organization's EHS program matures. For instance, it takes time and resources to progress from Working Towards Compliance (where the focus is on developing written programs) to EHS Leadership (where the organization is considered a sector leader with EHS and sustainably efforts clearly tied to the organization's competitive advantage). Fortunately, as organizations progress through the EHS Maturity Model, the baseline data changes, making the next level of achievement obtainable.

Action plans – even during the assessment stage – are crucial; they create a structure for continued assessment. In addition, taking the time to reassess is crucial for ensuring continuous improvement. This step creates opportunities to recognize successes and identify any efforts that failed to yield anticipated results.

When going through the TWH implementation and evolution process, finding outside assistance can prove instrumental in overcoming the most common challenges. Third parties can help provide impartial perspectives. An industrial hygienist, for instance, can also bring key analysis skills to the table – skills that are crucial in compiling and understanding the type of data that can result in meaningful changes.

To learn more about how BSI can help your organization transition to a TWH approach please visit **page.bsigroup.com/TWH**