LINKING HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING

Key questions to ask

■ How do these link together in the workplace?

■ What can I do?

In this section of the
Healthy Workplace
Resource Toolkit,
we look at how a
traditional workplace
health and safety
culture now includes
wellbeing.

HOW DO THESE LINK TOGETHER IN THE WORKPLACE?

While work health and safety has a legislated position in Australian workplaces, the emphasis has traditionally been on the 'health and safety' of employees, rather than their 'health and wellbeing'.

However, recognition of the benefits of workplace health and wellbeing programs is now gaining momentum. These benefits easily translate into the area of workplace safety.

Responding to the shift towards health and wellbeing, many Australian organisations are acknowledging the direct link between a safe worker and a healthy worker, recognising they are one and the same. Best-practice workplaces are now integrating their current workplace health and safety practices with workplace health and wellbeing programs, directly capitalising on time and productivity benefits.

Health and safety measures require all employees to be mindful and aware of the safest choice when acting at work, and unsurprisingly, the safest choice is most often the healthiest choice. In return, workplaces can make this easier for employees by making the healthy choice the easy choice.

For example, correct lifting procedures minimise acute and immediate injury for employees, but also minimise overall muscle strain, reducing the chance of a subsequent injury which may not be work-related. Following guidelines around fatigue management at work not only makes for safer employees in the workplace, it also minimises the harm caused to an individual by long-term sleep debt.

By providing a workplace environment that supports making the healthy choice the easy choice, organisations can help to mitigate the potential health risks experienced by employees, and show their workers the importance of health in everyday life.

While health and safety legislation exists in Australia, the vast majority of organisations implement health and safety procedures not because they have to, but because they value their staff and respect the contribution of the work they perform. Workplaces that implement health and wellbeing programs often do so because they are committed to looking after the welfare of their staff, and are therefore known as valued employers in the community.

In response to recent updates to national work health and safety legislation, Safe Work Australia www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au has developed a series of *Codes of Practice*. These codes apply to all types of work and workplaces covered by the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012*, and help to provide practical guidance on particular issues.

> The culture of an organisation often dictates what is acceptable and what's not so acceptable in the workplace — this applies to both employee safety and employee wellbeing.

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HOW DO THESE LINK TOGETHER IN THE WORKPLACE?

While many of these codes of practice concentrate on particular safety issues, some also refer to welfare or wellbeing issues.

For example, *Managing the Work Environment and Facilities* outlines that a workplace must provide employees with clean drinking water at all times, including for workers at mobile or remote sites. The code also encourages workplaces to provide dining facilities for eating, preparing and storing food. This links strongly to the healthy eating and hydration messages advocated when promoting workplace health and wellbeing.

Codes of practice are currently being developed around managing workplace fatigue and responding to workplace bullying, two other areas with a big impact on worker wellbeing.

> 'You can't be a safe worker if you're not a healthy worker.'
>
> *– Professor Dame Carol Black,*
> *Expert Adviser on Work and Health,*
> *Department of Health, England*

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WHAT CAN I DO?

The following strategies may help to strengthen the link between health, safety and wellbeing in your organisation.

- If you plan to create a specific health and wellbeing working group or steering committee, consider if it would be a good fit into your current work health and safety committee. In smaller organisations especially, it may make sense to have both groups under the one banner, as there is often an overlap in personnel and activities. This will save time and help to integrate health into your business culture.

- When reviewing current safety procedures or introducing new ones, consider any wellbeing aspects to the procedure. For example, introducing stand-and-stretch breaks into meetings longer than thirty minutes will reduce risks associated with sitting, which will have longer-term positive health implications for your employees.

- Just as you would encourage employees to identify, assess and fix a work safety hazard, encourage them to identify, assess and fix a wellbeing hazard. Look for areas that might have higher health risks, for example, sedentary roles in administration or transport, or work roles that have high levels of stress. Risk assessments on health issues are an important way to help identify hazards, find control measures and keep health on your workplace radar.

- Your duty of care extends to ensuring that workers are safe from psychological harm while at work. While traditional Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) can effectively deal with mental and emotional wellbeing after a problem has occurred, education, promotion of mental health awareness and a supportive workplace environment can address mental health risks at an early stage before they become a major issue.

> The safest choice is most often the healthiest choice.

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