Workplace health promotion in SMEs - management 101

Small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) managers are being encouraged by government in the UK and EU to take the initiative in improving employee health. The Luxembourg Declaration (European Network for Workplace Health Promotion, 1997) outlines areas of Workplace health promotion (WHP) activity directed at improving an organization's working culture and environment, preventing the development of occupational diseases and addressing employee lifestyle issues.

Within each area, the potential exists for prevention of ill-health, health protection and health education approaches, dependent upon targets for change and expected outcomes. Whilst this framework has offered stakeholders specific direction for the marketing and development of WHP activities, its translation into policy and practice across Europe has been patchy.

Levels of awareness of WHP activity in SMEs

A recent study revealed differing levels of awareness of WHP activity in SMEs, including "high awareness activities" and "low awareness activities". Each activity's relevance was tightly bound to a company's understanding of WHP. "High awareness activities" identified by participants included health and safety, lifestyle and occupational health. Collectively these addressed their concerns to:

- preserve and protect employee health and safety;
- prevent ill-health and injury; and
- promote employees quality of daily living.

Further probing revealed an additional three distinct WHP activities including provision of training and development, human resource management and environmental considerations, with these "low awareness activities" revealing participants' informal attempts to directly and indirectly improve organizational management of employee health issues, and address community environmental concerns.

High awareness activities

The idiosyncratic nature of health issues faced by SMEs revealed varied experiences of WHP activities. The study found some shared similarities in preventing ill-health or injury through the provision of information on prevalent hazards and effective means of risk control. To transgress these controls was detrimental to employee well-being through injury or ill-health, and to the organization through loss of business.

Others felt WHP activities incorporated more traditional problem-oriented health education issues, including nutrition and exercise. They based this on their experience of improvements in employee morale and expressed individual employee health.

Many participants, although not all, engaging with this type of lifestyle-related activity.
came from organizations of between 100 and 250 employees. Responses indicated that this engagement was synonymous with access to financial and human resources not readily available to smaller organizations.

Some participants had a clear idea as to what lifestyle-related activity should involve and were happy to determine and control these programmes themselves. Others, uncertain of what was involved, viewed such activity as being the province of external “experts”, such as an occupational health nurse. Such experts would either act as consultants or be employed directly by the business on a part-time basis. Much of this activity originated from a negotiated arrangement between the manager and service provider, centring on promotion of healthier lifestyles through the provision of health screening, smoking cessation, alcohol and drug awareness and diet and exercise events.

Low awareness activities

Examination of participants’ experiences revealed further activities not perceived as relevant to WHP yet which promoted a positive organizational and community culture, and preserved the environment. Many participants spoke of their organizational management in terms of “optimizing” employee health potential and facilitating the smooth running of the business through training and development.

Even though differences in the size of the organization seemed to influence the management approach taken, organizational and environmental activities were deemed by all participants to be important in improving employees overall health and well-being and the business itself. Whilst such activities were not mutually exclusive, and engagement with each had context-specific meanings, exploration of participants’ experiences at a deeper level uncovered a richer description of the meaningfulness of organizational and environmental activities for them.

Though participants wanted to improve workplace health for their employees, they seemed to lack awareness of the full potential of WHP activities to allow them to do this confidently. They had no clear idea as to what the full nature or extent of their engagement with WHP activity might be. Organizational and environmental activities more fully embodied each participant’s approach to workplace health, although they were not immediately perceptible as such.

The dominance of health and safety and lifestyle approaches

Despite recent strategic efforts to re-direct attention to the effects of environmental and organizational factors on shaping employees health, findings suggested health and safety and lifestyle approaches remain dominant (high awareness activities). Activities engaged in at organizational and environmental level (low awareness activities) only became perceptible as being relevant to improving workplace health through deeper examination.

Two explanations exist for the main difference in participants’ experience of high awareness activities:

1. legislative requirements, and
2. availability of resources.

Since legislation requires managers by law to preserve employees’ health and safety through hazard identification and risk management, it stands to reason health and safety activities would define management practices. Anecdotally, at a resource level, those managers with the time, personnel and financial leeway to devote to health and safety, occupational health and lifestyle-related activities are more likely to engage in their implementation.
The concentration of effort on preventing ill-health may spring from the historical positioning of workplace health within the traditions of health and safety and occupational medicine, with a single discipline emphasis on health assessment and control of hazards through health and safety measures. At a political level, emphasis has been placed on actively persuading SME managers as to the business benefits to be gained from health and safety engagement.

The importance of health and safety activities for managers

Findings from this study revealed the intrinsic importance of health and safety activities for managers in maintaining customer confidence in the business. This suggests managers may already be aware of the business benefits from health and safety activity investment. Considering the competitive environment of SMEs, and lack of personnel and financial resources, increasing engagement with health and safety activities is, therefore, more likely to be dependent upon SMEs getting adequate funding than just health and safety awareness-raising.

Differences between participants’ experiences of the occupational health services role are consistent with previous studies on the subject. The recent findings supported existing recommendations for occupational health service providers and health promotion departments to actively collaborate with each other to ensure SME managers are aware of the services they provide. Providers also need to be mindful that a blanket approach to service provision across all SMEs is likely to be ineffective, given that each SME not only has different needs but their manager may have different perspectives on what they consider appropriate for their business.

The high profile of lifestyle-related activities, low implementation costs and a growth in consumerism has encouraged uptake as a health education strategy in a number of public health settings since the 1970s, including the workplace. Increased interest in lifestyle-related activities has also been influenced by an extension of occupational health services’ role to include optimization of employees’ health potential, as opposed to treatment and advice on health-risk management practices and disease management alone.

Participants’ experiences of positive feedback from employees on lifestyle-related activities, and the availability of resources, emerged as being important. Given that service providers can only operate with managers’ permission, more attention needs to be given to marketing lifestyle-related activities, which have proven successful in similar SME settings.

Re-align your WHP thinking

The study exposed a significant under-estimation of the level of WHP activity engagement. Participants’ accounts showed health and safety, lifestyle and occupational health activities were complimented by the incorporation of health promotion concepts within organizational and environmental level policies and cultural practices. These contributed to promoting employees’ health and the business, yet were not considered within the realm of WHP.

There needs to be a clear distinction between activities focused purely on internal business management and those with a wider public health impact. Consideration needs to be given to human resource policies and procedures, as these are beyond employees’ personal control, yet have a direct and indirect effect on their working life and the smooth running of the business they work for.

These activities’ impacts extend beyond the workplace, and hold the potential to improve business profit margins and public health in general.
In terms of programme planning, a much wider variety of WHP activities can be explored by political strategists and practitioners within SME settings. There is a lack of awareness of the importance organizational and environmental activities play in addressing the wider determinants of workplace health within the SME context.

In marketing WHP activities, strategists, practitioners and educationalists need to focus not only on legislative health and safety, occupational health and lifestyle activities, but also the benefits both for SME businesses and their employees from human resource policies and procedures, training and development and environmental practices.

The untapped significance of these activities suggests the need to move from the present focus on mainly legislative health and safety, occupational health and lifestyle-related activities towards bringing to light the full potential of WHP for SMEs from organizational and environmental measures, many of which SMEs may already have in place.

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