OHS & Wellness Program Integration Checklist



Companies tend to put their wellness and Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) into separate silos with the HR director in charge of the former and the safety director the latter. While sensible as a bureaucratic solution, separation can create a disconnect that harms both programs. Studies show that companies achieve optimal results when they integrate wellness with OHS initiatives.

OHS/Wellness Overlap & Disconnect

A seminal research study from the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* (JOEM) stresses the overlap between OHS and wellness programs. Common functions include:

- Assessing workers' health status and personal health hazards to which they're exposed.
- Implementing appropriate measures to control identified hazards.
- Establishing a workplace health and safety culture.
- Recognizing and treating injury or illness as early possible.
- Helping injured and ill workers return to work as safely and quickly as possible.

Still, organizational attitudes toward these programs differ. OHS programs are typically viewed as a "necessary evil" to comply with OHS laws, while wellness programs are seen as a

non-legally mandated “bonus” for workers. Similarly, workplace injuries are taken more seriously than workers’ overall health. Example: The JOEM study notes that when a worker gets hurt on the job, work often shuts down so a root-cause analysis can be done to identify and address the injury’s cause. By contrast, work generally continues uninterrupted when a worker has a heart attack on the job.

Integration of OHS & Wellness

The JOEM study argues that it’s critically important for companies to recognize and address the disconnect between OHS and wellness. How? By more closely integrating health promotion (that is, wellness) and health protection (that is, workplace safety) activities along a continuum. In this model, health promotion initiatives contribute dynamically to improved personal safety in addition to enhancing personal health; occupational safety initiatives contribute dynamically to improved personal health in addition to enhancing personal safety.

The study cites evidence of the link between OHS/wellness integration and injury reduction and improved worker overall health outcomes and illnesses and improving workers’ overall health. That includes research showing that factors such as good physical condition, absence of chronic illness, and good mental health are associated with low occupational injury rates. Conversely, it’s been shown that workers with certain adverse health risk factors such as obesity, sleep deprivation, poorly controlled diabetes, smoking, and drug or alcohol abuse are more likely to sustain workplace injuries than those without such risks.

JOEM is part of a large school advocating for OHS/wellness integration. While specifics vary, integration models generally include common elements:

- A “whole life” approach to health and safety that

combines on-the-job and off-the-job aspects to create a unified “culture of health”.
- Emphasis on the importance and connection of overall health and wellness to safety outcomes.
- Recognition of the evolution in the nature of workplace hazards as a key factor in the development of health strategies.

Takeaway

The basic theory underlying OHS/wellness integrations is that a healthier workforce is a safer workforce and vice versa. For HR and OHS directors, the goal should be to work together to morph your workplace’s safety culture into a more inclusive and broader “culture of health.” Download an OHS & Wellness Program Integration Checklist to guide the integration process in your company below.