WELLNESS: Use a Food & Beverage Policy to Improve Workers' Health

The workplace can impact workers' health in many ways. For example, exposure to hazardous substances can cause serious illnesses, including cancer. Even something as seemingly benign as the food and beverages you make available to workers on the job can affect their overall wellness. For instance, providing only sugary snacks and drinks can lead to the development of diabetes, while having healthy treats and water on hand can help workers' lose weight and give them energy. We

spoke to registered nurse and health coach Heather Ratliff about why employers should implement a policy on the kinds of food and beverages available in the workplace and how to do so.

‘We can be our own worst enemies when it comes to food choices,’ says Ratliff. The food we eat impacts our health’both positively and negatively. For example, eating high quality, healthy food can improve workers’ concentration, give them more energy and reduces their illnesses’and thus their absences’from work. In contrast, poor eating habits can result in weight gain and its related health impacts, including high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease.

When you consider that workers spend about 40% of their time in the workplace, it’s clear that employers can have a huge impact on the foods and drinks workers chose to consume while they’re on the job, explains Ratliff. And if employers can help workers develop healthy eating habits at work, they may take those habits home with them to their families and friends, she adds, increasing the benefits of eating well.

Ratliff explains that a food and beverage policy spells out what kinds of food and drinks the employer will’and won’t’provide or permit to be sold in the workplace. The policy would apply to everything from the contents of vending machines to what’s served in the cafeteria to catering for company meetings and events. But to be clear, she notes, these policies *don’t* apply to food and drinks workers bring in themselves. In other words, if your policy bars selling sugary drinks on site, workers would still be permitted to bring in a can of soda from home.

Hospitals and school districts are leading the charge in terms of implementing food and beverage policies, Ratliff says. For example, the Cleveland Clinic implemented a policy barring foods and drinks containing sugar and sugar-like substances from its campus. (See the box at the end for details.) And in

Sept. 2011, a food and beverage policy for schools took effect throughout Ontario.

Choice is critical to the acceptance and success of a food and beverage policy. If the choices you give workers are too limited, workers will protest, says Ratliff. She explains that you need to strike a balance between free will and total control or a 'nanny state.'

The most effective approach involves setting 'optimal defaults,' says Ratliff. That is, you want to make it as easy as possible for workers to make healthy choices, while making it more difficult for them to choose unhealthy foods and drinks, she explains. Some examples of this 'soft paternalism' approach:

- Make water available throughout the workplace for free or at low cost while moving the soda vending machine to the basement or far reaches of the facility;
- Place healthy snacks on eye-level shelves and unhealthy ones on higher shelves;
- In the cafeteria, make vegetables the default side for main dishes and require workers to specifically request, say, French fries if that's what they want instead; and
- Impose a 'sugar tax' on unhealthy food by, say, charging more for candy bars than you do for raisins or nuts. But Ratliff notes that for cost to deter bad choices, the price difference between healthy and unhealthy foods must be significant. Small increases, such as .25 more for a chocolate bar, have no impact.

Before you develop a food and beverage policy, get feedback and input from workers first, suggests Ratliff. By making them part of the development process, they'll be more likely to accept the final policy. Other factors you should consider include:

Vendors and contractors. You'll need to consider the options

available, especially if you have vending machines or an outside contractor who operates your cafeteria, advises Ratliff. She explains that your policy may be limited by the choices available from your vendors and contractors. For example, it's counterproductive to set a policy of having only healthy snacks in vending machines if the vendor who stocks them only carries candy.

***Insider* Says:** Once you have a policy in place, the people in your company who negotiate contracts with vendors and food contractors should consult and comply with the requirements and limits set in that policy.

Surrounding environment. The environment surrounding your workplace will also impact your food and beverage policy, notes Ratliff. If your facility is isolated and workers are forced to eat and drink what you provide or they bring in themselves, your policy will have a big impact on them as you'll essentially control their choices, she explains. In contrast, if your workplace is surrounded by restaurants, markets, a food court, etc., workers will have many options and so your policy may have less of an impact. However, the abundance of choices will let you justify limits in your policy. For example, it's easier to justify a ban on soda in the workplace if workers can simply leave to buy a Coke, she says. (The fact is, however, that workers are more likely to eat and drink what's readily on hand.)

Portion control. A food and beverage policy isn't just about what foods and drinks are available in the workplace but also how much of them. You can still provide less than ideal food options but limit their portion sizes, suggests Ratliff.

For example, say you cater a company breakfast meeting once a month and provide bagels, muffins and the like. To get more healthy, you could eliminate those items completely but people might object. As a more palatable alternative, feature healthier options, such as Greek yogurt and fresh fruit, and

cut the bagels and muffins into smaller pieces, such as quarters, suggests Ratliff. People may be more reluctant to take four pieces and risk looking like a pig.

Also, if you have a cake every time it's someone's birthday, change that policy to having a cake once a month to celebrate all of that month's birthdays, recommends Ratliff, thus reducing the number of opportunities to indulge. In addition, you should cut the cake into small slices and choose healthier cake options instead of heavily frosted ones.

Case Study: The Cleveland Clinic

The CDC lauded the Cleveland Clinic's food and beverage policy as a healthy hospital practice. The Cleveland Clinic employs over 18,000 hospital staff on its main campus alone. It has successful wellness programs and made changes to hospital policy and the food and beverage environment, including:

- Phasing out whole and 2% milk in favor of 1% and fat-free milk;
- Replacing the fryers with ovens in the cafeteria;
- Removing sugar-sweetened beverages along with hundreds of other unhealthy foods;
- Taking away the can openers and giving the cooks knives so that 70% of what's served in the cafeteria is food that they cook, cut and process onsite; and
- Using citrus fruits to flavour foods instead of salt and other additives.

The result: Hospital employees lost 180,800 pounds in just 15 months.

BOTTOM LINE

If your company has a wellness program, implementing a food and beverage policy can complement that program, especially if it already has elements designed to address workers' diets, such as cooking classes and incentives for workers to lose

weight. But even without a wellness program, implementing a food and beverage policy is an easy way to influence your workers’ food choices and have a positive impact on their overall health.

***INSIDER* SOURCE**

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