

When Pain is MONEY?

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WHAT IS YOUR REAL INCENTIVE: YOUR MONEY OR YOUR HEALTH?

A sensible balance is required because the money will be useless if you are unable to enjoy it.

When starting a project with a new client, one of the first tasks of any health consultancy should be to establish some baseline measures and get a snapshot of the current health status of the workforce. But what happens when this process is tainted by employee scepticism, mistrust, or just plain old resentment?

The simple truth is many employees are often sceptical of company management when they introduce these types of initiatives. First impressions are everything: if the program isn't structured correctly from the outset, then employees may develop a jaundiced view of the consultancy. Such as being a 'hired gun' charged with digging up the dirt on the workforce and providing ammunition for the next round of retrenchments, re-structures and company cutbacks. Note: retrenchment decisions based on age, gender, level of fitness etc are discriminatory! The selection process must be fair and objective, and contain various criteria including performance.

In a recent example, a newer BAC client, out of a workforce of 63, had 15 people (24%) make a conscious decision NOT to provide their age when presented with a simple checklist for aches and pains. Similarly, another workforce from a different project was so reluctant to provide information that only one in eight employees actually completed the information correctly. This makes it very difficult to start developing a successful workforce health management program and highlights the level of scepticism, uncertainty, insecurity and cynicism that is present in some workplaces.

In our experience over the last 10 years, if management hasn't been up-front about the program, and explained its purpose properly to the workers, then up goes the wall, particularly with older workforces.

Therefore, it's critical that the starting point of these programs must be an information session for the workforce to allow the company to present the program and introduce the service provider; and subsequently allow the workforce to have the opportunity to ask questions in order for all parties to feel comfortable with the initiative.

Smart employers might choose to include a section in their Induction Program about maintaining one's health and fitness for the specific needs of individual jobs. Very few of us really appreciate the long-term effects from the constant stresses and strains imposed by manual handling. Therefore, diligent employers should insist that ALL employees undergo regular physical assessments and/or medical checks every two years (max.). The benefit is that a good doctor working with a good exercise physiologist may pick up important indicators of various serious conditions in time to address them before they become major health issues!

Then it is necessary to reinforce this message by spending time with the workers at the coalface, demonstrate your independence from company management and to show you are genuinely interested in both the immediate and long term health and wellbeing of the workforce. Put simply, you need to get involved with those for whom you are effecting change and show them there is a better way and you believe and support that way.

The drilling industry of Australia presents its own unique set of challenges in the implementation of workforce health management programs. It has numerous jobs which provide incentives purely by production targets. It is not easy to remove metreage bonuses given that the entire industry is based on 'risk and reward'. Drillers are essentially paid by the metre, so any time spent away from the drill rig is, in their eyes, time wasted and that goes for their off-siders as well. Employees who work long shifts without breaks are exposing themselves to risks of musculo-skeletal injury associated with high fatigue levels especially sprains and strains resulting from manual handling.

Pulling drillers and off-siders away from the workface to perform health assessments or to participate in education sessions on working postures can often lead to certain levels of resentment from management (who are not convinced of the benefits) towards the health professional attempting to implement a workforce health management program. In some cases, this is often viewed by some as a waste of time, keeping them from their jobs and therefore limiting their earning potential.

This brings together a clash of two opposing schools of thought in the drilling industry. On one hand we see a 'Money Now – Health Later' attitude where the worker wants to work as long as they can to get paid more, often carrying injuries, and placing their bodies under high levels of physical and emotional stress, ultimately increasing the risk of suffering long term injuries. A factor that we have seen throughout the industry especially in drillers working rigs in open pits and underground in the metalliferous area.

On the other hand, the health professional wants to see a 'Long Term Health – Long Term Earning' attitude by ensuring workers take proper steps to reduce these immediate physical and emotional stresses. These steps include taking regular work breaks, breaks for stretching and mobilisation exercises and so on, which might eat marginally into the immediate earning potential of the worker, but is aimed at prolonging the long term working career by minimising injury risks.

The 'Long Term Health – Long Term Earning' attitude is not always at the forefront of the underground mining industry and is often dominated by the 'Money Now - Health Later' attitude which is a very difficult culture to break.

The affects of this 'Money Now – Health Later' attitude on the potential success of the workforce health management program should not be under-estimated. Companies should therefore consider long and hard their motivation for offering such an incentive and if it is simply to tick a box then it is our experience that this approach is of little benefit to the workforce and it is better not to. Unfortunately, companies need to become better educated as to the real and true benefits of work force health management programs before changing the behaviour and culture of work groups is likely to become a reality.

At the end of the day, as a professional health consultancy, it is our job to ensure that all possible steps are taken to maximise the potential for a successful workforce health management program and that means finding an optimal balance between the 'Money Now – Health Later' attitude and the 'Long Term Health – Long Term Earning' attitude.

Just as it is important to allow the drilling workforce, no matter the environment, a degree of freedom to take advantage of the traditional productivity incentives, it is equally important that we equip these workers with the ability and tools to identify risky behaviours so they can make informed choices regarding the decisions that might affect their immediate or long term health.