

Wellness Programs Step Up as Worksites Reopen

Collaboration between facilities and wellness managers can ensure safe workplaces

By Greg Goth

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There are opportunities to re-envision and reinvigorate employee wellness programs as the economy tiptoes into reopening while COVID-19 remains at pandemic levels.

"A building is only going to be as safe as the people inside of it [in terms of] how they are interacting with one another and how they are interacting with the space," said Rachel Gutter, president of the International Well Building Institute (IWBI) and an advocate for improving well-being through healthier and safer buildings. "You cannot solve this issue without engaging with HR and your wellness directors," she added.

Thinking anew about the physical workplace amid the pandemic contains a silver lining—the realization that office designers have a critical role to play in ensuring public health. Establishing strong collaborations between these professionals and wellness and HR leaders will be vital to ensuring workplaces are safe.

Mary Bilbrey, chief HR officer for commercial real estate services vendor Jones Lang Lasalle (JLL) sees the coming weeks and months as an opportunity to recalibrate positive relationships between wellness staff and colleagues in other parts of a business.

"We're seeing different parts of the organization coming together to ask, 'How can we engage with our employees in a way that feels warm and inviting,' so that the workplace doesn't seem a scary place to come back to?"

Emily Klein, director of workplace strategy at design studio Perkins & Will's Boston office, said wellness and facilities staffs will have to become more tightly coupled.

"Setting up the physical workplace so employees feel safer coming back in—anything from reminders to practice good respiratory hygiene to instructional protocols like how to use meeting rooms and elevator protocols—will fall into the ongoing responsibilities for facilities managers," Klein said. "In contrast, wellness directors are responsible for creating the parameters around what defines a healthy, safe and resilient return."

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

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No Shortage of Resources

In addition to guidance from federal and state governments, private organizations are providing HR executives and facilities managers with best practices for reopening safe workspaces. Here are some noteworthy examples:

- Perkins & Will's Road Map for Return (<https://perkinswill.com/news/road-map-for-return-guidance-for-a-return-to-the-office-during-covid-19/>) makes clear that, even if an office has been modified to enable healthier onsite work, employees may not be comfortable returning for other reasons, such as a lack of adequate child care or elder care, reduced public transportation schedules, or concerns about health risks for the employee or a family member. "The message must be clear that it is OK to defer your return, and no reason is needed," the guideline says.
- JLL's Roadmap to Respect Health and Wellness (<https://www.us.jll.com/content/dam/jll-com/documents/pdf/other/jll-us-respect-health-and-wellness.pdf>) advises employers to identify critical employees who must return to work in each wave of re-entry and to create rotational schedules where needed. Maintain separation between groups returning to the office, if possible, and recognize that some employees may require extended remote work due to underlying personal factors, transit challenges or school closures.
- IWBI has outlined WELL Building Standards (<https://a.storyblok.com/f/52232/x/f12ca80093/strategiesfromwell-covid19-v2.pdf>) that promote clean contact, enhance air quality and support movement and comfort. It also created a Health-Safety Rating, (<https://www.wellcertified.com/health-safety>) which includes insights from a task force on COVID-19 with more than 500 experts from across public health, medicine, design, real estate, government and academia.
- Design firm Gensler's space management tool (<https://www2.genslerwisp.com/solutions/covid-19-planning/>) features scenario planning so managers can visualize and communicate which seats are available for occupancy at a floor, "neighborhood" or departmental level.

[SHRM members-only toolkit: Designing and Managing Wellness Programs (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/designingandmanagingwellnessprograms.aspx)]

Go Granular

At JLL, Bibrey said, "We had employee assistance programs, physical wellness sponsorships and community activities we were promoting locally, but we didn't have a collective view across the organization. So the teams came together and created one comprehensive well-being landing page."

Along with all the local initiatives, this omnibus resource provides access to well-being webinars. JLL also gave employees a free subscription for a few months to Headspace, a meditation and stress relieving app, and provided managers with tips on reaching out to their employees to ask how they're doing.

Bibrey advised that sharing videos of the workspace with employees, noting re-entry features such as signs and directional arrows, could be useful.

"Employees may want to see how things will look and feel before they get there," she said, "so when they do come back, they won't have anxiety about how to use the restrooms." For instance, employers could install signal lights to show whether or not the restroom is occupied.

Sharing videos of workspace changes with returning employees can reduce their anxiety.

A Pivot Point for Wellness

Due to the pandemic, "the door has opened up to talk about well-being and mental health," Bilbrey said. "This is a great opportunity for us to elevate the conversation of wellness—mental well-being, physical well-being, financial well-being, cultural inclusion."

This comes at a time when there are significant questions about the direction workplace wellness programs should take. For instance, a new study (https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/article-abstract/2765690?guestAccessKey=e5e8e875-c27f-44c4-a5b1-bea7ea27af57&utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_content=tf1&utm_term=052620) from researchers at the University of Illinois found wellness programs had no significant effect on measured physical health outcomes (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/wellness-programs-show-modest-benefits-as-efforts-pivot-to-well-being.aspx). And recent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission proposals (<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200617.824130/full#:~:text=In%20a%20public%20meeting%20on%2cproposed%20rulemaking%20on%20wellness%20programs>) restricting financial incentives for wellness program participation cast further confusion into the debate. But that is no reason to abandon a holistic approach to employee health, according to IWBI's Gutter.

"We shouldn't have to debate whether the way we treat our employees and support and enhance their well-being is material to a business's bottom line," Gutter said. "This should be a foregone conclusion now. Ninety percent of our expenses are in our people. If we are able to decrease sick days, to increase our collective immunity and our mental resilience, and to maintain our productivity working from home or when we are back in the office under extreme conditions, what about that isn't going to impact our business?"

She added, "If a consequence of COVID-19 isn't the rise of the chief wellness officer within the modern organization, we haven't been paying attention."

Greg Goth is a freelance health and technology writer based in Oakville, Conn.

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