

A new approach to health and work - did you know that work is good for you?

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You may have heard it before, and we all have days we are really not so sure, but for most of us, there is evidence that the right kind of work is actually good for physical and mental health and well-being (Waddell and Burton 2006). This contradicts many a work place belief that illness means a person is unable to work.

Work should be "good" work - What does that mean? - "healthy, safe and offers the individual some influence over how work is done and a sense of self worth". In many studies the beneficial effects of work are greater than the risks and much greater than the problems caused by long term sickness or worklessness.

So why do we need a new approach?

"Government, healthcare professionals, employers, trade unions and all with an interest in health should adopt a new approach to health and work in Britain based on the foundations laid out in this review."

There is no doubt that millions of working days are lost to industry each year, and that thousands of people are on Incapacity benefits (IB), so this suggests that something in the current approach is still failing.

Despite putting policies in place to assist people to get off IB and back to work, there are still many people going onto IB, and the statistics are frightening - most people once on IB stay on it for more than 5 year, and if a person is on it for more than 2 years, they are more likely to die than go back to work!

The report identifies the implications for why health and work is so important for everyone:

•- Individuals and families - health affects the quality and length of life, the capacity of people to work and provide for their family

•- employers - healthy workplaces are more productive, employees are retained longer leading to investment in training, and that training itself will lead to greater productivity

•- society - the down sides of ill health include social exclusion, lower economic output, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs for healthcare and benefits creating a burden on the tax payer.

The report has identified some key "foundations" and a new vision for health and work in Britain which seeks to demonstrate the links between work and health and the need for them to be recognised as integral to the future of every level of society from individuals to corporations and communities.

Three principle objectives: (Chapter 1 - Working for a Healthier Tomorrow)

- Prevention of illness and promotion of health and well-being
- Early intervention for those who develop a health condition
- An improvement in the health of those out of work - so that everyone with the potential to work has the support they need to do so

The following reforms are highlighted:

- Improvements needed to sick certification that identifies and promotes fitness for work - radical reforms are planned for the current system

- Beliefs about fitness for work - there is still a strongly held belief in many sectors that a person must not return to work until they are 100% fit. This belief limits and underlies many of the negative approaches to managing people with problems. There needs to be a major shift in attitudes and expectations of all concerned.

- A review of the framework of Occupational Health provision needs to take place to ensure the best support of health and well-being.

- Actions to consider the health and well being of tomorrow's working population - the children and younger people

There need to be changes in approach amongst employers, the public and healthcare professionals. Then, in order to identify whether the new approach is working there needs to be measurement of improvement. It would be great to be

able to gather information about individual businesses who measure absence and the effectiveness of any solutions they provide, so we'll take a look some straight forward ways to do this in another article.

As employers there is much that can be done simply and effectively to improve our part of the process, and adding our contribution to the bigger picture. It is not a mission that can be achieved by one employer or organisation alone but is going to require co-operation all the way from the shop floor to the board room, and across public and private sectors.

Just making small changes to the way your business does things makes a difference to your employees and their families and has ripple effects back out into the community.

For more information about some of things you could start doing right away you can request Heather's Free Special Report on "Getting Your Employees back to work Faster". Please visit the website to access it if you haven't yet seen it - [www.workperformance.co.uk/special report](http://www.workperformance.co.uk/special%20report)

References:

Working for Healthier Tomorrow - Dame Carol Black <http://www.workingforhealth.gov.uk/>

Waddell, G & Burton, A.K. (2006) Is work good for your health and well being? London. TSO (The Stationery Office).