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# EVALUATING WORK HEALTH PROGRAMS

Evaluation is critical to successful work health programs. This resource provides guidance on why, how and when to evaluate work health programs. It may be suitable for use by human resource and work health and safety managers and consultants, and health and wellbeing coordinators.

## WHY EVALUATE?

- > Understand the return on investment for the organisation.
- > Understand short, medium and long term outcomes for the organisation.
- > Identify health benefits for employees.
- > Provide evidence for ongoing investment in work health programs.
- > Understand how to implement targeted programs to best achieve organisational priorities.
- > Identify opportunities to optimise positive outcomes of the program.

Like other business initiatives, work health programs generally require significant investment of resources. For this reason organisations are often keen to understand the return on investment for such programs, that is, identifying how the benefits of the work health program outweigh the costs.

Various large scale reviews suggest that work health programs can have a significant return on investment, in many cases ranging between a 3:1 and 5:1 return per dollar spent, per worker<sup>1</sup>. If you can clearly demonstrate the return on investment and benefits to worker health, senior leaders are more likely to commit to long term investment in work health programs.

In addition to highlighting the bottom line benefits of a work health program, organisations need to understand how they can continue to improve their programs to optimise their outcomes. Organisations may be able to improve efficiency, and learn new ways to build on the positive outcomes of their programs.

## WHEN TO EVALUATE

- > Evaluation starts with planning.
- > Evaluate *before, during* and *after* program implementation.

### Developmental evaluation

This refers to evaluating the needs assessment that informed the type and design of work health program that was implemented. It is important to ensure that an accurate and comprehensive needs assessment was conducted, as this will impact on how well matched the program is to the organisation's needs and goals.

### Design evaluation

Once the program is underway, evaluation should occur to identify any issues in the design of the program, and to allow for corrections to be made where possible. This type of evaluation can prevent program design flaws from having significant negative effects on program outcomes.

## Process evaluation

In order for a program to achieve its goals, there need to be sound processes in place to communicate and engage with the intended audience. Identifying any process issues and correcting them during program implementation is vital to the success of a program.

## Impact evaluation

This type of evaluation occurs at the conclusion of a program, and provides valuable information about the impact the program has had (for example, reduced absenteeism, self-reported increases in productivity).

## HOW TO EVALUATE

- > During the planning stage, identify the goals your program is aiming to achieve, and therefore the types of data that should be evaluated (for example, is it to reduce injuries or illness, or to be an employer of choice?)
- > Plan and budget for your evaluation, considering the method of evaluation and resources required.
- > Collect data from existing sources in the organisation, and via targeted measurement tools.
- > Collect data at different points in time, that is, before, during and after, and in the years beyond implementation.

When planning your program, set the goals to be achieved, and ensure your goals are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time framed (that is, SMART goals)<sup>ii</sup>. With clear goals you should be able to identify the type of information you need to collect to identify if goals have been achieved. For example, one goal of the program may be to decrease the average BMI of participants by at least five per cent. To assess this you would need to take biometric measurements of participants prior to and post program implementation. In many cases it may be beneficial to embed evaluative questions in existing surveys, such as an annual or biannual staff satisfaction survey. Benchmarking organisation results against other organisations in similar industries is also an effective way to evaluate program effectiveness.

Remember to plan and budget for the evaluation process itself. You are likely to require specific resources, such as assessment tools and time to review organisational data. You will also need to consider what statistical analyses will be undertaken to assess the impact the program has had on organisational indicators. It is generally not sufficient to compare pre and post data, without considering if changes are significant or other factors that may have influenced change. Staff overseeing the program can complete most aspects of the evaluation process. However, you may need to identify expertise within or external to the organisation to assist.

When setting your program goals and planning evaluation, consider if all goals can be evaluated through existing data collection procedures or if specific assessments will also be required. For example, comprehensive work health programs often aim to positively affect morale, which may be assessed through a culture survey.

Finally, it is important to remember that the average projected time frame for 'hard' return on investment is estimated to be between three and five years<sup>iii</sup>. Expectation management of senior leaders is important and you should consider some shorter term as well as longer term indicators.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Please refer to the following resources for detailed guidance on program evaluation:

Nutbeam, D., & Bauman, A. (2006). *Evaluation in a nutshell: A practical guide to the evaluation of health promotion programs*. Sydney, Australia: McGraw-Hill Australia Pty Ltd.

Owen, J., & Rogers, P. (1999). *Program Evaluation: Forms and approaches*. (2nd Edition). St Leonards NSW: Allen & Unwin.

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i Chapman, L.S. (2007). Proof Positive. An Analysis of the Cost Effectiveness of Worksite Wellness. Seattle, WA: Chapman Institute (and) Baicker, K., Cutler, D., & Song, Z. (2010). Workplace wellness programs can generate savings. *Health Affairs*, 29(2), 304-311.

ii Chenoweth, D. H. (2011). *Worksite health promotion*. 3rd Ed.

iii Health, Work and Wellbeing U.K. (2008) 'Building the Case for Wellness' [online], Available: <http://www.workingforhealth.gov.uk/documents/dwp-wellness-report-public.pdf>