

What are the benefits of health and wellbeing in construction?

In the macho world of construction, discussions about 'wellbeing' can seem out of place. After all, isn't it true that seasoned construction workers should be able to deal with health issues, bravely soldiering on regardless until payday? Maybe not...

The real truth is that health is important for all employees, regardless of which industry they work in. Which is why construction companies need to take a more proactive lead in managing the wellbeing of their workers.

Consider the numbers

Statistics from the HSE confirm that construction is a particularly dangerous industry for employees. Although just 5 per cent of the total UK workforce are in construction, these workers account for 27 per cent of all workplace fatalities, and 10 per cent of reported major injuries. They are also 100 x more likely to die from a disease – such as silicosis or asbestosis – as a result of their job.

The health impact of working in construction is long term – 54 per cent of male construction workers do not reach a working age of 60 in the industry, and 56 per cent of all male cancers are caused by working in construction.

Employers are making improvements, but employees are still falling ill and dying from avoidable factors.

Health from an employer's viewpoint

The cost in terms of human life is shocking, but from a financial standpoint, some employers may be tempted to keep health spend as

low as possible. From the short-term view of the balance sheet, it makes sense to restrict expenditure to the bare essentials, but this could be storing up problems for the future.

Sickness and absenteeism

Whenever a worker is injured, or contracts a serious illness, they will need to take time off to recover. Obviously, this presents a series of problems: productivity will drop while your employee recovers; if the worker needs to be replaced, you will incur extra hiring and salary costs for a contractor; and your worker may be entitled to sick pay and compensation where your business is found to be at fault.

Losing employees for any reason adds to the cost of a project. If margins are already stretched, can you afford to absorb those additional expenses?

Presenteeism

Almost as costly as having employees taking time off is the scourge of presenteeism.

Presenteeism is a British cultural phenomenon whereby being seen at work is considered as important as actually doing work. A truly healthy construction force will be encouraged to take time off after injury to recover – even if it does add to project costs.

Your workers may think they are doing you a favour by turning

up to work when not in the best of health, but they are not. Sick or injured workers are less productive – and risk worsening their condition in the process. In many cases, taking time off to recover may be less damaging to productivity than having them 'soldier on' at reduced capacity.

Start thinking long term

Instead of worrying about workers being off sick, employers should instead be planning to reduce instances of sickness and injury. In most cases, this means strengthening existing health and safety risk assessments to prevent injury or exposure to factors likely to cause illness.

Many employers are also beginning to consider employee wellbeing – health factors that are not directly related to work itself. Wellbeing provisions are not a legal requirement, but they can significantly improve the overall health – and performance – of employees.

What are these wellbeing factors?

Employees affected by substance abuse are just one example of a condition where employers can help, even if it is not directly related to the job. An alcoholic bricklayer is unlikely to perform well at work – and could present a significant risk to themselves and their colleagues, for instance.

Similarly, employees affected by mental health issues will also struggle to cope at work. One report suggests that construction workers are six times more likely to die from suicide than fall from height, indicating just how common depression and related conditions are in the workplace.

Although not required, construction firms should consider putting measures in place to help workers deal with non-work related conditions. By improving their overall health, these employees will be more productive – providing a reasonable return on investment.

Wellbeing programmes are also very attractive to would-be employees. Any construction firm that demonstrates it is committed to caring for its employees will find it much easier to attract the very best talent. And this boosts productivity and profitability in the long run.

Obviously, there are financial implications associated with wellbeing programmes, but the returns may be the justification you need to make the additional investment. For more help and advice, please get in touch.

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