

PARADIGM SHIFT

An Intentional Approach to the Synergy of Employee Health, Human Performance, and Workplace Safety





In the workplace, there are departments dedicated to safety, health, and the environment. The concept of health within these departments has traditionally been focused on performing required regulatory medical tests to clear workers to be able to perform duties such as physically demanding work, wearing respirators, detecting if the work environment is negatively affecting health (such as in a hearing conservation program), and reducing workplace incidents. As the value of overall employee health becomes more evident, an intentional approach to employee health from a primary prevention and optimization perspective is needed to actualize the safety and productivity of the workforce. Over time, new paradigms are beginning to emerge incorporating a more holistic approach to employee health in the workplace such as Total Worker Health.

Total Worker Health Transition

The concept of Total Worker Health (TWH) that has been established and promoted by NIOSH takes the traditional safety programs and adds to their policies that promote the workplace as a social determinant of health. It also puts in place systems that prevent worker injury and illness and extends efforts to advance worker well-being.

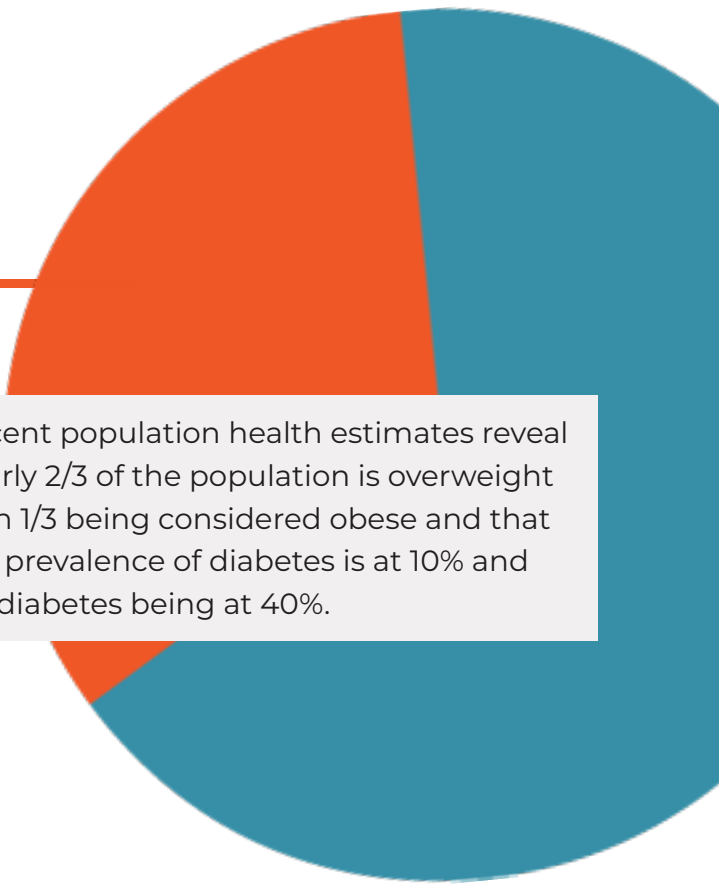
As more research becomes available on the association of personal health conditions affecting:

- Human error
- Productivity
- Workers compensation outcomes
- Health insurance costs
- Overall quality of life

companies are realizing the focus of their employees' health greatly affects many aspects of their business.

Personal Health Variable

Personal health has been shown to be closely connected to human error, which contributes up to 90% of workplace mistakes as opposed to equipment failures. In addition to workplace mistakes, and especially for companies with employees performing safety sensitive duties or high-risk work, the high prevalence of personal medical conditions can greatly affect the number of available full-time equivalents available to perform this work. As the occurrence of chronic medical conditions becomes more burdensome and even epidemic, those employees may not be cleared to do this type of work, depending on the severity of the medical conditions. Even if companies do not have safety sensitive work, short term (and potentially long term) disability rates can be greatly affected by chronic medical conditions if they are not addressed or optimized.



Recent population health estimates reveal nearly 2/3 of the population is overweight with 1/3 being considered obese and that the prevalence of diabetes is at 10% and prediabetes being at 40%.

This heavy burden of increasing presence of chronic medical conditions is the major driver for health care costs for both the employer and employee and one of the major costs of running a business is employee health insurance, which usually is typically the second or third highest cost to a company.



Strategies To Improve Employee Health

As the value of employee health becomes more apparent across the personal, business, and safety continuum, companies should consider a two-tiered fitness for duty strategy that focuses on improving and optimizing employee health in a proactive methodology in addition to testing employees for fitness at the pre-placement and periodic exam intervals.



Proactive Health Optimization

Tactics to be considered in engaging in the proactive side of health optimization include promoting healthy behaviors by having access to:

- Healthy food
- Physical activity
- Engaging in employee health wellness programs
- Tailored health insurance plans

Tailoring employee health insurance benefit plans should address and eliminate obstacles to quality primary and specialty care in a transparent cost-effective model. Employee wellness programs can be designed to conveniently give access and insight into the employee's own personal medical conditions (many may not have been screened ever or within a reasonable

timeframe). With early knowledge and then subsequent treatment for these medical conditions that may be developing insidiously, is the best approach in curtailing the increasing trend of chronic medical conditions becoming more prevalent at epidemic proportions.

By addressing employee health from a population health perspective where trends of your employee health outcomes can be tracked, inferred from, and then have resources directed to address, is a powerful tool that can both significantly impact the employees personal health journey while improving fitness for duty, human performance principles, and safety outcomes- while lowering healthcare cost for both the employee and employer.



About the Author *Dr. Scott Cherry*

Dr. Scott Cherry is a Fellow within the American College of Occupational & Environmental Medicine and dual board certified in the medical specialties of Occupational & Environmental Medicine. His professional goals and interests focus on individual, population, and workplace safety, health, wellness, productivity, and disability management. He currently serves as Chief Medical Officer for Axiom Medical whose mission is to provide comprehensive occupational health services for the total life cycle of our client's employees.