

Developing programmes to achieve a healthy society: Creating healthy workplaces in Northern Ireland*

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Healthy workplaces help to prevent occupational disease and injury as well as promoting positive healthy lifestyle behaviours. The concept of creating healthy workplaces through workplace health promotion has been identified as a legitimate area of activity for public health policy in Northern Ireland, supporting as it does, the settings approach as a means of improving the health and well-being of the population at large. Benefits accrue to businesses, organizations and individuals from the enhancement of positive healthy lifestyle messages in addition to reinforcing the principles of good occupational health practices. Developing a framework for the creation of healthy workplaces is part of a joint initiative between the Northern Ireland Health Promotion and Health and Safety Agencies. Commitment to delivering the concept is required from all the key players who include: employers, employees, trade union groups and health and safety professionals. A healthy workplace model needs to be created which is flexible and adaptable to suit all types of business and in particular the needs of small businesses which predominate in Northern Ireland. The principles underpinning the Business Excellence Model may be a useful vehicle for delivering workplace health promotion onto an organization's agenda.

Key words: Healthy workplaces; public health policy; workplace health promotion.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of creating healthy workplaces through workplace health promotion in Northern Ireland is something that should be of interest to all those who work in the province as it has the potential to impact on us and our organizations. In considering the topic it is useful to outline what workplace health is and show how it relates to current public health issues. It is also beneficial to review an employer's experience by way of illustration before going on to discuss where things currently stand and see what the future holds for the development of the concept in Northern Ireland.

Workplace health can be seen as having three components: the effects of work on health; the effects of health on an individual's capacity to work and the opportunity for health promotion by the employer through a range of

activities that encourage employees to adopt healthier lifestyles. Within these components there are two key words:

- *Prevention* — a healthy workplace is one that prevents work-related disease and injury;
- *Promotion* — a healthy workplace is also one that promotes positive healthy lifestyle behaviours.

A healthy workplace therefore helps in the prevention of work-related disease and injury in addition to promoting positive healthy lifestyle behaviours on the part of all the workforce and their families. It is achieved through an adherence to health and safety protocols and the facilitation of health promotion activities and programmes within the workplace. As well as that, and perhaps more crucially, the well-being of the employee must be recognized as fundamental to an organization or company's overall performance. This builds on the maxim 'good health is good business', by proposing that 'good employee well-being is good human resource strategy'. Policy, practice and research in workplace health has

