Promoting a robust workforce

By Milad Hassandarvish

WHEN Google opened its first office in the 90s, it took a unique approach to employee commitment. It introduced a workplace wellness programme that went down so well with the staff that it not only attracted the best talents but made their office a place that people craved to work as well.

That philosophy brought employees together, increased productivity and improved morale. It is such that today, companies all around the world are trying to emulate Google’s success by establishing a similar programme as employees come to grips with the idea that health, happiness and productivity at work are related concepts. And that all three factors could be fostered in a single corporate wellness programme.

Lifestyle interventions, via small modifications to people’s behaviour, are the best ways to prevent non-communicable diseases. Many companies have already embarked on several employees’ wellness programmes including Columbia Asia group of companies. The company has what its corporate clients service manager, Sherry Someh calls a “comprehensive programme” that goes beyond the standard annual health screenings.

This is imperative since a study done by the World Health Organisation reveals that 70 per cent of all deaths annually are due to preventable, non-communicable diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

“These diseases have common risk factors which include inappropriate diet and physical inactivity, both of which are related to lifestyle and personal choices,” she said at Columbia Asia’s Corporate Health Transformation Conference 2017 held at Hilton Petaling Jaya hotel recently.

The same study also reported that lifestyle intervention, via small modifications to people’s behaviour, is the best answer to the problem. Since a majority of people spend a good portion of their waking hours in the office, a thorough wellness and intervention programme could give employees incentives, tools, social support, privacy and especially healthy behaviours, to mention some.

Someh said that the health outcomes of corporate wellness programmes are many including weight loss and obesity prevention, diabetes control, blood pressure and cholesterol management as well as personal health and safety practices like stress management.

“It doesn’t end there, of course. On the work front, the outcomes include lower absenteeism, higher job satisfaction and work productivity. Higher employee retention and lower health care costs,” she added.

Given the variety in types of organisations, it’s difficult to pinpoint precise financial damages incurred by health-related absenteeism and presenteeism, but a recent survey by AIA Vitality found that Malaysian employees lose 67 days a year in these factors.

With that in mind, Columbia Asia, which has been in Malaysia for over two-decades, has taken the initiative to spearhead the movement towards promoting a healthier workforce in the country through its comprehensive Corporate Health Transformation Programme (CHTP).

According to Someh, the health of employees affects more than just medical costs. "The majority of healthcare spending is caused by preventable, modifiable health risks such as cardiovascular diseases, high cholesterol and blood pressure, diabetes and cancer which may lead to health-related absenteeism and presenteeism at work," she added.

Someh also explained that presenteeism occurs when employees are present at the workplace but are not productive due to an illness, lack of motivation or fatigue due to their workload.

Recognising the need for a corporate health programme that offers real, achievable, measurable and cost effective preventive solutions, Someh said the company developed a personalised lifestyle modification and health intervention programme that benefits every employee in any organisation.

“The goal is to create healthy habits among the employees that can mitigate the rising costs of healthcare faced by individuals, companies and insurers,” she explained.

Designed to transform both the organisation and its workforce, the aforementioned CHTP consists of two phases. Under its first phase, employees will undergo a health screening which include full blood screening, imaging and radiology as well as physical examinations.

After this is done, employees will receive a health statistics report to get an insight into their health and wellbeing. “The report will provide useful information for companies when deciding on the type of employee benefits; it can also be compiled annually to monitor health status and track progress of health programmes,” she continued.

To further educate employees on preventable health complications, there will be proactive intervention and disease management classes to provide crucial personalised support to employees with existing chronic diseases as well as those who are at high risk of developing one.

“This includes physical and mental training sessions by qualified fitness trainers, nutritionists and doctors every week to improve the health and wellbeing of the employees while encouraging them to embrace healthy-living lifestyle.

Throughout the 12-week programme, most of the engagements are done via WhatsApp and social media groups to create more effective daily interactions between the wellness team and employees,” she stated.

The goal, Someh said, is to create a culture where employees “choose” to live a healthier lifestyle rather than being forced to do so.

“Wellness works best when the experience is a shared one either through mutual goals or by pitting employees against each other to create healthy competition,” she concluded.

Besides its many health benefits, corporate wellness programmes boost employees’ job satisfaction and productivity.

Corporate health and wellness programmes will not only reduce medical costs but can also increase employee morale.