Addressing the Non-Communicable Disease Challenge: 
the Role of the Private Sector and Employers at Large

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Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), mainly cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes represent a growing threat to human health and development. The rise of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) is a global phenomenon, i.e. 63% of all deaths worldwide currently stem from NCDs and approximately 500 million people are obese.

The Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases from 2011 called upon the private sector to:

“...promote and create an enabling environment for healthy behaviours among workers, including by establishing tobacco-free workplaces and safe and healthy working environments through occupational safety and health measures, including, where appropriate, through good corporate practices, workplace wellness programmes and health insurance plans...”.

Healthy workplace initiatives are considered as effective tools for implementing the WHO global action plan of prevention and control of NCDs endorsed by the 66th World Health Assembly. The World Health Organization (WHO) Healthy Settings approach reaches back to the Ottawa Charter on Health Promotion in 1986 (“Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play, and love”), but only recently has the WHO recognized the huge potential of improving health behaviors of individuals at the workplace, in addition to protecting the health of workers. The majority of adults spend most of their waking hours at the workplace, often as a captive audience, and thus the workplace provides a huge opportunity to inform and help workers to improve their health. The increased awareness of the workplace as a viable setting has led to an increase in programs.

Many Countries Face the Same Challenges

The Global Survey on Health Promotion and Workplace Wellness Strategies (now in its 6th year) has documented a steady increase since 2007 with regard to employers recognizing their role in employee health and well-being. The key global drivers or reasons for employers offering programs are:

• improving worker productivity
• reducing absenteeism
• improving workforce morale
The issue of mental well-being and work engagement coupled with rising work-related mental illness has become the leading challenge for enterprises worldwide and a growing number of programs are addressing this gap. Employees feel constantly overstressed, pressured, worried about their job security and often display a lack of motivation thus impacting productivity and customer service. Other big drivers for employers are their corporate image as well as recruitment and retention. The main health issues driving health promotion and wellness strategies are strikingly similar across the globe:

- stress (a key contributing factor to mental illness)
- physical activity
- nutrition
- work-life issues and
- chronic disease.

Outside of the US health care costs are not the main focus for employers due to differing health care systems. In many countries a preferred outcome indicator is the sickness absence rate although we know of the limitations of absenteeism as an indicator. Measuring presenteeism is not yet fully accepted as a valid method and measurement instruments are often scrutinized, including in the US. A greater emphasis is placed on satisfaction scores outside of the US, especially in Europe, e.g. with the program or the workplace in general. A number of valid tools with a track record are being used in various countries, e.g. the Work Ability Index (WAI) or the Q12 Engagement Survey.

**Global Guidance for Successful Programming**

The Global Healthy Workplace Awards program considers its activities to promote healthy workplaces as contribution of the private sector to implement the UN General Assembly decisions on NCDs and a unique opportunity to involve employers at large (not just private) as many organizations (including NGOs) worldwide are part of the initiative. GHWAwards has set the ambitious goal to gather and disseminate better practices globally for the creation of healthy workplaces based on the Healthy Workplace framework.

The Healthy Workplace model provides guidance for a comprehensive and systematic approach on a global scale. Four main areas of influence are identified:

1. physical work environment
2. psychosocial work environment
3. personal health resources
4. enterprise-community involvement
The Healthy Workplace model also follows a continual improvement process, e.g. highlighting the need for evaluation, and places leadership engagement and worker involvement as central priorities. Maybe most importantly, the very center of the model exemplifies that promoting health at the workplace is both the right thing (ethical) and the smart thing (adds value) to do.

The Healthy Workplace Model has been developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and can be accessed at: [http://www.who.int/occupational_health/healthy_workplaces/en](http://www.who.int/occupational_health/healthy_workplaces/en).

Information on the Global Healthy Workplace Awards, including profiles of the winners and finalists, can be found at [http://globalhealthyworkplace.com](http://globalhealthyworkplace.com).