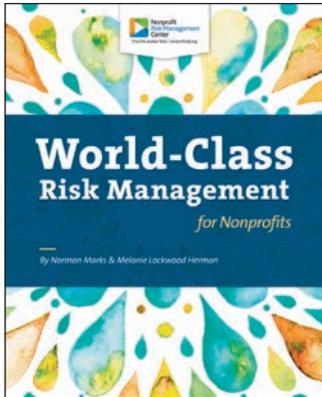


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THE HEALTHY WORKPLACES ISSUE

Pass Me the Remote! The Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs of Telecommuting Teams

by Delia Jones

Remote Work: Benefit or Burden?

“You should be able to work from anywhere.” A former boss of mine said that a lot and it sounded great. If an employee asked to work from home, my boss would agree with that announcement and leave the second level managers to implement a telecommute solution. Second level managers were inevitably left with a few questions, such as:

- How will one person’s remote work affect those not working remotely?

- Will remote work change employee relationships with stakeholders?
- How will work hours be tracked?
- How can I ensure that my team’s morale remains high?
- How will we handle remote employee training, supervision, performance management, and retention?
- How will I recognize and when should I address signs that remote work is disrupting a team’s work?

According to *The 2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S. Employee*

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Pass Me the Remote! The Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs of Telecommuting Teams CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Workforce Report—published by FlexJobs and Global Workplace Analytics—in 2017, 3.9 million U.S. employees worked from home at least half the time, a whopping 155% increase from 1.8 million remote workers in 2005. If you’ve ever wasted what felt like a lifetime battling rush hour traffic, you’re probably not surprised to know that, “In more than half of the top U.S. metro areas telecommuting exceeds public transportation as the commute option of choice.”

Though remote work has increased significantly in the U.S., many employers remain reluctant to offer flexible commute and schedule options to employees. Reluctance may come from a fear of change, uncertainty about the logistical questions shared above, deep concern about potential negative impacts to organizations and staff morale, or frustration with telecommuting trials and test-runs.

Myths and stigmas aside, one key question remains unanswered: are remote workers more or less productive than their in-office peers? Some research studies and case studies strongly favor remote work as the more productive option, such as Traitify CEO Dan Sines’ experience, explained in his piece “[Hiring Remote Workers Made My Entire Team More Productive](#)” (*Fast Company*, January 2018). Corporate leaders aren’t the only ones reporting positive telecommuting outcomes; a UK-wide charity shared its “[Advantages of Remote Working](#)” on KnowhowNonprofit.org. Larry Alton, writer of a 2017 *Forbes* article, “[Are Remote Workers More Productive Than In-Office Workers?](#)” points out that remote work has great potential to increase employee productivity, but employer policy and implementation determine the success of remote arrangements.

It Takes a Village to Telecommute

Sitting in offices or cubes, conference rooms, huddle rooms or even hallways—

our coworkers are a mixed bag of how work gets done. Some need a lot of social time but work long hours, some like to keep quiet, buckle down and clock out right on time. Work style varies greatly from employee to employee.

Recognize any of these colleagues from your flexible workplace?

The Baby Napper

A parent is ready to go back to work but is having a hard time finding childcare. The employee intends to work when the baby naps. They also offer to work late or weekends to make up for any lost time. Problem: babies don’t nap on schedule, and even a stellar employee is not at their best after sleep deprivation. Of course, this employee has the best of intentions, and in some cases the arrangement may even work out.

The Peace Lover

This one has frustrated me and is very popular in the age of open office space and shared work spaces. Here’s the pitch: “I really need to work at home, so I can just concentrate and not have to deal with people coming by my desk and asking questions or chatting.” This request is often followed by something such as: “I also get much more done when I work at home!” Okay, I think. Greater productivity sounds great. But like The Baby Napper and the fine print on a statement from your retirement provider, past performance in a competitive office environment is not necessarily an indicator of future performance.

The Errand Runner

So, you’re calling someone working remotely and can’t reach them. They return your call and say, “Sorry I missed you; I was quickly running an errand.” It’s true that employees at the office run errands too, but a remote one is not only away from their desk, they have disappeared from your radar screen. Got trust?

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“Remote workers may be at the greatest risk of feeling—and being—left out when it comes to co-worker camaraderie.”

The Camera Avider

They hate seeing themselves on video chat. For some reason, their camera is never working. Fairness, anyone? Interacting in-person or through a video conference helps create and foster trusting teams. Unfortunately, out of sight too often means out of the loop.

Do any of these remote workers sound familiar? No workforce—remote, onsite or a blend of both—consists of worker clones. In fact, advancing your nonprofit’s mission requires a wide spectrum of perspectives and personalities, which means different work styles can and ideally should be a valuable asset. But it’s the rare team that triumphs in a vacuum, and all workers need direction, and the occasional correction. Consider the strategies below to nurture, leverage and maximize the diverse talents and workstyles of your on-site and remote teams.

Unmasking Remote Worker Risk

Research on health issues in the workplace cites flexible workplaces (flex time, remote work options, etc.) as a driver of employee

engagement and satisfaction. But as risk champions are well aware, bountiful opportunities may obscure unintended consequences and downside risks. Some of the risks that arise when one or more workers telecommute include:

- **Divisive versus cohesive culture** – The NRMCM team tells me that staff teams they encounter during Risk Assessments can be divisive instead of cohesive for a number of reasons, and it’s not uncommon to encounter team members who feel or perceive that certain colleagues are more valued than others. Feelings of resentment fester over time, and may lead to lowered productivity and declining engagement at best, and sabotage or deliberate performance slow-downs at worst. Remote workers may be at the greatest risk of feeling—and being—left out when it comes to co-worker camaraderie. A *Harvard Business Review* article from November 2017 noted a wide range of challenges facing remote workers, from greater difficulty resolving workplace conflict, to a sense of being left out of changes in

process and projects, as well as feeling mistrusted and disrespected by their on-site peers. The authors write that “remote workers, and the managers tasked with keeping them focused and engaged, face inherent challenges that cannot be ignored.”

- **Faint feedback** – Research on motivation in the workplace indicates that employees value feedback far more than financial rewards. In his book *Payoff*, Dan Ariely explains that the quickest path to workplace demotivation is ignoring a colleague’s contribution, and that most managers consistently underestimate the motivating value of praise and overestimate the lesser value of monetary rewards. Employees who work from home are more likely to miss opportunities for occasional, informal feedback. Over time, this lack of feedback and positive reinforcement can lead to founded or unfounded fears about performance quality or social perception.
- **Inability to Temperature-Check** – Experienced supervisors check in with their direct reports to guide, support, redirect and also gauge staff satisfaction. As an experienced leader of a team that included multiple remote workers, I’ve found that it’s harder to sense frustration on the part of remote teams. At any time your staff may be frustrated about an assignment, a task, organizational policies, and more. A nearby report may cross the threshold of your cubicle or office to vent about these issues, while remote staff may be reluctant to dial in with similar concerns. In their HBR article, authors Grenny and Maxfield note that a manager’s *availability* is a highly valued quality among remote workers, adding that “successful managers are available during remote employees’ working



hours, no matter their time zone.”

A team working across time zones led by a manager who ‘clocks out’ at 5 pm is probably destined to go off the rails and experience low levels of satisfaction.

- **Productivity Perception** – While telecommuters may profess to being more productive on days they avoid the commute to and from work, the perception of others may be slightly or substantially different. It’s easy to observe a co-worker taking calls, rifling through paperwork, or busily typing on their keyboard. Not so when a colleague works from the privacy of their own home. And remote workers may not be aware of the negative perceptions of their peers and superiors.

Seven Strategies to Triumph with Telecommuting Teams

1. Choose Remote Options with

Care – When you’re writing a new position description, consider if the job really can be done remotely, and also

whether the position’s supervisor is truly available to provide the support the position needs. Think about how remote (near enough to come in for impromptu meetings, or only rare ones?) the position should or could be. Be brutally honest—first with yourself—before opening the door to disaster by promoting a fully flexible workplace on the job description.

For example:

- Will a new hire be immediately eligible to work from home, or only after they complete an introductory period on site?
- Is an applicant who wants to work 100% from home eligible for the position?
- Does “working from home” mean sticking to regular office hours, or may the employee sign in and out and work the hours s/he finds convenient?
- Are travel costs—for truly distant workers—in your approved budget, or is a distant worker expected

to cover those costs, just as nearby staff cover their public transportation, gas and other commuting costs?

- What lessons have you learned from supervising other remote workers? Your new position description is a chance to get it ‘right’ from the get go.

2. Tune in and Probe Perceptions During Interviews

– During interviews with candidates for positions with ‘work-from-home’ options, remember to inquire about the candidate’s experience as a telecommuter and how they envision doing so at your nonprofit. Resist the tendency to ask leading questions, and resolve to listen earnestly and wholly to their answers. Putting a prospective employee in a box immediately can result in tension and unintended consequences down the road, so it’s best to acquire a whole understanding upfront.

3. Build a Durable On-Ramp for Remote Workers

– After hiring a staffer who will work remotely, invest in the employee’s success by taking the time to set up the remote working relationship properly and clarify the rules of staying off the road. Consider developing a checklist or written agreement about your expectations for remote work. Discuss it. Make it specific. Revise it. What do you need? What won’t work? An important goal at this stage is to anticipate bumps in the road before they send you into a dangerous ditch. You’re trying to avoid the need to modify or revoke a remote status setup down the road.

4. Use Multiple Tech Tools without Excuses

– The popularity of remote working means lots of tools. Services and software for video conferencing, real time messaging, and team project management. My personal mantra

Pass Me the Remote! The Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs of Telecommuting Teams

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has been: if someone wants to work remotely, they need to commit to learning the technology to do it well. Even if that means how to contact a help desk! Your organization funds the tech and training, the employee learns and retains the information, uses the technology on a regular basis, and gets extra help as needed.

Keeping with the tech theme, good audio is still underrated for meetings and general remote communication. Find or research the best tech minds for what works and help diagnose what doesn't. Use messaging tools to help employees feel connected. A group chat with video (like Google Hangouts) can even be used as a real time virtual office.

I saw Google Hangouts used very successfully with a six-person, all-remote team. Everyone logged into the hangout in the AM and worked all day at their remote spaces. They'd move away from camera when needed (like someone would in an actual office) or use mute, but they could also chat with each other spontaneously. They'd log off at the end of the day. It took getting used to and there were assorted tech glitches at first. But in the end, the remote team was more close-knit and collaborative than any in-person team in the larger group.

5. Make Wise Investments for Remote Team Success – Don't forget the financial investment needed to support remote teams (video service subscriptions, headsets, cameras, etc.). Keep in mind that many options are available for trial periods or with limited membership, so you can test drive them before making a full-on commitment. Evaluate your investments periodically, and invite everyone to weigh in on the pros and cons of the equipment, software and systems used to support your high functioning team.



“Although the potential benefits of telecommuting are often considered employee benefits, telecommuting positives accrue to employers, as well as employees.”

6. Leverage Remote Workforce

Benefits – Although the potential benefits of telecommuting are often considered *employee* benefits, telecommuting positives accrue to employers, as well employees. Ultimately, it's up to your organization to manage remote worker downsides, and leverage the positives. For example, according to *The State of Telecommuting* report, employers who triumph with telecommuting enjoy access to an expanded (think global) talent pool.

7. Strive for Equity and Squash

Stereotypes – Some people believe that telecommuting is trendiest amongst the youngest generations,

Pass Me the Remote! The Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs of Telecommuting Teams
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but in fact, the majority of telecommuters are Baby Boomers. In SHRM’s article, “[Telecommuting Cuts Across Gender, Generations](#),” Families and Work Institute CEO and President Ellen Galinsky shares that employees from all generations desire flexible work. *The State of Telecommuting* report also clarifies that both men and women enjoy telecommuting, and they telecommute almost equally.

personality types fade away and don’t get complacent or fall victim to the “Fallacy of Centrality”: if something was wrong, I’d know about it; since I haven’t heard anything everything must be fine. Check in with remote workers *more often* if you’re not hearing from them. And remember that workplace trust is built on relationships, which require time to form and must be nurtured along a team’s journey in the workplace.

- “[A Study of 1,100 Employees Found That Remote Workers Feel Shunned and Left Out](#),” by Joseph Grenny and David Maxfield, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2017

Review and Adjust as Needed

Don’t continue with a tool or process that doesn’t work. Schedule a review of remote work practices every 60 days, 90 day, or twice a year. Don’t let the quieter

Resources

- The 2017 State of Telecommuting in the U.S. Employee Workforce Report, FlexJobs - www.flexjobs.com/2017-State-of-Telecommuting-US/

Delia Jones is an experienced Creative Director who has recently been contributing her leadership insights and creative skills to support the mission of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Delia welcomes your comments on managing remote worker risk and reward at delia.jones@gmail.com.



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Case Study

Who: A nonprofit culture organization that produces large-scale events

Strategy: To provide risk management and youth protection training to event volunteers

Results: Our work included the delivery of a custom-built online portal featuring courses and resources for volunteers and other stakeholders. To read additional case studies, visit: www.nonprofitrisk.org/consulting%20Services.pdf.



Not Here: Zero Tolerance for Inappropriate Workplace Conduct

By *Melanie Lockwood Herman*

Last year I attended a leadership conference hosted by Camp Fire, a nonprofit dedicated to helping young people to “find their spark, lift their voices, and discover who they are.”

During the opening keynote session, Hal Gregersen, Executive Director of the MIT Leadership Center, reminded his audience that “assumptions act as blinders,” and encouraged leaders to “look for surprises.” One approach is to ask the question, “How many things am I dead wrong about?” Gregersen’s prompt led me to reflect on the fact that many nonprofit leaders have blinders on when it comes to workplace culture and misconduct. During the past year we’ve learned that egregious

workplace misconduct—including sexual harassment—impacts organizations across a wide spectrum of industries, including our beloved nonprofit sector.

Waking Up to Workplace Misconduct

The resignations and terminations of prominent sector leaders has been a wake-up for leaders who believed that our noble missions inspire noble actions towards internal as well as external stakeholders. Yet during some NRMC consulting engagements, we’ve heard stories about conduct that could very well be reported as sexual harassment between colleagues. So perhaps I’ve been dead wrong about the extent to which inappropriate conduct

is occurring in the organizations whose missions I support and admire. Does the shiny surface of a nonprofit distract attention from wrongdoing that may be causing harm to staff? Is misconduct sometimes overlooked, even if the nonprofit condemns harassment in a written policy?

Why and How We Ignore Workplace Harassment

Despite the serious consequences of workplace harassment and growing awareness about its costly toll on employees as well as employers, the potential for damaging and illegal conduct remains a very real risk for nonprofits. Sadly, harassment complaints continue

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“Remember that you’ll always be blind to something... the fact that you haven’t seen misconduct doesn’t mean that it isn’t happening.”

to take our sector by surprise. While that shouldn’t be the case, perhaps there are other factors in play that cause us to be surprised by inappropriate behavior and egregious misconduct committed by the people we trust to serve and deliver our missions. Below are seven possible reasons that workplace harassment flies ‘under the radar’ in the nonprofit sector:

- **Disbelief** – Believing that something “couldn’t happen here” has no impact on the likelihood of that event occurring: it does, however, reduce the opportunity to root out bad behavior, hold all staff accountable, and create an environment worthy of your mission. Remember that you’ll always be blind to something... the fact that you haven’t seen misconduct doesn’t mean that it isn’t happening.
- **Too Nice** – In a recent article on [social engineering risk](#), we encouraged readers to be “nicely suspicious” when it comes to handling inquiries and interacting with unknown visitors in the workplace. We reminded you that a pleasant attitude and inquiring mind aren’t incompatible traits. Nonprofit team members should all display a

willingness to respectfully question whether misconduct is jeopardizing the safety and integrity of the team.

- **Cause Up, Guard Down** – Rallying around a cause or a campaign is a common occurrence in a nonprofit. This sometimes means burning the midnight oil and a commitment to setting aside normal work patterns. Working long hours on an advocacy issue, fundraising campaign or new program understandably leads to stress. Research shows that compulsive behavior is harder to resist when we’re under stress. In an article published by the Association for Psychological Science titled “*Stress Changes How People Make Decisions*,” the writers note that there may even be general differences in how men and women respond to stress: when men are under stress, they become even more willing to take risks; when women are stressed, they become more risk averse.
- **Charismatic Untouchables** – The term “untouchable” typically refers to an individual within a group that has been excluded or ostracized by

mainstream society. But here I’m referring to nonprofit leaders who seem to occupy a position of privilege due to their charisma. In a nonprofit, charisma is often a differentiator between sector leaders who are effective fundraisers and public advocates for a cause, and those who are not. Boards and staff sometimes put these leaders on a pedestal and look the other way when inappropriate conduct occurs. In the book *Willful Blindness*, by Margaret Heffernan, the author explores how we ignore painful and frightening truths and wrongfully believe that deflecting and denying truths protects us.

- **Dangerous Disbelief** refers to the common practice of believing that someone we admire or respect is incapable of inappropriate or illegal conduct. At NRMCA we have seen this in many cases involving child abuse: after incidents come to light there are usually stakeholders who still tout the reputation, talents, and character of the person they thought they knew. Another facet of Dangerous Disbelief is the reaction of some victims: did

Not Here: Zero Tolerance for Inappropriate Workplace Conduct

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this really just happen to me? Did I misunderstand or misinterpret what was just said or done? Am I partly to blame for what happened to me?

- **Power Imbalance** is the one reason Here Too on my list that precedes inappropriate conduct and illegal harassment in all sectors. Despite the egalitarian values many nonprofits espouse, reporting relationships and hierarchies are common to all organizations. Ignoring power balances in your organization gives individual team members the space to act on ego rather than prioritizing your nonprofit's mission and your team's collective goals. Want to manage power plays at work? Read our article, "[Sick of Power Plays?](#)"
- **Mission Loyalty** – The final reason on my "Here Too" list is unique, I believe, in the nonprofit sector: victims of harassment and other inappropriate or illegal conduct may hesitate to bring their experiences to light due to fear that their actions will harm the nonprofit missions they love. This reasoning arguably does more harm than good in the organization, as it goes against the virtue of the nonprofit from within.

What is Illegal Workplace Harassment?

Nonprofit leaders should strive to be aware of both federal and state laws pertinent to harassment in the workplace. These include:

- **Federal Laws:** Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it illegal to base employment decisions on characteristics such as race, color, religion, national origin and sex, and also prohibits harassment against an employee because of these characteristics. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) prohibits discrimination based on

an employee's age (40 or older). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination based on an employee's disability.

- **State Laws:** State-specific laws have expanded federal civil rights protections, such as by including additional protected characteristics, and by lowering the threshold of applicability. Visit this [National Conference of State Legislatures webpage](#) for information on the list of protected classes in each state for employment decisions and purposes.

Harassment Facts and Myths

- **Some inappropriate workplace conduct might not be illegal conduct.** To constitute illegal workplace harassment, conduct must create an environment that "would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people." (Source: [EEOC](#))
- **Victims of illegal harassment include, but are not limited to the person harassed in the workplace.** Anyone affected by illegal, offensive conduct is a potential victim of harassment.
- **Any employee is a potential victim** of sexual or other forms of illegal harassment—regardless of their sex, status, sexual orientation or identity. Harassment's costly price tag includes mental and physical harm to the survivor—including consequences that survivors might suffer throughout their lives—as well as economic damage to our society.
- **Illegal harassment negatively impacts all employees** at a nonprofit in the form of poor morale, low productivity, and increased turnover, not to mention financial and reputational harm.
- **Any employee, volunteer or contractor might be a perpetrator** of illegal harassment for which your

nonprofit can be held legally and financially liable. If allegations are made, no one should be given a special pass or be considered above suspicion.

- **Illegal harassment may be found even when the victim or victims have not suffered tangible,** economic injury, such as a demotion or termination of employment.
- **Workplace harassment too often goes unreported.** According to a report from the EEOC, common "workplace-based responses" by victims of harassment include avoiding the harasser, denying or downplaying the gravity of the situation, and attempting to "ignore, forget or endure the behavior." The report includes an astonishing statistic: "roughly three out of four individuals who experienced harassment never even talked to a supervisor, manager, or union representative about the harassing conduct."
- **Retaliation is strictly prohibited.** Federal and state anti-harassment laws also prohibit harassment against an employee for filing charges of discrimination, participating in an investigation, or opposing employment practices the employee reasonably believes are illegal or discriminatory. This form of prohibited discrimination is often referred to as illegal retaliation.

Stop Workplace Harassment Before It Harms Your Greatest Asset

Nonprofit leaders often showcase their staff members as the greatest asset to their missions. If you've ever said, "my staff and volunteers are the heart of this organization," then pledge to stop workplace harassment before your heart is harmed.

- **Adopt a broad, clearly written policy that strictly prohibits**

Not Here: Zero Tolerance for Inappropriate Workplace Conduct

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workplace harassment based on any protected characteristic. Your anti-harassment policy should prohibit any form of illegal harassment and make sense on the first read. Keep in mind that an overly-legalistic policy will be viewed cynically by employees: before sharing the policy, ask yourself two questions: 1. will readers understand what conduct is strictly prohibited? and 2. will readers know exactly what to do if they witness or experience inappropriate conduct?

- **Invite ideas and input about ways to improve your workplace culture, including input on your harassment policy and reporting methods and procedures.** Remember that all of your employment policies should be subject to change—including changes prompted and inspired by the thoughtful concerns and inputs of the staff your policies are designed to protect! Never close the door on input and resolve to remove unnecessary barriers to speaking up about policies that aren't working or need modernizing.
- **Investigate all allegations of workplace misconduct, even when you believe that the behavior might be inappropriate, but not illegal.** Remember that—like near misses preceding a crisis—inappropriate conduct could later snowball into illegal conduct. Investigating all inappropriate conduct might help you prevent future illegal misconduct. Doing so also sends a clear message that your nonprofit takes misconduct seriously, and also understands that employees may sometimes misinterpret the intentions or actions of their co-workers. Keep in mind that not every investigation will lead to a finding of inappropriate or illegal conduct and punitive measures. But every investigation of allegations of

misconduct can be a valuable lesson for your organization.

- **Update your training program focused on harassment prevention and reporting for employees and managers.** Remember that training too-narrowly focused on avoiding legal liability doesn't effectively prevent misconduct, and overly generic training materials and modules inspire cynicism about your commitment to preventing and remedying inappropriate conduct. Implement training that equips your staff with the skills they need to reject and report harassment, should they experience or witness harassing behavior.
- **Adopt a no exemptions policy when it comes to mandatory anti-harassment training.** Don't give senior leaders a pass or assume that anyone is too busy or experienced for your customized, essential training. The desire to skip anti-harassment training directly challenges the values of any nonprofit that prioritizes workplace safety and respect.
- **Find out if your state and size trigger mandated sexual harassment training.** Connecticut, Maine and California are among the states that require periodic training. In California, employers of 50+ staff must provide two hours of interactive training at least every two years.

Of late, news is teeming with tales of workplace sexual harassment in Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and more recently, the NGO world and nonprofit sector. While it's important to recognize that both men and women are victims of workplace harassment, many American women are stepping forward for the first time to report harassment they have experienced recently, and during their careers. A [Nonprofit HR article](#) reminds us that 73% of nonprofit sector employees are women, yet other sources, like a piece in the [Nonprofit](#)

[Quarterly article](#), convey that only 43% of nonprofit board seats—specifically, 33% of board seats in nonprofits with budgets \$25 Million and up—are held by women. While I'd like to think that the nonprofit sector refutes gender disparities, these statistics and recent news stories make me worry that I'm dead wrong. The truth is that we must all band together to respect and encourage diversity and inclusion in our sector, as one of many strategies to squash workplace harassment.

Resources

Take advantage of the multitude of free and authoritative resources to prevent harassment and address allegations and incidents. These include:

- [Report of the Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace](#), U.S. EEOC
- Nolo's article, [Guidelines for Handling Discrimination and Harassment Complaints](#)
- Resources available from your state department of labor or commission on human rights (e.g., New York State Division of Human Rights, [Guidance on Sexual Harassment for All Employers in New York State](#))
- Harassment prevention resources and the employment hotline available from your Directors' & Officers' or Employment Practices Liability provider

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Melanie welcomes your thoughts about preventing workplace harassment and misconduct at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.



Workplace Wellness: Managing Risks to Employee Health & Productivity

By Jules Finkelstein

Although most nonprofits are founded on deeply-rooted principles of service and compassion, nonprofit leaders sometimes forget to care for their own employees. During the day-to-day grind, employees may also forget to take care of themselves. Employee wellness is a potentially powerful risk management resource; this article invites you to consider whether it is an asset or an untapped resource in your organization.

What is Workplace Wellness?

According to Wikipedia, workplace wellness refers to “any workplace health promotion activity or organizational policy designed to support healthy behavior in the workplace and to improve health

outcomes...” In the modern nonprofit workplace, many employers prioritize the health and safety of their employees. Examples of the commitment to these values are seen in health insurance offerings, sick leave or PTO benefits, the purchase of ergonomic office furniture, and even the availability of water stations. A growing number of nonprofit employers are adopting workplace wellness programs that go beyond these traditional benefits and discovering additional benefits to healthy staff, from higher levels of engagement to reducing absenteeism and mitigating turnover risk.

In his blog post, [5 Proven Workplace Wellness Statistics Every Employer Should Know](#), CEO Dr. Stephen Aldana of Wellsteps

describes a number of interesting outcomes of intentional workplace wellness. At NRMC we found two of these related outcomes, especially interesting:

- **Healthier employees are more productive** – A common frustration among supervisors is presenteeism: employees who show up to work, but are nonetheless unproductive. The causes of presenteeism include: personal issues, social conflicts, stress and poor health. The article notes that the cost of presenteeism is staggering: “2-3 times greater than the cost of direct health care expenses.” Citing research from the journal *Population Health Management*, Dr. Aldana writes that “Employees with an unhealthy

Workplace Wellness: Managing Risks to Employee Health & Productivity
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“Nonprofit employers that invest in wellness have the potential to reap the valuable reward of decreased absenteeism. Employees with healthy behaviors--such as healthy blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose, and body mass index (BMI)--are less likely to miss work due to illness or injury.”

diet were 66% more likely to have high presenteeism than those who regularly ate whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.”

- **Wellness programs can decrease absenteeism** – Nonprofit employers that invest in wellness have the potential to reap the valuable reward of decreased absenteeism. Employees with healthy behaviors—such as healthy blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose, and body mass index (BMI)—are less likely to miss work due to illness or injury.

Who’s Stressed, and About What?

In the Forbes article “[10 Workplace Trends You’ll See In 2018](#),” the #5 trend on the list was the prioritization of financial and mental wellness. In the words of author Dan Schawbel, employees are “stressed out, burned out and it’s affecting not only their productivity but their satisfaction on the job.”

And according to Northwestern Mutual’s [2017 Planning & Progress Study](#), more than a quarter of millennials report that financial stress affects their job performance, a quarter feel physically ill due to financial anxiety, and over half feel

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depressed due to financial worries. And of course financial and other stressors aren't limited to millennial staff: they affect employees from all generations. Stress levels may in fact be higher among older workers whose personal worries include caring for younger *and* older family members, substantial financial debt, and age discrimination in the workplace. Wellness programs at your nonprofit have the potential to reduce the health risks your suffered by employees, which in turn can positively affect your mission and bottom line.

Strive for Wellness, But Mind the Law

Before implementing a wellness program or investing additional resources in an existing program, keep in mind that a number of laws may intersect with your wellness goals and activities. For example:

- **The Affordable Care Act (ACA)** established wellness regulations that apply to programs that are—or are part of—group health plans. ACA regulations aim to ensure that certain types of wellness programs are truly designed to enhance employee health, and that they do not limit health benefits for employees with health conditions.
- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** bars employers from asking their employees to divulge health information, including submitting to a medical exam. ADA offers some exceptions for voluntary wellness programs.
- **The Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA)** prohibits employers from “requesting, requiring, or purchasing genetic information from employees unless an exception applies,” according to “Wellness Programs and Incentives,” a 2018 factsheet from Cigna. GINA

offers some exceptions for providing financial incentives to employees in wellness programs that solicit genetic information—as long as the employee clearly knows that disclosure is voluntary.

- **The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)** established national standards for protecting individuals' health information. HIPAA's Privacy, Security, and Breach Notification Rules apply to certain covered entities—including healthcare clearinghouses, health plans, and health care providers—and business associates. Employers are not necessarily required to comply with HIPAA, but if your workplace wellness program is administered in connection with a group health plan, then any protected health information (PHI) that you collect is likely protected by HIPAA.

Keep in mind, too, that some regulations are based on the type of workplace program you establish:

- **Participatory** wellness programs are voluntary and are open to all employees regardless of health status. Participatory programs typically offer a reward—selected by the employer—simply for participation.
- **Health-contingent** wellness programs offer rewards and incentives based on an employee's health risks and related performance in the wellness program. For example, an employee may be required to meet a health goal—such as reducing body mass index (BMI) by X%—in order to earn a reward or avoid a penalty. Employers may waive an employee's activity requirement or offer an alternative activity to ensure ACA compliance. The ACA also stipulates that health-contingent wellness programs “must be reasonably designed to promote health and prevent disease.”

Wellness Activities Can Be Fun

There are fun ways to incorporate wellness into the workplace. Delia Jones, author of another article in this issue of *Risk Management Essentials*, told us about simple activities she helped to implement in the workplace. One of these was **Salad Club**, a casual group that met once a week for lunch. Club members signed up to bring at least one salad ingredient that day, and would gather together and build their individual salads with the shared ingredients. The diversity in preferences among the group made for interesting and unique combinations.

Another easy workplace activity was a daily walk referred to as **Stair Club**, where a group of employees congregated in the office stairwell at 11 AM and 3 PM every day and walked up and then down all 10 flights of stairs in the building. Employees of all fitness levels were encouraged to walk as many flights as they felt comfortable doing and at always their own pace. Depending on how your office space is configured, the activity could translate to many formats — including outdoor walks.

Not only do informal programs like this promote good health and activity, they encouraged camaraderie among employees, which is beneficial for social status and mental health.

Keep in mind that when you're planning wellness activities like these, remain inclusive by offering alternative programming that enables *all* team members to participate, regardless of health status and ability.

“If you’ve ruled out wellness programming because you’re not sure where to begin, or you’re worried you can’t afford the cost, think again. There are relatively easy, low-budget ways to make wellness a priority.”

Considerations for Implementing a Workplace Wellness Program

The path to workplace wellness is promising, but tricky to navigate. The question many employers struggle with is, “How do I begin?” Another common question is “Is wellness possible on a budget?” If you’ve ruled out wellness programming because you’re not sure where to begin, or you’re worried you can’t afford the cost, think again. There are relatively easy, low-budget ways to make wellness a priority.

United Way of Central Ohio offers an example of a wellness program implemented at a nonprofit with more than 100 employees. In her blog post about the program, nonprofit thought leader Beth Kanter notes that the organization established a committee to focus on wellness. The committee works with every staff member to assure that individual wellness goals and needs are understood and achieved, including reimbursing gym expenses, funding fresh food in the workplace, and promoting workouts and mindfulness activities that strengthen the body and mind. Kanter describes employee participation in these programs as “strong,” citing incentives such as on-the-clock activities and senior leadership participation that rouse staff engagement. And according to Kanter, the organization’s wellness program was implemented with a budget of just \$7,500, and the majority of “programs and activities have minimal or no costs.”

If your nonprofit is too small to launch and sustain such a program, consider adapting wellness principles and activities to your scale by offering:

- healthy snacks in the break room
- healthy recipe swap
- mini mindfulness breaks at the end of long meetings
- occasional stand-up meetings
- reminding staff of the importance of occasional breaks and taking a lunch break every day
- low-cost pedometers to help employees develop awareness of their own activity levels
- voluntary team workouts after-hours or during breaks in the work day
- a lending library of fitness resources and nutrition/recipe books

Noodle on Needs Before You Begin

At NRMCM we often hear about good intentions that fall flat when an overly ambitious program is launched without first evaluating interest and resource levels. Before jumping into the deep-end of a workplace wellness program, conduct a needs assessment—using a survey or through facilitated discussion—to understand your employees’ primary wellness challenges and goals. Also remember to involve your team in the design and implementation of your wellness program, so they feel a sense of ownership and motivation to participate, and present the program to your team in a

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way that makes it relevant, accessible and attractive.

Another important factor to consider is individual perspectives on wellness. Everyone faces barriers on the road to fitness and wellness, whether it be self-consciousness, lack of social support, physical challenges, or lack of confidence in the ability to set and meet health goals. Being mindful of these individual barriers, both in the design and practice of your program, is critical for it to be ultimately successful in motivating changes in nutrition and activity. Accessible and inclusive programming is key for facilitating participation and for providing ample social support—a pillar of health behavior change—to employees engaged in the program.

Watch Out for Disincentives and Measure Success

Ideally, the workplace culture at your nonprofit will be welcoming to wellness. But keep in mind and be wary of social norms that negatively impact workplace wellness. If an organization has a pre-established wellness program but it is seldom used, for example, this can disincentivize employees and steer them away from the path to wellness. Perhaps the most formidable foe to wellness, however, is neglect: reinforcing the purpose and components of your wellness program is key to keeping it alive and well.

Another key consideration in designing and implementing a workplace wellness program is the need or desire to evaluate the program's effectiveness in reducing employee health and productivity risks. A number of resources are available to help employers gauge the benefits of their wellness programs, including:

- **The CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard**, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- **The Well Workplace Checklist** from WELCOA (Wellness Council of America)

- **The Workplace Health Achievement Index** and other Workplace Health Solutions, from The American Heart Association

Workplace wellness programs are within reach for every organization across the vast spectrum of nonprofit missions and structures. Your employees are your most important asset, and their well-being is key to the well-being of your mission and ability to serve your community in the years to come. Create or retool a workplace wellness program that conveys—and carries out—your renewed commitment to caring for your employees, for yourself, and for your mission.

Jules Finkelstein was an Intern at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (NRMC) this Spring. She will be attending Boston University in the Fall.

Additional Resources:

[“Workplace Wellness Programs: The Penalties and Risks of Noncompliance,”](#) Wellness Council of America

[“Changing Rules for Workplace Wellness Programs: Implications for Sensitive Health Conditions,”](#) Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

[“Workplace Wellness Programs Characteristics and Requirements,”](#) Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

[“Promoting Employee Well-Being,”](#) Society for Human Resource Management

[“Workplace Wellness Programs Study,”](#) U.S. Department of Labor



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