

First Group – First ScotRail Reducing Sickness Absence and promoting a healthy workforce

Introduction

First ScotRail is the largest regional train operating company in the UK covering the widest geographical area. First ScotRail holds the franchise to operate 95% of passenger rail service within Scotland as well as the Caledonian Sleeper services between Scotland and London. The company has integrated staff wellbeing into its human resources strategy since 2006. A key aim has been to manage employee health more proactively, reducing sickness absence due to stress, musculoskeletal injuries and lifestyle-related factors such as poor diet.

Background

First ScotRail had no defined people policy during the first year of the franchise, which commenced in October 2004. A range of issues and concerns were noted:

- A workforce with an 80% majority of males, which had led to an entrenched “macho” culture where change was not readily embraced – and the promotion of healthy lifestyles was not taken seriously.
- In addition, the workforce is ageing and a large majority of staff are with the railways from leaving school until retirement - as evidenced in very low staff turnover.
- Sickness absence levels were high at 6.2% in 2006/7.
- The main reasons for sickness absence were musculoskeletal and mental health problems.

First ScotRail set out to proactively address all these issues.

Most of their employees are shift workers and First ScotRail took action to help and support staff in achieving good work life balances and positive wellbeing at their workplaces.

As a lot of families work within the company, they also chose to tackle poor lifestyle choices within the family setting as well as the workplace.

What was done?

First ScotRail developed a people strategy - with input from key stakeholders, including the four unions, to achieve a full understanding of issues and most appropriate solutions.

Formal policies were developed to manage sickness absence proactively with rehabilitation redeployment, ill health retirement and post-traumatic stress disorder procedures.

A team of physiotherapists was brought on board with particular focus on occupational physiotherapy. A key element of the team’s work was to assess jobs and all locations – and to ensure treatments were incorporated in staff’s daily duties as much as possible.

First ScotRail provided on site the services of massage and chiropody for all employees as well as hypnotherapy to help them stop smoking.

First ScotRail also set up a personal health challenge, involving a personal trainer who developed a fitness assessment and improvement plan for every employee who took part in the campaign.

Their employee assistance programme was redirected to have a person centred approach and offer cognitive behavioural therapy as appropriate. It was also extended to family members.

Wellbeing weeks were launched featuring:

- Advice on healthy eating, discounted gym membership promotions, alcohol advice, stopping smoking and cancer awareness;
- Introduction of employee lifestyle diaries and 1-to-1 advice focusing on sleep, eating, alcohol, smoking, exercise and working patterns;
- A company funded hospital cash plan available from January 2009.

What were the Barriers/ Challenges?

A male dominated workforce and a “macho” culture made it difficult to get employees to take seriously the ideal of wellbeing.

Shift working is often cited as the reason why lifestyles are unhealthy. Another barrier was staff being based over a wide area, with some of their largest depots situated in remote locations.

What Were the Business Benefits?

Absence decreased from 6.2% to 4.1%, in 2010 saving around £3 million per annum.

40% of cases referred to physiotherapy returned to work after an average of five sessions.

In a survey, staff reported they felt “well looked after” by First ScotRail.

Schemes, ranging from personal health challenges to the introduction of “wellbeing weeks” four times a year to pro-actively manage health issues, have been a resounding success.

First ScotRail’s overall sickness absence has been reduced - and there have been marked reductions in musculoskeletal and mental health issues.

Massage and chiropody have been rolled out to all locations as the take up of appointments improved dramatically.

The stopping smoking programme has a 70% success rate and it is expected hypnotherapy will be rolled out to meet other health needs.

First ScotRail’s personal health challenge has resulted in marked improvement in fitness, and is so popular that they are looking to bring it in-house as part of their next stage of wellbeing promotion.

The business (as well as its people) has gone from strength to strength.

A three-year extension to the franchise was granted in April by the Scottish Government, with Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson stressing it was down “to the success of First ScotRail in delivering levels of performance above and beyond those set out in the original franchise agreement.”

Passenger growth is up 20%; train punctuality and customer satisfaction ratings at record highs; turnover in the year to March 31 2008 increased from £494.3m to £526.6m. First ScotRail received Investor in People accreditation across the company.

It was also named UK Passenger Operator of the Year at the National Rail Awards – and Scottish Public Transport Operator of the Year. Being named UK Passenger Operator of the Year further established the company’s growing reputation as a quality employer and Britain’s leading transport provider.

Both awards recognise the company has consistently exceeded targets and a remarkable culture change among the 4,300 strong staff.

First ScotRail registered for the Healthy Working Lives’ award scheme and, having completed their bronze, are well on their way to the silver award. They were also successful finalists in the Employer Forum Awards in 2009.

Impact upon First ScotRail Business

The reduction in sickness absence was measured by quantitative methods via human resources systems.

Qualitatively, employee engagement has soared – with staff survey response rates more than doubled to 44%. This can be attributed in part to our positive wellbeing strategies. “Wellbeing” is now a phrase that is familiar to all our staff.

Achievement of the Healthy Working Lives awards will show to the wider business community and their employees how seriously they take on wellbeing and lifestyle issues.

The campaigns in meeting the challenges of an ageing workforce and healthy living have encourage people to work for the company. A revitalised website recruitment campaign received 80,000 applications in a matter of months. Another campaign, to attract female train drivers, increased applications by 10%.

Being named UK Passenger Operator of the Year further established the company’s growing reputation as a quality employer and Britain’s leading transport provider.

What did First ScotRail Learn?

Staff engagement is central to quality customer service and First ScotRail’s passion to make things happen and introduce lifelong learning skills and wellbeing will continue.

However, they would involve more employee teams at local level - to help source services which are known to them in their areas.

They would also involve the local teams in helping iron out any cultural and environmental differences which exist between different work locations. This would increase the staff “buy-in” to initiatives from the very beginning so that it did not appear that culture change and people-centred practices only come from HQ.

Nicola Macpherson Nurse Adviser said “I am so pleased by the amount of our staff who have taken part in all our wellbeing campaigns, and the increasing numbers of participants and decreasing number of absent staff due to sickness are what motivates me to keep looking at new ways of reaching out to all our employees.”

Fiona Irvine HR Director said “Wellbeing initiatives are proving very popular with our staff. It’s often just a small change that can make a big difference to your working life and I hope that even more of our staff will get involved and be encouraged to make improvements in their health and wellbeing.”

A ScotRail Employee said “It feels good to know that First ScotRail value me enough to organise all these wellbeing initiatives for me at work.”

The Future

First ScotRail have developed a very comprehensive proactive Wellbeing Programme to ensure that all their employees in all their locations have the same wellbeing experience as is possible. The health needs assessment questionnaire they used as part of their healthy working lives assessment confirmed that the health and wellbeing promotional campaigns were relevant to their employees. This has led to the development of future plans. First ScotRail have built on their health campaigns and processes to develop them further to keep health and wellbeing very much on the agenda and maintain the momentum.

Wellbeing is high on the agenda for First Group. Health champions are now being nominated across the whole business to run local wellbeing initiatives throughout the UK.

Benefits of taking part in the Healthy Working Lives Programme

According to NHS Scotland, actively promoting health in the workplace has been shown to improve productivity.

A Harvard Medical School study, which explored the links between health and productivity, revealed that a multi-component health promotion programme saw an 8.5% improvement in work performance, absence reduced, and the return on investment was calculated at £3.73 for each £1 spent.

(Figures from *the Vielifit/IHPM/Harvard Medical School Health and Performance Research Study, October 2005.*)

The cost of employers' liability insurance premiums is increasing, with more insurers moving towards premiums based on evidence of risk management. Organisations which clearly demonstrate they are addressing issues such as accident reporting, staff health and well-being in the workplace are more likely to be looked upon favourably by insurers.

The Scottish Government is asking employers to view work in its wider context and to act in ways that benefit not only their business and their employees, but also the wider economy and society as a whole.

There are obvious combined effects of health promotion, attendance management, flexible working, providing a safe place to work, supporting the mental well-being of staff, caring for the environment and promoting social responsibility.