Fit for work: A comprehensive approach

What is Fit for work?

"Fit for work" refers to employees' ability to safely undertake the physical and psychological demands of their jobs.[1] It is a comprehensive approach that employers can take to co-ordinate health and safety efforts, policies and guidelines to ensure a safe and healthy workplace for everyone. A fitness for work assessment is part of this approach and is used to determine if an employee can perform a specific job or task under their documented working conditions. Fitness for work assessments are most often done to determine medical fitness after an illness or injury, but are sometimes done after employment has been offered (pre-placement), as requested by the employer or as a condition of a job transfer.

A comprehensive approach

Fit for work is a comprehensive approach where many individual pieces fit together to create the whole picture. There are four key elements that make up this approach:

- clear policies and guidelines
- workplace programs and services
- employee support
- shared responsibility

Shared responsibility / Employee support / Workplace programs and services / Clear policies and guidelines

Clear policies and guidelines

All staff should be clear about what the rules are and what is expected of them. The company should also have procedures and guidelines in place with regard to treating employees according to labour, employment and occupational health and safety legislation. Some examples of policies and guidelines that can support workplaces in consistently managing addiction, substance use, psychological health or physical health situations include

- alcohol and drug policies
- fit for work testing
- drug testing programs
- disability management programs
- occupational health and safety programs
- respectful workplace guidelines (e.g., the Canadian Safety Association psychological safety standard)
- shift work guidelines

The role of alcohol and drug policies

Having a clear alcohol and drug policy is one element of a comprehensive fit for work approach. While individual leaders are usually not responsible for developing policies, they often participate in policy design committees or policy review meetings. Leaders also play a key role in policy implementation and are usually responsible for ensuring that employees adhere to workplace standards.
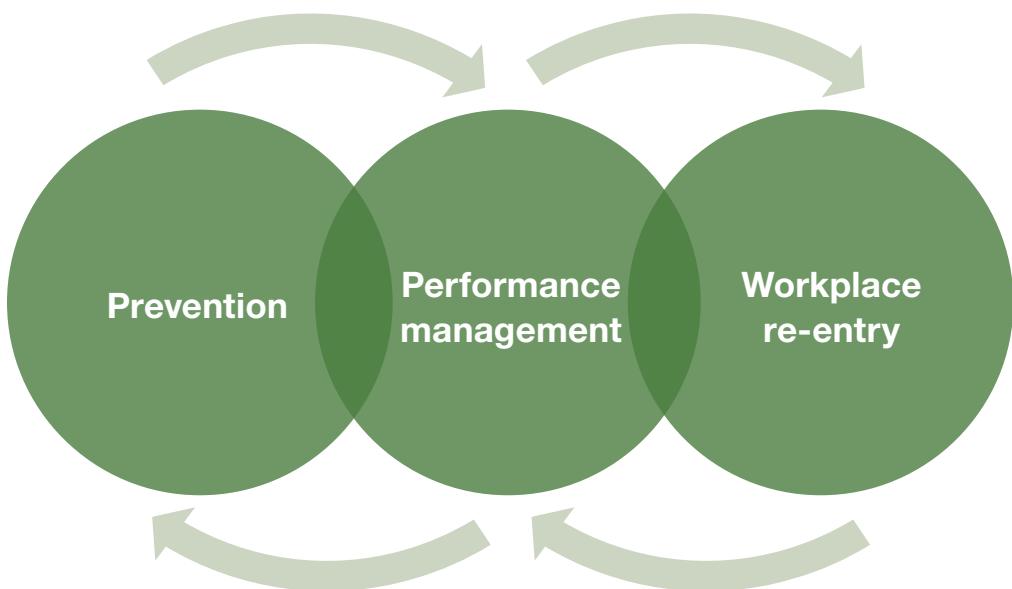
Workplace programs and services

Individual programs and services contribute to an understanding and the effective administration of policies and support services offered to employees. Examples of these programs and services include

- education
- supervisory training
- workplace health and wellness programs
- employee assistance program (EAP) or employee and family assitance program (EFAP)
- informal and formal peer support (this ensures confidentiality)

Employee support model

The model below outlines the range of support that a company can make available to its workers while implementing its fit for work approach.

The process is not linear and does not have a start or end point. At any point in the process, the employee can move to the next or previous phase, though they do not usually skip a step entirely. It is common for organizations to focus on performance management: identifying and dealing with employees who violate policies. The fit for work approach, however, is much more proactive

and focuses instead on prevention. For example, as part of this approach, employees are offered information about the effects of drug use on safe work performance, allowing them to make better choices. Here's an example of effective prevention.

Without prevention and education	With prevention and education
A worker goes to work unaware that the Tylenol® 3 he is taking, as prescribed by his doctor for back pain, has the potential to affect his work performance. The worker has an accident driving the company vehicle. The investigating supervisor notices that he is groggy and unco-ordinated. The worker is tested for alcohol and drugs. He tests positive for opiates.	A worker is prescribed Tylenol® 3. He is aware that some medications can impair safe work performance. The worker asks his doctor if the Tylenol® 3 can affect his work performance. The doctor advises him that it can impair his ability to drive or operate equipment. The worker discusses this with his supervisor and the supervisor reassigns him to other duties that do not involve driving.

In this example, the worker would fail a drug test, even though he has never used an illegal drug. Tylenol® 3 contains codeine, which is derived from the same source as opium and heroin. The bottom line is that the accident is still an accident, and the driver was under the influence of a drug. This situation can be avoided when employees receive workplace education to help understand the effects of some medications on their work performance.

Education is usually effective, and it allows for an approach that is proactive and positive. Content usually focuses on what to do or not do, as well as how to comply with the policies and guidelines of the workplace.

Today's workplaces focus more attention on supporting workers in recovery, as well as those who are returning to work after a leave. By focusing on education and prevention, employers and organizations can increase an employee's chance of success.

Shared responsibility

The foundation of a comprehensive fit for work approach is shared responsibility. An organization's culture, structures, policies and procedures can have a significant effect on its employees' health and well-being. Employers and employees share responsibility for creating and sustaining a safe, healthy, respectful and productive workplace. Each employee contributes to the company's commitment to fitness for work.

Employers, with support from key leaders, can work towards creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. This refers to a workplace that promotes good mental health for all employees by preventing careless, negligent, reckless or intentional harm. Some examples of the characteristics of such a workplace culture are

- psychological support: co-workers and supervisors support the addiction and mental health concerns of all employees

- organizational culture: the organization and team culture fosters trust, honesty and fairness

- clear leadership and expectations: leaders help employees understand what they need to do, as well as how their work contributes to the organization and future changes

- civility and respect: employees show respect and consideration to clients, the public and each other

- growth and development: leaders encourage and support employees to develop people and job skills

- job fit: there is a good fit between how an employee interacts with people and how his or her emotions, job skills and job position are managed

- recognition and reward: employees are acknowledged and appreciated for their efforts in a timely manner

- involvement and influence: employees are included in discussions about how they do their work and how important decisions are made

- workload management: employees are able to perform tasks and responsibilities successfully in the time available to them

- engagement: by enjoying and feeling connected to their work, employees are motivated to do a good job

- balance: the need to balance work, family and personal life is recognized

- psychological safety: employees feel comfortable asking questions, seeking feedback, reporting mistakes or problems, or proposing new ideas, without being afraid of negative consequences to themselves or their job

- physical safety: management and employees take appropriate actions to protect the physical safety of employees, who then feel more secure and engaged at work[2]

Employees also play an active part in improving their health at work, as well as the health of others. Managers can encourage employees to

- monitor work–life balance and make a list of ideas each week to establish a better balance

- set a regular bedtime and wakeup routine— most adults need 7–9 hours of sleep each night

- live an active and healthy lifestyle (e.g., take walks, spend more time with their children, stop smoking and limit their alcohol intake) to help lower stress, sleep better and manage anxiety and/or depression

- be respectful in the workplace—this may look differently for everyone but generally includes valuing other workers and their families, being fair, valuing diversity and treating others with respect and dignity

- think about activities that make them feel good about themselves—if these activities are written into a schedule, people are more likely to do them

- learn how to manage emotions—be aware of thoughts that are unfair, unrealistic and inaccurate and turn them into thoughts that are balanced, fair, realistic and accurate.

Employers have the front-line responsibility to make sure that employees report for work and remain fit to perform their duties safely and well. But this is not something they are expected to do on their own.

Promoting fitness for work must start at the top. Companies must equip their leaders with clear policies, guidelines and programs that support fitness for work. They must also support their leaders in enforcing fitness for work. This starts with training and extends to standing behind leaders when they make a decision to remove a worker who does not appear fit for duty.

Individual employees must also share in the responsibility of keeping their workplace safe.

Alberta Health Services

This starts with healthy lifestyle choices (e.g., a drug-free lifestyle), safe work practices, good sleep hygiene (especially for shift workers) and managing treatable medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, depression and epilepsy). Individual team members must also learn how to intervene when they suspect that a co-worker is not fit for work. Each workplace will have its own guidelines about what steps should be taken. All employees must be clear on what steps to take if a fellow employee is not fit to perform their duties.

Employers can take responsibility for initiating team discussions or ensuring that training occurs so that all employees are clear about their safety responsibilities. They can also promote fitness for work by setting a good example and intervening when required.

References

1. Dyck, D. (2011). *Occupational health and safety: Theory, strategy and industry practice* (2nd ed.). Markham, ON: LexisNexis Canada.

2. Guarding Minds at Work. (2012). *The 13 psychosocial factors in GM@W.* Hamilton, ON: Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. Retrieved from http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/info/risk_factors

For more information

Alberta Health Services, Addiction and Mental Health offices offer a range of prevention and treatment services to assist businesses in managing workplace addiction and mental health concerns. For more information, and to find an addiction and mental health services office near you, please call the 24-hour Addiction Helpline at 1-866-332-2322 or the 24-hour Mental Health Helpline at 1-877-303-2642. For more workplace-specific resources, please visit: http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/2672.asp