



## **Role of health promotion in attracting and retaining a healthy workforce in health service organizations**

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## **The International Network of Health Promoting Hospitals and Health Services**

The International Network of Health Promoting Hospitals and Health Services (HPH) is a network of over 600 hospitals and health services from over 30 countries that support the implementation of health promotion into the core organizational structure, culture, and decision-making processes of organizations. Initiated by the WHO in 1988, the institutions in our network advocate and assist in advancing health promotion by collaborating to develop structures, decisions, and policies that aim to obtain positive health outcomes for patients, staff, and populations served and support sustainable societies. The HPH network is a non-profit, non-governmental organization.

[www.hphnet.org](http://www.hphnet.org)

## Key Messages

- › The global healthcare sector is grappling with a severe staff shortage, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly affecting patient care and jeopardising safety.
- › The World Health Organization (WHO) anticipates a global shortage of 10 million healthcare workers by 2030, particularly impacting middle and low-income countries.
- › High turnover of healthcare staff leads to financial losses and disrupts patient care continuity, resulting in increased expenses and challenges.
- › Investment in a healthy workforce yields improved employee engagement, enhanced recruitment and retention rates, and significant cost reductions.
- › Recognizing the substantial time spent in work-related activities, workplace health promotion initiatives are essential for supporting employee well-being,
- › Healthy leadership and support cultivate positive work environments, alleviate stress and boost staff retention.
- › Healthier employees demonstrate improved physical and mental performance, embrace health-conscious behaviours, and exhibit increased efficiency and motivation.
- › Well-established best practice models that serve as a source of inspiration and offer guidance for practical implementation are available.
- › Health promotion should steer healthcare settings and communities towards salutogenesis, serving as a vital complement to the pathogenesis approach in health and social sciences.
- › Within the healthcare realm, the HPH network adopts salutogenesis, incorporating the Total Worker Health approach, with the significant task of transitioning from mere disease prevention to promoting comprehensive biopsychosocial well-being.

## Introduction

Working adults invest a significant portion of their lives in their professional roles, typically dedicating approximately 30% or about one-third of their entire lifespan to their careers (Writer, 2020). The quality of the working conditions holds immense importance in shaping an individual's overall health and well-being. Studies, such as the 2020 Trends Report on Well-Being at Work, have determined that improved working conditions can positively impact individuals and their health. Work has consistently ranked among the top three contributors to stress for several years, often resulting in consequences such as sleep deprivation and mental and physical ailments, which negatively affect employees' personal lives. (Koinig & Diehl, 2021).

In the constantly changing healthcare landscape, a highly dedicated and skilled healthcare workforce is a fundamental prerequisite for the well-being of individuals and communities. The effectiveness and resilience of our healthcare systems are inherently connected to the calibre and strength of our healthcare workforce.

Health promotion embraces a comprehensive approach geared towards enhancing the health and welfare of people and society.

This policy brief is centred on exploring how proactive health promotion initiatives can become potent in attracting new talent to the healthcare sector and ensuring our existing healthcare professionals' longevity and steadfast commitment (HCPs).

## Challenges in the Healthcare Sector

While noble and vital, the healthcare profession also has its challenges: antisocial working hours and shift patterns, strenuous environments, a persistent risk of exposure to infection and death, and an inequitable distribution among regions as many professionals seek improved working conditions in high-income countries. (Koontalay et al., 2021).

Given the added strains of the COVID-19 pandemic, high-income countries are no longer immune to these problems. Healthcare workers in these countries encounter reduced professional autonomy, sluggish bureaucratic processes, and inadequate compensation and disincentives.

Healthcare providers have been at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19, working tirelessly and often under exceptionally challenging conditions. The cumulative stress and exhaustion they have endured have profoundly affected their mental and physical well-being. A comprehensive study involving 7,780 HCPs indicated that one-third of these professionals experienced depression, and over one-third grappled with anxiety during the pandemic (Sialakis et al., 2023). A significant proportion also reported affective mood disorders and sleep disturbances, among several other psychological symptoms (Pappa et al., 2020).

While numerous scientific studies document elevated levels of distress among doctors and nurses, and Cristina Maslach's burnout assessment questionnaire (Maslach, 1981) has

long been recognized as a standard measure of physical and emotional exhaustion, there remains a lack of systematic evaluation of the physical and mental distress experienced by healthcare personnel. Furthermore, when patients sense their healthcare providers' discomfort, they often downplay their symptoms to avoid burdening them further. This mutual exchange in caregiving links burnout with patient communication and consequently impacts the quality of care delivered.

## **Global Health Crisis**

The shortage of medical staff knows no national boundaries and is rapidly evolving into a global challenge, as evidenced by data across EU, OECD, and WHO regions (Parzonka et al., 2023). Nurses of all age groups are leaving the profession in unprecedented numbers. Demographic shifts in populations, increased demand, and a rising number of chronically ill patients significantly contribute to these shortages (de Vries et al., 2023). In the past two years in the United States, a staggering 100,000 nurses have left, and an additional 900,000, nearly one-fifth of the total registered nurses, are planning to exit the workforce by 2027 (NCSBN, 2023). The anticipated retirement rate for nurses within the next decade is 17% in both American and European regions, taking with them decades of invaluable experience.

Furthermore, this demographic shift is underscored by the departure of approximately 117,000 US physicians in 2021, representing a significant loss of one in every five crucial healthcare workers (Ellis, 2022). Nearly half of actively practising physicians are estimated to retire by 2030, primarily due to age-related factors and early retirement.

Additionally, the increasing age of the caregiving workforce remains a persistent concern in the healthcare sector. The latest World Health Organization (WHO) report reveals that 40% of physicians belong to the '55 and older' age category in 13 out of 44 EU regions (Ticking Timebomb, 2022).

In a recent survey across ten High-Income Countries, young primary care doctors revealed high levels of burnout and distress. Disturbingly, more than half of experienced practitioners (55 and above) plan to retire in the next three years (Stressed Out and Burned Out, 2022). This could lead to a primary care workforce with less experience and more strained physicians (Figure 1).

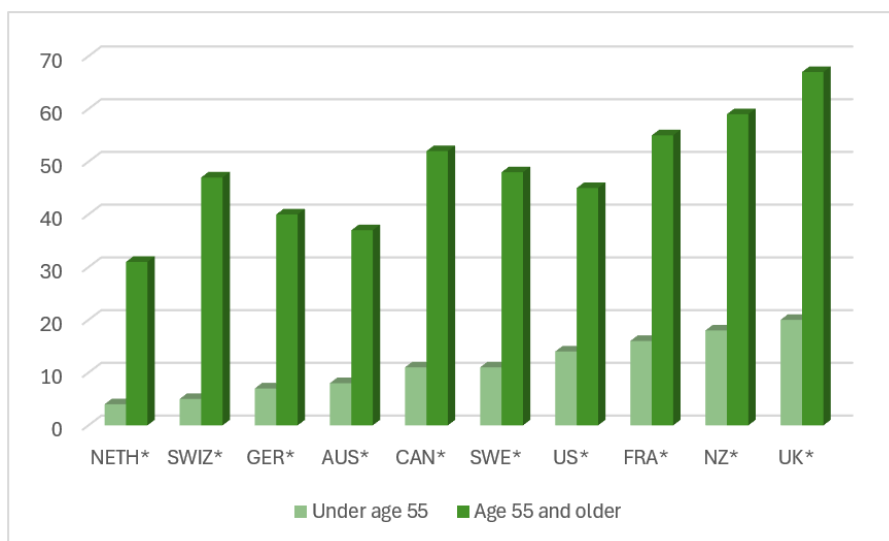


Figure 1: Percentage of primary care physicians in HICs who intend to stop practising within the next one to three years (Stressed Out and Burned Out, 2022)

Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) projects an impending shortage of 10 million healthcare professionals by 2030, particularly impacting low- and middle-income nations (WHO, 2023), recognising it as a significant obstacle to achieving health and development goals in the foreseeable future.

## What is the impact of this issue?

European Union (EU) hospitals have been confronted with elevated turnover rates (de Vries et al., 2023). This high turnover results in financial losses due to recruitment expenses but also disrupts care continuity and inflates patient care costs for the hospital. An example is the NHS trusts in the UK, which had to spend £2.4 billion in the year 2019/20 on agency staffing, which exerted tremendous pressure on already stretched finances (Rolewicz et al., 2022).

The shortage of healthcare workers burdens the remaining staff, leading to increased stress, chronic fatigue, burnout, frequent sick leave, and heightened susceptibility to illness. These factors strain the healthcare infrastructure significantly, eroding the motivation and focus of healthcare professionals, thereby endangering the quality of patient care and compromising patient safety.

The risks associated with these challenges range from minor medical errors to severe patient outcomes, encompassing hospital-acquired infections, patient accidents, medication inaccuracies, increased mortality rates, and additional barriers to accessing critical healthcare services, spanning preventive measures to life-saving interventions and emergency care.

The present circumstances are driving healthcare professionals to contemplate career changes or even consider leaving the healthcare sector altogether, intensifying the

situation and potentially resulting in long-term losses that will be difficult to overcome in the years ahead.

## **How does it relate to the work of the HPH Network?**

The Health Promoting Hospitals and Health Services (HPH) initiative, inaugurated by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1988, has been dedicated to addressing healthcare issues for an extended period. However, given the heightened criticality of the challenges mentioned above, there is an urgent need to raise awareness and intensify efforts to bring these issues to the forefront.

In times when healthcare professionals find themselves stretched to their limits, the fundamental principles of patient-centered care, effective communication, patient empowerment, and collaborative practices often encounter compromises. Therefore, HPH advocates integrating health promotion concepts and strategies within healthcare institutions. This approach transcends conventional medical practices and fosters a comprehensive wellness culture, benefiting patients and the healthcare professionals who tirelessly serve them.

## **What is Health Promotion?**

Health promotion empowers individuals and communities by providing them with the knowledge and tools needed to make informed choices, fostering actions that enhance overall well-being, prevent illness, and promote healthier lifestyles through education.

### **How does this concept apply in a workplace?**

The strategic incorporation of health promotion principles into workplaces has proven to be transformative, enhancing employee health and productivity by creating a positive and supportive work environment, which is crucial for attracting and retaining a motivated workforce.

## **The Challenge of Integrating Salutogenesis into Healthcare Systems**

The Healthcare Promoting Health (HPH) network is at the forefront of applying the principles of health promotion within healthcare environments. Within its standards, the HPH network integrates the principles of health promotion in the workplace, viewing health from a salutogenic perspective.

Healthcare, often referred to as the "disease care system," presents a unique and complex arena for the application of salutogenesis. As noted by Antonovsky, (1996) the healthcare

sector predominantly adheres to a pathogenic paradigm, focusing on managing illness through treatment or palliative care for chronic conditions.

In a world where chronic diseases are increasingly prevalent, this poses a significant challenge for healthcare professionals. Encouraging individual self-care practices such as yoga, meditation, or mindfulness, while valuable, cannot alone address the systemic issues within the healthcare system (Ofri, 2019).

As emphasized by Jürgen M. Pelikan in "The Handbook of Salutogenesis," effective application of salutogenesis in healthcare requires not only its incorporation into practice but also salutogenic clinical research and policy reform within the healthcare sector (Jürgen et al., 2016)

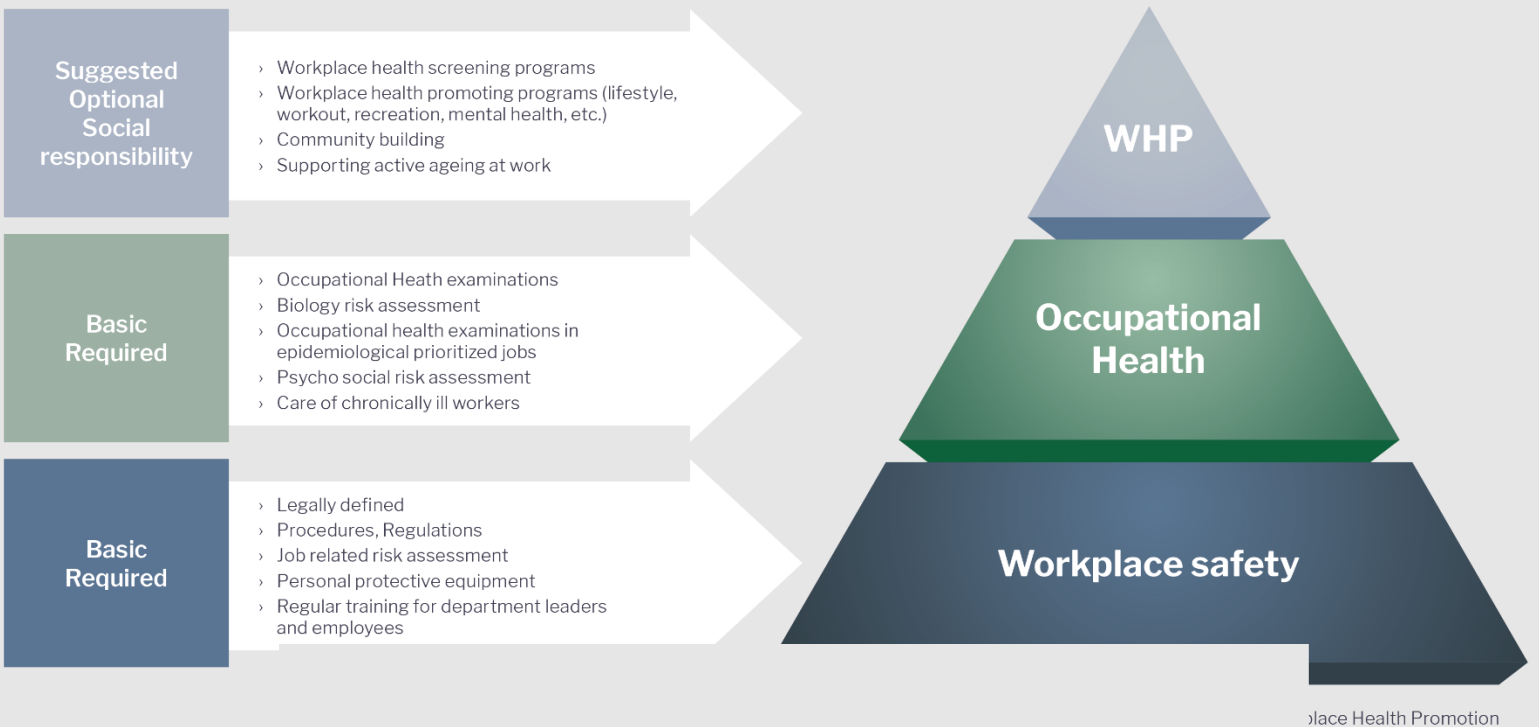
Given the designation of the health and social work sector as a "high-risk" economic domain by reputable organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO), and European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), the imperative for comprehensive workplace promotion becomes paramount. At the core of this necessity lies the fundamental principle of occupational safety and health, requiring employers to shoulder the responsibility of establishing a safe and advantageous work environment for employee's well-being.

This obligation extends beyond merely preventing workplace hazards. It necessitates the creation of personal, material, and organizational conditions that actively mitigate health risks of accidents and occupational diseases, safeguard well-being, and humanise the working conditions of individuals engaged in organised employment.

Integrating salutogenesis into healthcare settings to prioritize the well-being of staff represents a crucial step in bridging a longstanding gap within strategies that have traditionally focused on safety measures and combating pathogenesis. However, these strategies have often overlooked the dimension of well-being among healthcare providers, despite its inherent connection to the well-being of those receiving care (Figure 2).



# Parts and structure of Workplace Health Promotion



## HPH Health Promotion for the staff



Figure 2: Key elements in the hierarchy of workplace health promotion approaches

It is crucial to recognise that the foundation for effective health promotion at work rests upon the prior fulfilment of these primary conditions to the greatest extent possible. Only once these prerequisites have been met can a strategic and meaningful approach to health promotion in the workplace be formulated and implemented. Beyond being a legal and ethical obligation, this is a proactive stance towards prioritising the safety and productivity of the workforce, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of cultivating a healthier society.

## **Scope and Effectiveness of Workplace Health Promotion**

Workplace health promotion includes various initiatives designed to address the physical, mental, and social dimensions of employee well-being. This includes preventive measures, health education, and supportive policies to create a holistic workplace health approach. Examples of interventions span from fitness programs and mental health workshops to implementing ergonomic workstations and promoting healthy lifestyle choices. Numerous studies highlight the effectiveness of workplace health promotion in achieving its intended outcomes, as evidenced by a systematic review and meta-analysis (Vargas-Martínez et al., 2021).

The HPH network's approach goes beyond mere health education or disease prevention; it actively promotes health through a cultural transformation of the entire healthcare system towards salutogenesis. The goal is to reshape the traditional organizational, academic, and political culture that often demands caregivers to prioritize the provision of compassionate and competent care over their own well-being. It's becoming increasingly evident that such a culture is neither beneficial nor efficient.

## **Integrated Workplace Health Programs and Their Impact**

The work environment significantly influences individuals' responses to work situations, with stress recognised as a critical environmental factor contributing to poor health. However, this can be alleviated by adjusting organizational parameters (Koinig & Diehl, 2021). Growing evidence supports the effectiveness of integrated workplace health promotion programs that address occupational safety and health concerns in their design and implementation, outperforming traditional, isolated programs. This integration enhances program engagement and effectiveness, benefiting participants and the broader work organization and environment (Workplace Health Model, 2021).

## **Advantages of Cultivating a Healthy Workforce**

For organizations, cultivating healthy workforce yields cost reductions, including lower insurance premiums, reduced healthcare expenses, decreased absenteeism, and fewer workers' compensation claims. Moreover, these efforts have a profound positive impact on indirect costs, such as improved recruitment, higher retention rates, and a robust organizational culture. Maintaining a healthy employee base also brings advantages beyond cost savings, including increased job satisfaction, elevated employee engagement, and enhanced productivity (Koinig & Diehl, 2021; Workplace Health Model, 2021).

## Employee Health and Performance Outcomes

Research shows that healthier employees exhibit improved short-term physical and mental performance and are more likely to adopt health-conscious practices, which increase efficiency, motivation, and loyalty (Hegyesné Görgényi et al., 2021). Table 1 summarises the key short-, medium-, and long-term benefits of implementing health promotion in the workplace.

**Table 1 Benefits achieved from workplace health promotion**

In a few months	After 1-2 Years	After 3-5 Years
Closer engagement	Higher productivity and performance	Fewer workplace injuries
Better workplace morale	Increased labour retention and attractiveness	Less absence and disease
More vital team spirit and community building	A positive image of the company	Less presenteeism
	Better individual health awareness	Improving returns on training and development
	Increased employee satisfaction	

Source: (Hegyesné Görgényi et al., 2021)

## The Role of Healthy Leadership

In contrast to traditional leadership, healthy leadership strongly emphasises individuals' physical and mental welfare, striving to create a positive work environment, reduce workplace stress, and promote open communication.

Furthermore, autonomy and effective leadership significantly impact job satisfaction and retention. An integrative review by Kiwanuka et al. (2021) observed that nursing leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the productivity and morale of nursing personnel, fostering a positive workplace atmosphere. This, in turn, increases the inclination to remain within the organization, ultimately contributing to overall workforce stability and satisfaction.

## Practical example 1

### **Health Workers' Health Promotion Program / What can a health-promoting hospital do for its staff? (Example from the Hungarian Central County Hospital)**

Hungary's first hospital health promotion office started operations in 2008 at the Moritz Kaposi General Hospital. In addition to its public health mission, the main task of the health promotion office is to maintain and improve the health of more than 2,500 employees. After the hospital joined the HPH Network in 2021, a comprehensive, complex workplace health promotion strategy was developed. The new program has been integrated with the occupational health examinations.

In addition to the mandatory examinations, employees are offered recommendations for age- and risk-appropriate public health screening, other screening tests, and lifestyle changes. In the pilot phase of the new program, 800 employees participated. Colorectal cancer screening was organised for 600 workers, and an early skin cancer detection program for nearly 550 workers. The company doctor offered more than 1000 additional screenings and tests. In the program's first quarter, 2 colorectal cancers, 1 breast tumour, and 2 melanomas were detected early among workers.

The program ensures equal opportunities and access for all hospital employees. They will receive help in the early detection of certain cancers and other diseases of public health importance and support in maintaining their health. The program is well organised, traceable, and can be repeated year after year and integrated into the mandatory occupational health checks.

- Gabriella Szörényiné Ványi,

Leader of Prevention and Health Promotion Office

## Practical example 2

### **'Taking Care of Those Who Care for Us' program (Example from the Friuli Venezia Giulia Network, Italy)**

Since 2010, within the Friuli Venezia Giulia Network in Italy, we have focused on promoting staff well-being and managing psychophysical stress through a salutogenic approach. Amidst the pandemic, the Regional Authority for Coordination of Health Trusts of Friuli Venezia Giulia Region (Italy), as part of the HPH network, initiated the "Taking Care of Those Who Care for Us" program, aligning with HPH Standard 4. Collaborating with the Italian National Institute of Health in the updating national project "Caring for those who care" and stress management experts, we trained 95 professionals to form multi-professional teams across HPH members.

These teams aim to assess the allostatic load— the "wear and tear on the body" from chronic stress. Operating within each HPH network member, these teams raise awareness about "MUS-medically unexplained symptoms" and work to eliminate them. Recent scientific findings indicate that MUS signals persistent low-grade inflammation linked to stress (Tsigos, 2015). We have applied a non-invasive method to measure this phenomenon by analysing the activation of the nervous and endocrine arms of the stress system. This enables us to facilitate rapid psychophysical recovery (Chrousos GP, 2022) and alleviate symptoms.

This approach allows for genuine health promotion and objective measurement of salutogenic intervention progress through lifestyle, circadian rhythms, and cardiac coherence. It also addresses a gap in the prevailing healthcare worker academic training paradigm, often neglecting personal well-being. Staff members learn to perceive and self-regulate their well-being, emphasising self-assessment and new self-care skills. This proves crucial in restoring therapeutic strength in chronic conditions and rebuilding trust between healthcare workers and patients.

-Dr. Cristina Aguzzoli,

Coordinator HPH Friuli Venezia Giulia Network

# HPH Standards on Developing a Health-Promoting Workplace

The International HPH Network has established standards to operationalise its vision and encourage the organization to realign its strategy, better tackle overarching health system challenges, and ultimately transform the organization into a health-promoting setting.

A comprehensive approach to workplace health promotion involves designing programs, policies, benefits, and an environment that caters to all employees' health and safety needs.

Figure 3 is our proprietary visual representation of a workplace health model grounded in HPH standards. This figure delineates a systematic process comprising four key steps guiding the development of a comprehensive workplace health program:

- I. **Assessment:** The initial step involves evaluating and adapting to the staff's health needs. This includes assessing current organizational practices and offering support for improving health-related behaviours.
- II. **Coordination:** This phase encompasses several key elements, such as involving employees in decision-making, addressing existing issues, promoting teamwork, securing leadership support, formulating a workplace health improvement plan, allocating dedicated resources, and enhancing communication.
- III. **Implementation:** This stage focuses on developing programs and policies to enhance well-being and improve working environments. This involves fostering a respectful atmosphere with well-lit and clean spaces, providing healthy nutrition options, establishing relaxation spaces, and cultivating an organizational "culture of health."
- IV. **Evaluation:** After implementing health-promoting initiatives, evaluation is essential and can be achieved by assessing staff productivity within the hospital setting (e.g., tracking staff turnover rates and absenteeism), monitoring healthcare costs, evaluating patient outcomes, examining clinical quality indicators, and comparing the hospital's performance to a similar industry benchmark institution.

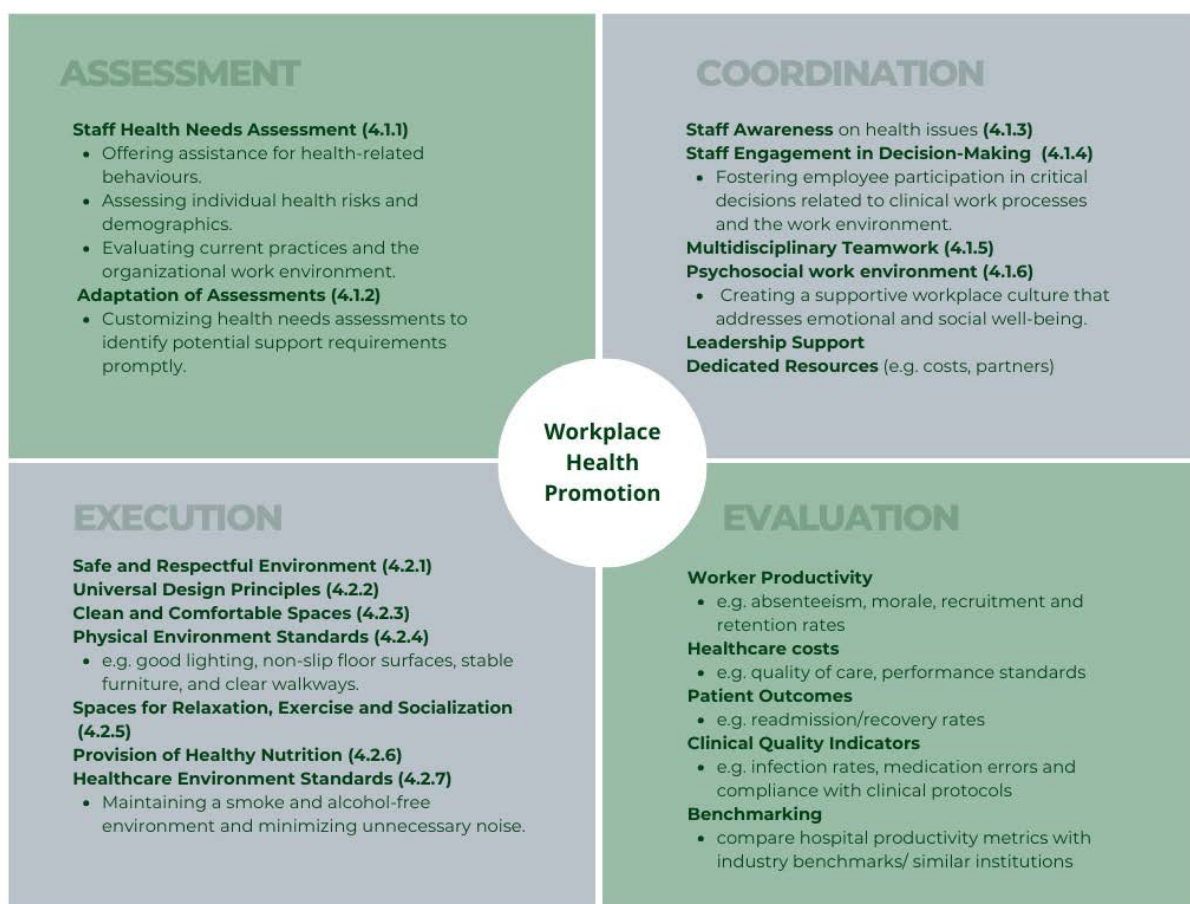


Figure 3: Workplace health promotion embedded in the HPH Standards

Mounting evidence suggests that programs adopting a coordinated and comprehensive approach and incorporating considerations for occupational safety and health threats to workers into the design and execution of workplace health promotion, both within and outside of work, yield more tremendous success than traditional isolated programs (Workplace Health Model, 2021) This integration can enhance program participation and effectiveness while benefitting the broader work organization and environment.

## Limitations

Encouraging healthy workplace activities proves to be a well-established strategy with numerous documented benefits. However, in the process of implementing such initiatives, it is essential to recognise potential challenges, such as:

- › Ensuring that initiatives effectively align with employees' working conditions and health needs.
- › Addressing potential concerns about the perceived level of effort required for participation.

- › Overcoming resource limitations that could hinder the successful execution of these initiatives.
- › Tackling any lack of understanding regarding the most effective ways to implement these programs.

It is essential to acknowledge that a one-size-fits-all solution may not be suitable. Therefore, when developing a workplace health promotion program, customisation is critical. Tailor initiatives to align with contextual factors, including the size, capacity, geographical location, and unique needs of your workplace or hospital setting.

## Conclusions

The global healthcare workforce crisis presents formidable challenges that profoundly impact patient care quality and the stability of healthcare systems and demand immediate and focused intervention.

In this critical context, the significance of proactive health promotion strategies has never been more apparent. Healthcare institutions must assume a central role in advocating the well-being of their healthcare employees by adapting to the evolving current landscape and recognising their distinct needs.

While healthcare institutions bear a significant burden of responsibility, it is crucial to acknowledge that the obligation does not solely rest on their shoulders. Governments and health authorities play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of the healthcare sector. This involves formulating and implementing policies integrating health-promoting initiatives in the training, recruitment, and retention strategies of the next generation of healthcare workers. By making collective investments in their health and sustainability, we lay the groundwork for a more resilient and robust healthcare sector, safeguarding the well-being of the industry and those it serves.



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## Annex

Recommendations for Small and Medium Enterprises (such as small clinics, practices):

While not all healthcare facilities possess the extensive infrastructures typical of large hospitals necessary for implementing expansive workplace health promotion programs, it is noteworthy that the Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SME) recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) are also designed to be adaptable to smaller facilities.

To facilitate the initiation of workplace health initiatives, we propose adopting strategies delineated in the latest WHO publication (Europe, 2023), coupled with drawing inspiration from practical, real-world workplace implementations. This proactive approach not only ensures the effectiveness of the health promotion program but also tailors it to the specific dynamics of your organization.

### Active Work and Living:

- › Walking Meetings: Encourage mobile discussions instead of the traditional meeting format.
- › Reminder Apps/Programs: Provide tools that suggest stretch exercises.
- › Ergonomic Solutions: Introduce fitness balls and sit-stand desks to enhance posture and core strength.
- › Promote Cycling/Walking: Encourage commuting to and from work by bike or walking.
- › Stair Usage: Display “point-of-decision” prompts near stairwells/elevators to encourage people to use stairs instead of a lift (particularly posters).
- › Step Tracking: Implement step-counting initiatives.
- › Company Challenges: Foster fun and friendly competition among staff (cycling competitions).

### Exercise and Fitness Programs:

- › Wellness Counsellors: Organize visits and teach easy-to-do exercises for the back and neck in small team training courses for employees.
- › Booster breaks: Increase movement time and reduce sedentary periods (warmup sessions that include aerobic exercises, stretching toning and flexibility exercises)

- › Physiotherapy Services: Offer a dedicated fast-track physiotherapy service for staff reporting musculoskeletal health issues.

## **Management and Leadership:**

- › Incentive Systems: Consider offering bonuses like gym passes, vouchers, or event sponsorships.
- › Policy Development: Create policies and action plans to promote physical activity.
- › Health Behaviour Programs: Encourage best practices in health by providing a Health Check and one-on-one dialogue with a psychologist to empower, reflect and act on one's well-being.
- › Policies: flexible times for beginning and ending a workday, job sharing and telecommuting. Formal or informal written statements designed to protect or promote employee health.

## **Communication and Dissemination:**

- › Expert Guidance: Seek talks or counselling sessions with a dietitian, fitness specialist or behavioural coach.
- › Information Materials: Distribute leaflets on safe walking routes to and from the workplace and the benefits of health promotion and physical activity through materials, literature, fact sheets, posters and videos.

## **Supplies and Premises:**

- › Bicycle Storage: Provide secure bicycle storage facilities.
- › Facilities: Establish equipped spaces for physical activity sessions and a well-lit, smoke-free space for relaxation during the breaks.