HIV/AIDS Prevention in the Workplace

Successful business relies on a productive labor force. Where the number of AIDS deaths continues to rise, businesses feel the financial pinch. Studies have projected losses of up to 56 percent of annual profits for some companies in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Companies incur many added expenses when employees or employees’ families succumb to AIDS. Absenteeism soars as workers grow weak, attend funerals or tend ailing relatives. Productivity plummets because of their absence, and the pool of available labor shrinks. Health care costs rise, including (for a growing number of companies) the cost of providing antiretroviral drugs to HIV-infected employees and dependents. Other new costs include higher medical and life insurance premiums and greater draw-down on disability benefits and pensions. In addition, employers must hire and train new workers to replace disabled employees, while absorbing burial costs and death benefits.

Although the business sector alone cannot stop the spread of HIV, businesses are well positioned to contribute resources and skills, help influence employee attitudes and sexual behaviors, and provide clinical services. The workplace offers a structured environment for sharing information, reinforcing notions of acceptable behavior, and implementing interventions. Businesses have learned that involving themselves in community HIV/AIDS prevention and care programs not only meets community needs but also enhances the company’s image and helps sustain the workforce.

Lessons Learned

No single workplace model is regularly shared across business sectors. But the experiences of a variety of businesses and workplaces — and the lessons learned in the process — suggest appropriate responses. Lessons gleaned from workplace HIV/AIDS initiatives include:

Leadership commitment demonstrated within the workplace and beyond. This is to ensure that HIV/AIDS prevention leadership is visible at all workplace levels to all employees and their dependents. It can involve:

- Training managers — especially human resource and supervisory managers and workers’ representatives — to address HIV/AIDS issues and respond to concerns in the workplace.
- Providing adequate annual financial and practical investments to ensure that programs run effectively and efficiently.
- Demonstrating recognition that HIV/AIDS does not stop at the company gates, by committing to programs in the community and interacting with government and other businesses in the country.

Comprehensive responses within the workplace. Piecemeal programs, programs only for certain categories of workers, outdated information, responses that cover prevention but neglect post-infection needs — all these convey a lack of employer commitment and tend to diminish employee interest and commitment.

Clear, consistent, and up-to-date information. This should include information on the disease, related workplace issues and the employer’s responses to the epidemic.

- Employees want regular information, especially given the ever-changing nature of the epidemic and research on aspects of the disease.
- Employees want to feel there is a safe environment for getting information and conferring with workplace managers and peers on HIV/AIDS issues.
Workplace policies. These should contain clear provisions for every group in the workplace, such as senior staff or dependents. They should be consistent with—and supportive of—workplace prevention and care programs. Policies should be designed to ensure that company practices help reduce employees’ risk of contracting HIV or infecting others. They should also be as consistent as possible across employee groups to avoid the perception of discrimination or favoritism.

HIV/AIDS prevention and care initiatives. These should be available to employees and dependents within the workplace or readily accessible outside the workplace. They could include:

- Up-to-date information, often provided by trained peer educators;
- Male and female condoms;
- Sexually transmitted infection (STI) diagnosis and treatment;
- Voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) services;
- Care support, including flexibility in work schedules and assignments;
- Access to all appropriate drugs, as employers increasingly recognize the value of providing antiretroviral drugs;
- Legal and caregiving support for the dependents of infected employees; and
- Annually updated information on employee benefits.

A pro-active commitment to avoid stigma and discrimination and maintain confidentiality. Special training for managers and peer educators on these issues is part of this commitment.

Employee involvement. Employees should be involved at all levels and in all aspects of workplace responses to the epidemic, including:

- Involvement in designing or revamping workplace policies and programs.
- Selection of peers within the workforce — including among middle and senior managers — who can provide colleagues with information, counseling and/or prevention supplies.

Monitoring and review. The effectiveness of HIV/AIDS initiatives should be monitored and reviewed regularly, with a willingness to adapt program and policies as the epidemic and employee needs evolve.

Resources

1. Asian Business Coalition on AIDS, [www.abconaid.org](http://www.abconaid.org)