

# Put it out

How a smoke-free work force saves money **Interviewed by Amy Dison**

**A**ccording to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, employees who use tobacco cost their employers \$1,300 more per year than those who don't. Typically, smokers have higher health care costs, higher absenteeism and overall less productivity. While these statistics are not new, employers today are taking steps to prevent such costs from accruing.

Many employers are creating a smoke-free work environment that either prohibits employees from smoking on their premises or, in some cases, from smoking at all.

"Seventy percent of employees claim they want to quit smoking, and employers are implementing policies and education programs that help them in this process," says Wendy Wigger, director of wellness for Priority Health. "Arming employees with the right tools and education is a win-win for employees and employers."

*Smart Business* spoke with Wigger about an employer's right to implement smoke-free policies and how to successfully implement such policies.

## Is creating a smoke-free workplace legal?

Yes. Employers have the right to create a safe working environment for all employees. This gives employers the right to protect nonsmokers from second-hand smoke in the work environment. I should note that, in some cases, a labor union may have smoking breaks or lounges included in their contract, but this is something we're seeing less and less.

Currently, a growing number of counties in Michigan are implementing work-site regulations requiring businesses to provide a smoke-free worksite. Restaurants and bars are excluded.

This has been spurred in part by employee feedback and statistics from places such as the CDC, which reports there are more than 250 toxic chemicals in cigarettes and more than 50 that have been linked to causing cancer. These chemicals can be found in second-hand smoke, thereby placing nonsmokers at risk for disease.



**Wendy Wigger**  
Director of wellness  
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## Don't employees have the right to take a break and smoke if they wish?

In general terms, smokers aren't considered a protected class under the American Disabilities Act. Therefore, employers aren't legally obligated to provide smoke rooms or smoke breaks to employees.

An employer has the right to create its own worksite policies that address the issue of smoking on premises or during work time. Some employers have taken a stance to not only specify they are a smoke-free workplace but that they also will not hire smokers.

## What are some of the best practices used by companies throughout Michigan who went smoke free?

Communication and support are two key factors employers should consider to ensure a smooth and successful implementation of a smoke-free work policy. This includes providing ample notice to employees that such a policy is going into place. With good notice and supportive resources, the employer is

less likely to meet resistance. The following are best practice steps utilized by many employers:

- Educate employees. Supply employees with the statistics about the dangers of smoking and second-hand smoke.
- Assess the effect on employees. Survey employees to see how many people the policy will affect and obstacles they may face.
- Give employees ample notice of a policy change. Aim to provide at least six months notice.
- Provide supportive quitting materials and education. It's important to provide many tools through different mediums. There may be online classes as well as printed materials and guides to help people through the quitting process.
- Include support for families. If an employee has family members who smoke, it may be beneficial to offer help to them, as well.
- Clearly establish policies and communicate policies to employees.
- Implement and enforce new policies in a nondiscriminatory manner.
- Consider offering incentives to nonsmokers and those trying to quit.

## How can employers use incentives to help implement a smoke-free environment?

Incentives are a great way to motivate employees to quit smoking. I encourage employers to consider rewarding all nonsmokers — not just those who are trying to quit. One way to accomplish this is to offer a monetary incentive to anyone who is not smoking six months from the policy start date. Some employers have rebated the co-pay amount for nicotine replacement therapies for employees trying to quit. Regardless of your approach, you want to be conscious of the message you convey to all employees. This can be a win-win for all. <<

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