

The Impact of Health on Performance

An Interview with Dee Edington,
 Founder and Chairman, Edington Associates, LLC

EDITORS' NOTE Dee Edington, Ph.D. is also Professor Emeritus of Kinesiology where he was Director of the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center. Trained in mathematics, kinesiology, and biochemistry, Dr. Edington received his B.S and Ph.D. degrees from Michigan State University and completed his M.S. at Florida State University. He did post-doctoral work at the University of Toronto and taught at the University of Massachusetts before going to Michigan in 1976. At Michigan, his research focused on the precursors of disease and high-level vitality. He is the author or co-author of over 1,000 articles and presentations, as well as several books.



Dee Edington

COMPANY BRIEF Edington Associates (edingtonassociates.com) is a team of individuals with diverse academic and applied experience from many different disciplines that are dedicated to helping clients create thriving and high-performing workforces and workplaces. Their methods are based on the principles outlined in Edington's highly popular book on health management, *Zero Trends: Health as a Serious Economic Strategy*, and further developed in the 2016 book with co-author Jennifer Pitts, *Shared Values- Shared Results™: Positive Organizational Health as a Win-Win Philosophy*.

How does the work you did with the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center tie into the work you do with Edington Associates?

When I founded the Health Management Research Center (HMRC) in 1978, there was no data relating healthcare costs with health risk factors, although it was well-known that health risks are often precursors to heart disease. The center eventually grew to 34 individuals working with a database of over two million individuals from hundreds of companies.

Over a period of 30 years, we demonstrated when individuals moved to low-risk or stayed low-risk, they had lower healthcare costs than others. We extended our research to correlating risks and change in risks to the costs associated with absenteeism and low productivity.

The *Zero Trends* book summarizes the HMRC's research over those 30 years, which provided the scientific basis for positive organizational health. The book also demonstrates how the science-based strategies

could be implemented in organizations given a five-pillar framework: senior leadership, operations leadership, self-leadership, recognition and rewards, and quality assurance.

It became clear to me that it was time to refocus my work towards positive individual and organizational health using the five-pillar framework. I gave up tenure and retired from the university to form Edington Associates with the purpose of developing positive organizational health as a strategy for optimal organizational performance.

We knew the challenge would be to help senior leaders see a path to get from their current state to positive organizational health and eventually to optimal organizational performance.

Organizations are good at displaying their organizational values, but seldom do we find a statement of how the values are demonstrated on a daily basis. Much too often, organizations stray from those written values while working for conflicting results. This disconnect creates problems in recruiting and retaining their best employees.

Employers value employees as a most valuable major resource. Also, they likely agree that employees drive products and services and, thus, drive revenue. However, this value is often buried under the pressure of producing shareholder value and profits.

If employees value working at an employer-of-choice and they agree that working at the company is good for their health, then they are likely to stay at the organization and remain highly productive.

These two conditions are what led to the win-win philosophy and are a major step towards optimal organizational performance.

The above led me, along with co-author Jennifer Pitts, to write a follow-up to the *Zero Trends* book: *Shared Values-Shared Results: Positive Organizational Health as a Win-Win Philosophy*.

Is it a company's responsibility to be involved in the health of its employees?

Developing and retaining healthy and high-performing employees is a self-serving value, as it should be. Without healthy and high-performing employees, excess absenteeism, low commitment, and low morale lead employees to put in their time and eventually they leave or stay and grow into dead wood.

The employer needs the employees to feel the organization is the best place to work and they

need to demonstrate that they care about employees' health and well-being.

The employees need to demonstrate to the employer that they value working at an employer of choice and they agree that working there is good for their health.

The above is the basis of a win-win philosophy and a major step towards optimal organizational performance.

How important is it to educate people that this is a smart business decision?

This is a key question for employers and employees because education addresses the "why" prior to "what" and "how." Currently most employers do not associate revenue generation and company success to healthy and high-performing employees. Our position is that the "why" is crucial because everything that happens in the organization concerning the health of the people impacts the health of the organization. Also, everything that happens concerning the health of the organization impacts the health of the people.

How critical is prevention as opposed to treatment after someone gets sick?

Currently, both prevention and treatment are needed for overall health. Prevention is crucial to address the first step toward disease. However, if someone gets sick, he obviously needs treatment followed by secondary prevention to prevent a relapse and keep him on his physician's recommended protocol.

If individuals are not sick, then it is less intuitive but more crucial to help the healthy people stay healthy. Only recently have the leaders in the organization begun to value the learning; it is easier and less costly to help individuals remain healthy than to treat them after they get sick. If we keep people healthy and engaged with the company, it's important for everyone.

Are you optimistic that we can address the key issues to truly transform healthcare?

I'm very optimistic that there are unique solutions for every person and for every organization. In America, we are focused on the increasing cost of healthcare and as a consequence we're primarily focused on reducing costs rather than the total benefits of positive organizational health. My biased view is that our primary effort should be focused on improving health and performance rather than waiting for, and then treating, disease.

What I am promoting is to look further upstream and create a higher level of positive organizational health to get to a win-win philosophy, which typically begins with senior visionary leaders. ●