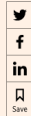


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# Business: Corporate world lends big guns to battle the disease

Sarah Murray NOVEMBER 30 2009



Feedback

A recent report from the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (Gain) argues that nutrition plays a critical role in supporting the health of people who are HIV-positive or have Aids.

The findings from Gain – a non-profit organisation that promotes public-private partnerships to fight malnutrition – present an opportunity for the corporate sector, particularly food companies, to join the fight against the disease.

Companies have long contributed to the battle against HIV and Aids. Many donate money from corporate foundations or add to funds raised by employees. Some have donated large quantities of drugs to developing countries.

Increasingly, however, the corporate sector is also offering the skills and expertise of its executives. In partnership with governments and community organisations, many businesses are developing innovative programmes in areas such as social marketing, capacity building and advocacy.

“Companies such as Mac, Chevron and Levi-Strauss have given millions of dollars, much of which has come from employees as well as the corporation,” says John Newsome, head of the US HIV Initiative at the Global Business Coalition (GBC) on HIV/Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria. “But beyond that we’re seeing new levels of engagement more broadly.”

And while many companies run workforce health programmes among their staff in severely affected countries in Africa and elsewhere – some even giving employees free anti-retroviral drugs – many are also addressing continuing infection rates in the US and Europe.

Among them is Mac, the US cosmetics group, which has been using its marketing experience to change perceptions of the disease. As well as earmarking the proceeds from its Viva Glam range for the Mac Aids Fund, Mac has been running an awareness-raising programme with the singer Fergie, who is the face of the Viva Glam line.

As part of the programme, designed to reach Britain’s African community, which accounts for nearly 50 per cent of the UK’s annual new diagnoses, Fergie has visited HIV-positive women leaders from organisations such as the African HIV Policy Network.

Education is another focus for companies, with companies such as Standard Chartered operating prevention-focused HIV education programmes. Meanwhile, in Washington DC, Pfizer, the pharmaceuticals company, is using its sales teams to support the city’s outreach efforts on HIV testing.

Moreover, companies are joining forces with other businesses. In the Washington outreach programme, for example, the initiative also draws on the resources of OraSure, the HIV testing company.

In this respect, organisations such as the GBC can play a convening role. “We identify where some of the biggest resource gaps are and identify companies who can meet some of those unmet needs with unique business skills and assets – and then get them to join forces,” says Mr Newsome.

Corporate expertise in areas such as strategy and performance measurement can be applied to fighting HIV-Aids. When Johnson & Johnson, the US healthcare products and services company, works with community and government partner organisations to reduce mother-to-child HIV transmission and its spread among women and young people, the company brings to the table business disciplines as well as funding.

“With the expertise that we have in strategic planning, we have partners who welcome that input,” says Sharon D’Agostino, vice-president of corporate contributions and community affairs.

Companies can also lend their brand and credibility to HIV-Aids initiatives. “Not only are we able to focus on the impact,” says Ms D’Agostino, “but also other funders would be willing to support them.”

For companies, part of the payback comes in reduced absenteeism among staff who are ill or away from work looking after relatives, lower recruitment expenditure on hiring staff to replace those too ill to work and fewer early pension pay-outs.

However, companies are also winning loyalty from employees not directly affected by the disease, and among potential recruits. “We know that these efforts are very important to those who are joining corporations around the globe,” says Ms D’Agostino.

Mr Newsome agrees. “There’s an understanding that employees benefit directly and appreciate the company’s involvement,” he says. “People like to know their company is doing good – it’s motivating and it drives retention and recruitment.”

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