

Wellness in the Workplace

Communicate your way to a better benefits budget



It's no secret that healthy employees can mean a healthier benefits budget. Companies who create and sustain a culture of wellness in the workplace spend less on health benefits. They see less absenteeism and fewer disability claims. And their employees are more productive on the job.

It takes more than merely offering fitness memberships and installing a wellness program. Wellness must become a way of life, deeply embedded in your company's mission and values, policies and procedures, and your health benefits. But, if you want to maximize the return on your investment, your employees have to want it too. You need to motivate them and keep them engaged. Communication is a key ingredient to achieving this.

Evidence supports wellness in the workplace

The question on employers' lips isn't whether wellness programs work. That much is clear. Among employers in a 2010 survey, 56% chose workplace wellness programs as a more effective approach to controlling health care costs than disease management programs.¹ The accounts of positive impact of wellness programs are reported in all industries, regions, and types of employers.²

Instead, employers are asking, "How much can we save?" "What is the ROI?" and "How can we ensure success?" According to a 2010 report from the Health Management Research Center at the University of Michigan, companies can save \$6 on health insurance costs for every dollar invested in wellness programs.³ Five other studies show ROI estimates range from \$1.65 to \$6.00 in cost savings per \$1.00 spent.¹

A more recent article in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*⁴ revealed an effective workplace wellness program could reduce average annual costs per working-age adult by an impressive \$649.09 or 18.4%. That figure is substantially higher for employers with older working adults, who typically have bigger health issues. This increased average could be the result of refinement and more widespread implementation of best practices as this relatively new cost-saving strategy becomes more prevalent and understood.

Communication is among best practices for success

You cannot simply throw wellness programs on the table and expect employees to run with it. You must also spend adequate time and effort explaining to employees the reasons, goals and benefits of the program.⁵

In 2010, 58% of employers reported low engagement as the greatest obstacle to their wellness initiatives.⁶ Some possible reasons for low engagement are:

- Poor communication at onset of the program
- Poor education about programs and resources
- Employees who don't presently have a health condition don't believe they need a wellness program

The fact is, three out of every four dollars spent on health care results from preventable conditions.⁷ Keeping employees healthy is a long-term commitment. Education becomes vital.

On the other hand, a study of 10 employers who experienced success with wellness initiatives revealed strong communication activities.² In another study, employers' top three gauges for program success are participation, engagement and employee feedback. Where health improvement programs are not working well, employers choose most often to re-evaluate their overall strategy (69%) and/or increase communications (61%).⁸

Employees, their families and supervisors need to know what you're doing and why with consistent messaging about the value and direction of the program. Employers should communicate early and often, but with a long-term communications strategy.

Use a variety of communication media

Messages should be directed toward the overall workforce and through diverse media channels. Successful organizations have used posters and bulletin boards to deliver information and reminders. Others use health and wellness themed newsletters, while others hold 'lunch-n-learn' presentations to raise understanding of the overall program.¹ General Electric uses a number of strategies but also held a Global Day of Health to promote wellness efforts.¹

A 2010 employee engagement study of 954 employers showed their most common communication methods include: emails, intranet and websites; face-to-face presentations; and posters, flyers, and print publications to engage employees.⁹ Lower on the same list are virtual meetings, social media, videos and podcasts.

Independent branding also helps to create recognition of wellness information. For example, you can create a logo or theme directly related to your cause, like Johnson & Johnson's award-winning Live for Life campaign.¹

Create a communication timeline

Many wellness programs kick off with strong messaging and management support, but then the task of creating and sending communications falls to the bottom of the "to do" list.¹⁰ Employee engagement fizzles out along with it.

It helps to include a communications plan with the overall strategy. Some companies get outside help for communications support.^{9, 11}

For example, you might plan to communicate your intention to promote wellness even before gathering benchmark health data from employees. At kickoff, provide clear, motivating information about wellness programs, how they work and any incentives for participation. And throughout the year, provide health and wellness tips and reminders to keep employees engaged. Remember to include family members who are also members of the health insurance plan and contribute to the cost of health benefits.

Refresh your materials each year. Communicate successes and program changes to re-motivate employees and families. Remember that a "culture" is an ongoing and consistent practice. It takes several years to realize full return on investment and, once achieved, continuation of programs and communications is key to maintaining cost savings.

Small employers can too!

Large employers are generally more successful with their wellness program ROI because they are more likely to formalize their plans. Companies with formal wellness plans have a higher average participation rate than those without formal wellness plans.¹²

This is not to say small employers cannot, or do not, see results. Today, many insurers include wellness programs with their health plans.

These health plans can be costly and often do not include key aspects of wellness programs, such as onsite bio screenings and employee communications. Small employers can outsource these services to maximize the value of the overall employee wellness initiative.





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