

Then and Now

National Wellness Expert Traces Evolution

By Charlee Beasor

Obesity rates continue to skyrocket – along with the prevalence of diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and depression. And health care costs remain on that seemingly endless upward spiral.

Is wellness the answer? We asked national expert Judd Allen (keynote speaker at the September 26-27 Indiana Employer Health and Wellness Summit) about the current state of wellness and how it's changed over the years. Based out of Vermont and carrying on the company (Human Resources Institute, LLC) his father, Robert Allen, Ph.D., started in the 1950s, Allen has written numerous books on the subject and travels the country speaking about wellness mentoring and culture. He serves on the board of directors of the National Wellness Institute and is an editor of the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

An avid runner, Allen has completed more than 25 consecutive New York City marathons. In addition, he has participated in a number of Ironman triathlons and long-distance cross-country ski races.

BizVoice®: As a national expert on wellness in the workplace, tell us about the transition from what wellness was 10 to 20 years ago to what it is today?

Judd Allen: “I think that originally, there was an idea of having support groups, and so a company like Johnson & Johnson might have different subject areas: one on weight and one on stress. One of the clients we worked with ... wanted to apply their technology to wellness, so we helped them with the collaboration of a health risk assessment. Early on, there was a lot of emphasis on this health risk assessment.



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– Judd Allen, Ph.D.
Human Resources Institute

“I remember dad wrote a book in the '70s called *Lifegain* and on one page there was this (health) self-scoring thing. It made the front page of *Time Magazine*. It was a new thing, this idea of, ‘measure this and see what your life expectancy will be.’ That technology has been a core technology within health and wellness.

It’s my least favorite piece – I think that idea of scaring people and the idea of focusing on what’s wrong with people is not as productive as we thought.”

BV: What challenges are facing the health and wellness industry currently?

JA: “I think the high failure rates is the largest impediment to wellness programs, not the cost. I just think people are discouraged and they don’t believe that they can personally change. And as the manager or executive, you are reluctant to tell your employees to do something that you can’t do.

“I think even though we’ve proven over the years this is something that has worked out for our industry – we’ve proven we can save money doing this, at least on health care costs – that it is still a hard sell. Employers are pretty much desperate for a solution to the health care costs dilemma. But it doesn’t matter, because I think that the programs they design haven’t been able

to produce a result anyone could write home about.”

BV: Why is the wellness environment so important?

JA: “First, in the typical wellness program where you have people sign up for things, you’re going to get a low number of people signing up because they have other commitments or it’s not to their liking. If you change the environment, you’re changing everyone. Just by being there, it’s a 100% change.

“...We really are not a very health-aware society. At least 80% (of people) can tell you what they tried to do last year and what their plans are for next year. Yet, less than 20% of those goals are achieved, and only by changing the environment can we have people succeed.”

BV: What about Indiana? We have struggled with our statewide health situation for many years.

JA: “For me, the greatest hope for Indiana is for us to go up that learning curve and create programming that basically celebrates people’s individual interests and why we should declare victory. (We need to) determine our success (based) on whether people are successful, not on whether they attended. It’s a new gold standard in my view.”

BV: Talk about wellness mentoring and how it can be an effective tool in the workplace.

JA: “The idea of peer support, of people helping each other, is really key in wellness. The support group idea was a good one; it’s just impractical. There’s an issue in peer support that’s very important: it’s not just a quantity thing – it’s a quality thing also. It’s nice to have a buddy, but great if they had some skills in supporting you.

“(I wrote) *Healthy Habits, Helpful Friends*, and it basically lays out six primary peer support skills. I didn’t invent these concepts of finding a role model; what I did was laid out a simple way for people to think about how they could help each other. ... This year in Brazil, there are 2,800 companies using this system. It has great applicability to large and small workplaces, because you only need two people helping each other. And people who help others are the ones most likely to benefit.”

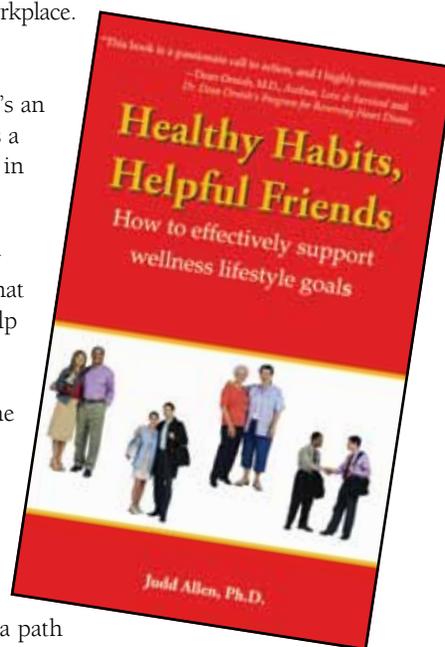
BV: What are the biggest wellness saboteurs that you’ve witnessed?

JA: “The biggest for me is as long as people are trying and failing, it’s a hard product to sell. People get discouraged. We have to work to help that success rate. I do think that I’m not really that thrilled about us going down a path where the only value proposition is money. I think that the nice thing about wellness is that it offers all sorts of important benefits. A smart CEO says, ‘I can save money and I can save lives.’ I think people come to wellness for a variety of reasons, including caring better for their families.

“I don’t think we have to undersell our product; this is a great way for you to save on health care claims. I’m in favor of that good data, but it can’t be all about greed. Fifteen years ago, we were only talking about health care claims. Then I and others (said), ‘This could be as important as productivity. Who can work if they’re not feeling well?’ We found that the productivity value is at least as high as the health care claims.”



Allen’s father, Robert Allen, Ph.D., created the Human Resources Institute in the 1950s to address business and social problems by understanding and shaping cultures. Judd Allen leads that charge today.



INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Judd Allen, Human Resources Institute, LLC, at www.healthyculture.com