

Wellness Plans

Not All Programs are Created Equal

By Bridget Scott

Wellness is such a broad term that it can imply many different things. Some people might define a wellness program as a fitness membership, monthly initiatives to promote healthy living, annual health screenings or even an onsite clinic. A wellness program can be all of these things and more. The most important aspect of a wellness program is that it meets the needs of the employees and the organization.

Before implementing a wellness program, leaders in an organization need to invest time researching what the employees would like to see offered and what components actually will have an impact on the well-being of the staff. There are several tactics you can employ to gain insight. We have found surveys and focus groups hosted by an outside party to be quite helpful in obtaining employees' perspectives on what is valuable in a wellness program.

Another great resource often overlooked is data available from the health plan administrator. Most plan administrators or insurance providers will give employers access to reports that show utilization, high-dollar diagnoses, preventive care visits, etc. This information often will allow you to start painting a picture of how healthy or unhealthy your group might be. We feel strongly that investing the time up front will pay off in the long run.

Between employee feedback and health plan data, you are fairly well equipped to start planning the goals and objectives of the wellness program. This is also the time to determine your budget. Wellness programs can vary from very minimal cost to high dollar. Typically, there is a direct correlation between the overall cost of a program and the return on investment (ROI), also sometimes referred to as value on investment (VOI). This does not imply that if you have no budget or a low budget you should not consider implementing a program. Go back to your objectives and employees' needs, prioritize and know your resources.

Phase in the rollout

Once the organizational objectives of the wellness program have been established, it's time to launch it to employees. Keep in mind, employee buy-in is extremely important, which means you may want to shy away from rolling out every last detail to your staff. In fact, we think introducing a wellness program works best in a phased approach. For example, if the overall objective of the program is to reduce the overall health risk factors of the organization and create a culture that supports the well-being of employees and their families, you might start by forming a wellness committee. From there, the committee might coordinate a health fair or onsite health risk assessments and screenings to check biometrics.

Communication goes a long way. Keeping employees informed through consistent messaging and continuously delivering on that message is crucial to the program's long-term success. There is



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an old statistic from a Watson Wyatt study that found that mediocre plans that were well communicated fared far better with employees in terms of satisfaction than those that were poorly communicated but richer in terms of value. Although this statistic refers to health plans, we can assume this same principal would apply to a wellness program. We have seen it be the case within organizations of all shapes and sizes.

Again, to ensure you are keeping employees engaged in the program: communicate, communicate, communicate. My theory is it takes seven times for a message to stick. Put your advertising hat on and market the wellness program in a way that employees can embrace. Establishing a brand that resonates with them can be helpful in achieving consistency with your communication efforts. You should also remember that not everyone receives information in the same way. While you may not tweet or think posters in the break rooms are a viable way to receive information, someone else likely does.

Step by step

So it all boils down to this:

- **Do your homework.** Invest the time up front to know your audience. What is important to them? What health concerns are they facing today and over the next five years? What is the company hoping to achieve by offering a program?
- **Develop a plan.** This should include not only the goals of the program, but also the budget. Are you looking to spend less than \$1,000, or are you ready to make an investment in a program that engages employees in a way that can change behavior? There is no right or wrong answer; just be realistic.
- **Get employee buy-in early on.** This is done through consistent communication and delivering on promises. You might consider starting with a committee of five to 10 people who are passionate about the health and well-being of the group.
- **Promote the program like it's the latest iPhone.** There is something to be said for creating a buzz. Wellness is one thing you want the rumor mill to be talking about.

We have seen workplace wellness programs that consist of a newsletter, posters and educational opportunities be as successful as one that offered an annual health risk assessment and onsite screening. The common denominator is that both programs are tailored to the employees of each unique organization, and they have found just the right way to communicate and promote the program. Go for it! There is no time like the present.

INFORMATION LINK

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