



By Tom Schuman

# TAKING THE WELLNESS JOURNEY

## More Opportunities, Additional Challenges

Workplace wellness, circa the early 2000s: “Here’s some money so you don’t have to pay as much when you go to your local gym.” Or, “We really think you should try to eat healthier” – as we provide calorie-filled donuts at our morning office meetings.

Fast forward to today: Encouraging employees (and often family members) to take advantage of clinics and health coaches. Offering seminars on financial best practices and assistance for social and emotional issues.

Here’s how Cara Long, a clinical account executive with Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, describes it:

“One of the biggest changes is moving

from that physical approach (fitness centers, etc.) to more of a holistic approach to wellness. Not just physical, but mental, emotional, financial, social. All those aspects are very important,” she states.

“Second is a reactive to proactive approach to wellness in the workplace. Reactive is where we all started, providing access for people who are ill. Proactive is resources for all the members inside the organization.” For Long and Anthem, that is serving people in the following categories: healthy, at-risk, chronic and critical.

Jamie Thomas, a principal in the Indianapolis office of global consultant Mercer, also uses the all-encompassing description. She gives the examples of weight loss or tobacco cessation 10 years ago compared to a

much broader strategy today.

“Now employers,” she says, “are recognizing there were a lot of outside factors impacting (an) individual’s ability to meet metrics that were put into place. They’ve taken a step back and have a more holistic approach.”

In addition to these evolutions, what are some of the keys to workplace wellness success? Don’t expect immediate results, make sure your culture supports the efforts, leadership buy-in remains essential and don’t ever – ever – feel you have communicated enough.

### It’s a long way home

Alex DeSantis, director of human resources for IDI Composites International in Noblesville, discloses that the road to wellness for the 55-year-old company began about a dozen



The Wellness Council of Indiana begins its second decade in affiliation with the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. It guides workplaces and communities through the development of comprehensive health and wellness strategies. Learn more at [www.wellnessindiana.org](http://www.wellnessindiana.org).

This is the first of a yearlong series on a variety of wellness topics.

years ago. IDI is a global custom formulator and manufacturer of thermoset molding compounds.

“We took small, incremental steps throughout the years,” he relates. “But the focus was: ‘Where do we need to go in eight, 10 years to provide the tools for employees to adopt healthy lifestyles and hopefully reduce health care costs?’ ”

The program started with on-site screenings, paying for gym memberships and basic education classes. In recent years, it has evolved to an annual physical, nicotine test and biometric measures (employees must pass two of these four measures to obtain the highest possible savings on their health insurance premiums). Spouses who are within the medical plan are included in the screenings.

“You have to have a long-term vision. Even if you do screenings on-site, that’s going to cost you money, right?” DeSantis asks. “It’s like checking your oil one time a year and you haven’t done it for five years – some cars are going to need fixing. If it’s people, your medical bills, your claims are going to go up.

“Based on my experience, if you figure you’re going to see savings off the bat, you’re not! More than likely, you’re going to see costs go up.”

Lisa Day, total rewards specialist with Kimball International in Jasper, agrees that an organization must be in it for the long haul, but she does point out some potential ancillary benefits.

“You will get testimonial from people – some who say ‘I don’t participate in X, but I feel it’s really great we have that for our employees’. Or some might say, ‘I only take advantage of one or two (wellness offerings)’, but (they appreciate) having opportunities available.”

Thomas says that factor ties into reducing turnover, an especially important consideration in today’s battle for talent.

“It’s no longer just a medical plan. It’s how can I make this person’s life easier ... with behavioral health resources, programs that can provide backup day care,” she contends. “If an employee walks in and sees I have all this to help with life at home so I can focus on being a productive employee, it’s going to make them feel more valued and want to be there.”

Long uses a wellness-related analogy to make her point about the time frame for results.

“A lot want change overnight. You didn’t gain 100 pounds overnight; you can’t lose 100 pounds overnight,” she poses. “A wellness program takes time – it takes years. Without a three- to five-year plan, you’re always going to feel like you’re failing. Focus on realistic goals, then move through year after year after year.”



An available space was turned into an on-site yoga class at Kimball International, which also features a family wellness fair at its annual employee picnic.



## Keep on talking

Whether beginning a wellness initiative or expanding a long-established program, one constant is getting the word out. The guidance is to do it early, do it often – and then maybe repeat it all over again.

“You can have the best program in the world, but if people are not engaged, it’s not making a difference,” Long observes. “You have to have an effective communications plan.”

Day, with 22 years of experience at Kimball and the last 10 with an emphasis on wellness, has the benefit of a near-site health center that is also open to spouses and dependents. It has become, in part, a “communication hub for our families.

“Whenever you get into the subject of health and wellness, if it provides value, you need to be talking about it. Because it’s highly personal, they might not pay attention to it but one day it might resonate. So we just recommunicate and recommunicate.”

DeSantis admits it was more of a struggle in the early days as employees were unaware of the value of the screenings and questioned being asked about personal aspects of their lives.

He notes similar sentiments as Day: “I would say it’s communication, communication, communication. Try to make it as personal as possible. If they have a healthier lifestyle, there will be fewer bills when they retire. They will be healthier.”

## It’s all about culture

But even before communication comes into play, another “C” word is essential. If it is not in place, your wellness efforts will falter and overall company success is in jeopardy. The key ingredient: Culture.

“It really comes down to culture in a lot of ways,” according to Day. “When I speak to other employers dabbling in this and trying to figure it out, I always say, ‘Your culture has

to support it. You need to start there, all the way from your executive leadership down to your line leaders.’”

Long reiterates the common refrain that it really has to start from the top to alter a company culture. And even though she opened with praise for the more proactive nature of wellness programs, she adds, “We still have quite a ways to go. People understand the concept, but it’s actually taking that leap forward and embedding it in the culture that you have.”

National surveys outline the value wellness can have on company culture – 77% of employees backing that in recent research by TalentLyft. But Thomas, who works with a variety of clients in Indiana

and beyond, believes there is a clear reason why so many organizations struggle with a wellness strategy.

“You have to have leadership buy-in. Changing your culture to one of well-being can take a while ... like turning a ship,” she offers in comparison. “It’s a harder sell because it’s a softer return on investment. There are still those expectations (of immediate ROI).”

Clients tell her their HR teams are too lean, they wear too many hats and they don’t have the capacity for new initiatives – including wellness expansion. “They are overwhelmed with where to start, how to measure it and to get buy-in from their leadership. Probably leadership buy-in is the biggest challenge I hear.”

## WELLNESS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT



**87%** Employees that expect their employer to support them in balancing work and personal commitments



**61%** Employees burned out on the job



**61%** Employees that say they have made healthier lifestyle choices due to company’s wellness program

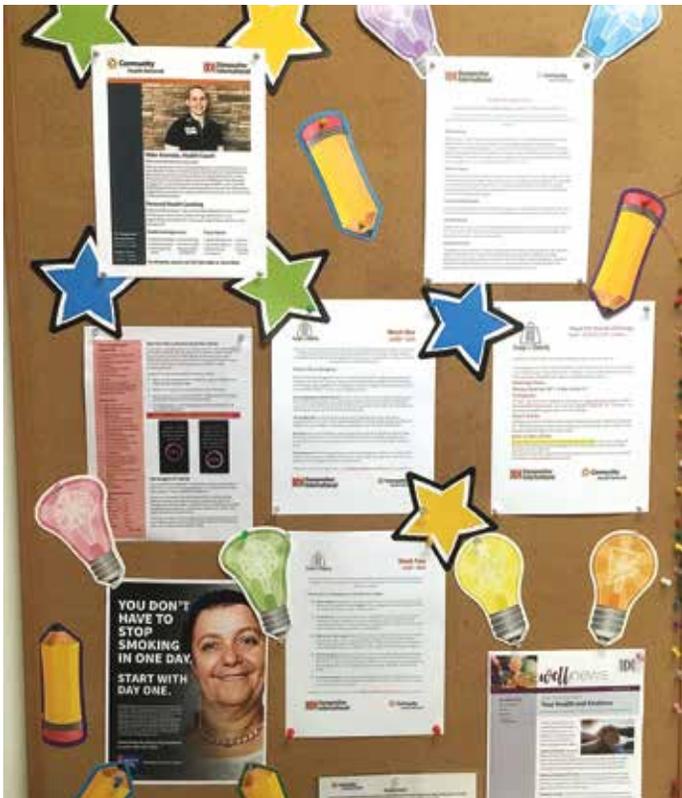
**70%** Employers that have improved physical environments to encourage healthy behaviors



**89%** Workers at companies that support well-being initiatives are more likely to recommend the company as a good place to work



Source: Forbes



One can never overcommunicate when it comes to wellness programs and initiatives as demonstrated by this effort at IDI Composites International.

DeSantis concurs on the strategic struggle, noting that many company leaders “don’t believe in it; they don’t see the true value of it. For some, it’s the flavor of the month. It’s not an easy thing (to measure) like sales margin.”

And while an organization “may have a terrible year from a financial perspective with your health care claims, a good wellness program has many, many wonderful impacts for that workplace culture.”

### Big or small, it works for all

While some associate fitness centers and on-site clinics as the face of wellness programs, even those amenities are evolving. Thomas says it may not be a buzzword yet, but there is more talk about concierge services. She gives the example of the Haven start-up from Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway and JPMorgan.

One of the ingredients is using telemedicine but taking it to a new level if further care is required. Instead of sending the employee to a physician’s office, the doctor comes to the workplace. One-stop advocacy services to help people deal with the complexity of the health care system are another growing concierge option.

“One piece I am seeing,” Long reveals, “is the lifestyle approach. Let’s get to the root problem, not cover it up with medication. On-site clinics are being more proactive, getting to the root of what is going on with that person.”

But what about the smaller employers? Long says it starts with “making sure you understand fully what you are paying for today. There are a lot of programs out there that are either embedded in your plan or community programs that are free. Try to be creative around

what you already have.”

While Kimball may be a large furniture manufacturer, Day shares some easy-to-implement wellness steps that can work for an organization of any size.

Before the on-site café with healthy snacks and meals, an employee mentioned a desire for a fresh salad for lunch. The answer was a pitch-in salad bar.

With a team member certified as a yoga instructor, employees took over a conference room, pushed back the tables and had a yoga class once a week.

Walking breaks were set up for both the morning and afternoon.

“That doesn’t cost anything,” Day attests. “Now, we have walking maps showing mileage. When you involve your employees and grow with them, they really become excited about it.”

And employees are encouraged to provide honest feedback through an annual wellness survey.

One of the early lessons for Day was realizing she did not have to go it alone.

“When I started, I thought I had to do this all by myself. Then I’m like, naïve me, I’m such a dummy, look at all these community resources that can help – Purdue Extension, the local hospital, health department, resources to help us walk alongside our employees.

“And that’s what I love about this Indiana Healthy Community initiative,” she continues, with Dubois County earning its designation from the Wellness Council of Indiana in 2019. “It makes it even easier for employers, especially smaller employers, to find wellness opportunities for their employees. Incorporate your community with your employees; they’re living in this community. That was a learning point for me.”

### Looking to the future

The holistic approach cited by all presents both opportunities and challenges.

Long sees continued growth in the wellness field, with choice and convenience rising to the forefront. “Instead of offering one solution, there’s going to be multiple solutions and a lot of modes in which people want to engage.”

For Mercer and Thomas, it’s all about the growing amount of information that is available.

“Your data drives everything. It can be overwhelming, because I’m not just saying claims data. We have to take a look at who are your employees – what generations do you have, what are the personas, where do they live, what are the salary ranges? It’s about how you find solutions that fit all your demographics.”

For a client with an office near Times Square in New York City, a commuter benefit with pre-tax dollars on a credit card to use for mass transit was an important offering. Mercer strives to evaluate for its clients the products and services of the rapidly expanding pool of wellness vendors.

Indiana is a bit unique, Thomas believes, with more smaller employers that self-fund their insurance. “They have to be a lot more creative in what they do, to look for the suites of voluntary benefits to offer.”

Day compares the present to a decade ago.

“The conversations are easier. People understand it; they grasp it. It’s become such a broad area, though, that sometimes it’s hard for health and wellness practitioners to make sure they’re hitting all the targets.

“But that’s also exciting,” she expands. “It’s evolutionary. It’s a journey. We want to put timelines to things and fix things, and that’s just not easy to do in a short amount of time.”

**RESOURCES:** Lisa Day, Kimball International, at [www.kimballinternational.com](http://www.kimballinternational.com) | Alex DeSantis, IDI Composites International, at [www.idicomposites.com](http://www.idicomposites.com) | Cara Long, Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, at [www.anthem.com](http://www.anthem.com) | Jamie Thomas, Mercer, at [www.mercer.com](http://www.mercer.com)