Designing a Perfect-Fit Corporate Wellness Program

Part 1: Laying the Groundwork

Introduction

Whether you're starting up a wellness program from scratch or refining an existing one, you have one overarching goal: to improve the health and well-being of your employees.

You're definitely not alone in this endeavor. More and more companies are turning to wellness programs to help improve productivity, lower healthcare costs, improve retention, and help their employees be happier, healthier, and more engaged. In fact, in a 2012 Rand study, 85 percent of employers indicated that they either offer or plan on offering a wellness program for their employees.

However, not all wellness programs meet with the same level of success. Some programs are transformative, while others simply fall flat.

How do you design a wellness program that will *work*?

It takes a lot of planning, research, and evaluation, and it can be difficult to even know where to begin. This series of white papers will help guide you through your planning process, raising the questions that you may not have thought to ask, but that will be essential to your program's success.

This first white paper will help you lay the important groundwork for planning out your program, whether it's setting goals, figuring out who will be eligible, or how to get broad-based organizational support.

Let's get started with the very first question you should ask yourself, whether your program is brand-new or decades-old:

What are the goals of our wellness program?

Your goals set the tone for every aspect of your wellness program. A program focused on ROI will be much different than a program focused on employee engagement. For this reason, it is important that you determine your goals *before* you get started.

Many wellness program pioneers focused on ROI and provided the necessary "carrots" and "sticks" to achieve this goal. What resulted were suboptimal programs where employees focused on promises and threats but not on actual, lasting wellness. These programs also created employee animosity toward their employer.

85%
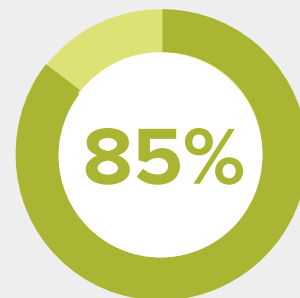
Percentage of employers that either offer or plan to offer an employee wellness program

As wellness programs evolve, they are becoming more humanized and flexible. Employers are learning that wellness is a great platform on which to build employee engagement. They are also realizing that trying to measure wellness ROI is complicated and subject to interpretation. As a result, they're starting to focus on providing the tools and environment that help employees consciously choose wellness.

Keep in mind that aligning the program's goals with the overall strategy and goals of the company is absolutely crucial. This is *your* company's wellness program, not your competitor's or neighbor's, and if the program's goals do nothing to further the company as a whole, it will struggle to obtain needed support and resources.

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Here are some of the targets you may want to consider when setting goals for your wellness program:

Increasing Employee Productivity

There is no guarantee that the healthiest employees will also be the most productive, but they will generally be more productive than if they were unhealthy. Better health improves absenteeism rates, concentration, stamina, and creativity.

Increasing Employee Engagement

A rising area of employment development is the level of employee engagement. To combat "presenteeism", or being physically present at work but not engaged, employers are looking for ways to increase employees' desire to accomplish goals and contribute to productivity.

Attract and Retain Employees

With increasing numbers of employers offering some form of a wellness program, potential new hires will grow to expect this type of work benefit. A highly visible wellness program can improve employer branding by conveying the company's focus on workforce health and a culture of concern for employee's work/life balance.

Reduce Absenteeism

High levels of absenteeism can cost billions of dollars in lost productivity. For example, absenteeism among clerical/office workers costs $8.1 Billion in lost productivity every year. In some industries such as healthcare, education, and service workers where shift coverage is necessary, absenteeism can create inconvenience and frustration among other staff, resulting in lowered morale and increased employee turnover.

Reduce Healthcare Costs

Healthier employees use fewer healthcare services, have fewer hospital admissions, and visit the emergency room less frequently. In addition, when employees prioritize their own health, they do not neglect checkups and other important preventative care. The result? Warning signs (like high blood pressure or high blood sugar) are caught and treated, possibly preventing chronic diseases.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 75 percent of

healthcare costs are due to chronic conditions. The CDC identifies [the most prevalent chronic conditions in adults](#) as:

» High blood pressure (26.7 percent of adults)

» High cholesterol (21.9 percent)

» Allergies, sinusitis, and other upper respiratory conditions (13.5 percent)

» Arthritis (13.0 percent)

» Mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder (10.6 percent)

» Diabetes (9.5 percent)

Not all of these conditions (like Type 1 diabetes or allergies) are preventable. However, many of these conditions are associated with lifestyle factors such as activity levels, diet, and stress. By creating better habits, employees can have a significant positive impact on company healthcare expenditures.

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Ideally, your wellness program goals will be SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely. It is not enough to say, "Let's lower healthcare costs," nor is it productive to say, "Let's reduce absenteeism down to zero." Your goals should have a timeframe, with realistic and specific numbers to reach, and should matter to the organization as a whole.

Once your goals are set, the next step is to determine who in your company should be eligible under the program.

Who is eligible?

In the early days of wellness programs, employers who focused only on reducing healthcare costs tended to limit wellness programs to employees with medical benefits. Left out were casual or part-time workers, contract staff, or employees' families. This approach brought limited returns and often resulted in confusion and resentment.

Today's best practice is to include all employees [as well as their family members](#).

$8.1 Billion

Yearly cost of lost productivity due to absenteeism

Why? As it turns out, in order for employees to have the best chance to develop healthy new habits, they need support from the people around them. Research finds that when one partner changes to healthier behavior, the other partner is more likely to also make a positive behavior change. By including spouses and families in employee wellness programs, employers can improve the chances of positive changes within the family unit, effecting similar positive changes in the employee.

How will we foster organizational support?

A wellness program might be well-thought-out with excellent goals, but if it doesn't garner organizational support, it may not get off the ground long enough to achieve results. There are multiple audiences whose support is vital to the success of a wellness program: management, executives, the employees themselves, and if applicable, wellness committees.

Management Support

Many well-intended programs have failed due to the lack of middle-and-upper management support and involvement. It's important to note that support needs to go beyond lip service: If employees are encouraged to participate in the wellness program, but are not actively given the time and resources to do so, the encouragement will ring false. Successful wellness programs require not only the support, but also the active involvement, of management. Active involvement means agreement on how you will define and measure success, including appropriate timeframes.

Management should also demonstrate visual participation in program events. Employees are more likely to take the time to attend a wellness seminar if their managers encourage them to, and attend themselves. Moreover, the development of this supportive culture should emphasize the importance of regular communication, including reminders about upcoming events such as: "*See you at the flu shot clinic.*"

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Executive Involvement

Ongoing visual support of the wellness program by the executive team is critical. And for executives to be visible in the program, it is important to provide ongoing updates about upcoming programs and results from the previous ones. This will allow time for appropriate scheduling of attendance and provide an opportunity to celebrate successes. Remember, the executive team members are employees too, and their feedback on their personal experience with the program also helps plan future strategies.

Employee Support

One of the best ways to ensure employee support is to empower employees, giving them a reasonable amount of say in the program's development and content.

This can be accomplished through integrating interest surveys into the development process to determine employee wants and preferences, but this type of feedback should be continuous: online surveys, paper surveys in public areas, and reminders during normal work presentations are a good way to get continuing input.

Be careful, however, of going solely by majority rule. You will need to weigh general feedback in terms of its benefit to the largest number of people, but feedback from a smaller group may suggest additional resources for those with more complex needs.

Wellness Committees

Another source of input can be obtained by forming a wellness committee. Committees should be comprised of a diverse group of employees, representing many different departments, levels of management, and physical abilities, not just the human resource staff members who have been charged with administering the wellness program.

The wellness committee should:

» Provide suggestions and insights to the operations within their departments that may impact the success of the program

» Evaluate program outcomes

» Most importantly, help communicate the program to their department

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Once you've set your goals, determined who's eligible, and have lined up support, it's time to get into the details of how your wellness program will be designed. Make sure to download Designing a Wellness Program, Part 2: Understanding Your Options, to get you on the road to a wellness program that is flexible, comprehensive, and geared toward success.

Ready to put your plan into action? Get your easy-to-use wellness program planning checklist, which will help you complete every step, guiding you toward the perfect-fit wellness program for your company.

Need more guidance, or want to learn more about our corporate wellness programming and platform? Contact us today!

About WellRight

WellRight powers over 600 corporate wellness programs with its flexible and fun-to-use software. Offering all the essentials (health assessment, fitness device integration, pre-built challenge library, health coaching, claims data analysis, biometrics, and a rewards engine), WellRight's customizable design lets employers tailor these features so they can deliver wellness programs that are relevant to employees. This approach to corporate wellness helps organizations build a better culture and a better business while employees create healthy habits. For more information, please visit www.wellright.com.

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