The goal of Wellness Management is to help you learn how to better manage wellness: at home, at work and in your community.

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20 Essentials for a Successful Worksite Wellness Programs
by Don R. Powell, Ph.D.

Wellness means different things to different people. Return on investment is a critical measure for a worksite wellness program in an uncertain economy. Of what should an organizational wellness program consist? Certain components of a wellness program are critical to its success and others are more fluff. Based upon my 37 years in the wellness field, I’ve identified 20 key characteristics of wellness programs which produce the greatest return on investment.

1. Provide Assessment Activities

A health assessment helps to determine the health of your employees. An assessment can take the form of a health screening where individuals’ height, weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure are checked as a means to identify their health risks. It can also include a computerized analysis called a health risk appraisal (HRA). HRAs are a confidential questionnaire that asks employees how often they smoke or drink alcohol, how much they weigh, how tall they are, if they have a family history of heart disease or cancer, etc. All of this information is then compared to other people of the same age, race, and sex. These assessment activities provide the company with a baseline of the health of their workforce. The assessment results may also motivate an employee to make lifestyle changes.
2. Use Communication Materials

Communication materials are appropriate for all companies, but particularly for those smaller in size with multiple locations and remote employees. These factors make it more difficult to reach employees. Communication materials can include newsletters, calendars, pocket planners, paycheck stuffers, posters, brochure racks, and table tents. In addition, online information and emails are helpful. Communicating with workers about wellness must be done on an ongoing, consistent basis to be effective.

3. Offer Self-Help Programs

Self-help interventions for tobacco cessation, weight control, stress management, etc. have become more popular as the field of health promotion has become more sophisticated in helping people help themselves. An advantage of self-help programs is employees can change their behavior on their own time and in the privacy of their own homes. Examples of self-help materials include interactive videos, DVDs, computer programs, audiotapes, and booklets.

4. Offer Group Programs

Group programs may consist of lunch and learns and/or classes conducted by an instructor. Instructors may come from a local hospital or wellness provider or they may be an individual from a company’s medical or benefits department trained to put on the program. Group programs allow for interaction with a professional and other attendees.

5. Provide Health Coaching

Many employees would like to change their lifestyle behaviors, but need professional assistance in how to do so. This is where health coaching plays an important role. Each employee is assigned a health coach who guides them through the behavior change process, whether it be to quit smoking, lose weight, manage stress, exercise more, manage one’s time more effectively, etc. Coaches can mean the difference between a proposed health change and an implemented change.

6. Offer Programs with Short-Term Benefits

By offering programs with short-term benefits, organizations can see an economic return within 6 to 12 months. Some examples include programs to increase seat belt usage, enhance consumer education, improve prenatal care and manage disabilities.

7. Teach Medical Self-Care

Medical self-care represents one of the most promising ways to reduce health care costs. It consists of teaching employees to become wiser consumers of the health care system. They learn when to seek professional assistance for health conditions and when to use self-care for symptoms treatable at home. This is important because 55 percent of all ER visits and 25% of all doctor visits are unnecessary.

The 5 elements of an effective self-care program are:

- Self-care book
- Self-care instructional workshop
- Nurse advice line
- Self-care software
- Promotional materials

8. Address High Risk Employees

Employees who have chronic conditions, such as diabetes and asthma, are considered to be high risk employees. They tend to have health care costs from 100 to 500 times greater than the costs for healthy employees. Providing a disease management program can moderate these costs.

9. Address Low Risk Employees

Research conducted at the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center has shown healthy employees will not remain unless wellness programming is provided for them. In fact, up to 20 percent of low risk employees will move to a higher risk category within one year. Research at the Center has also shown that when an employee loses low risk status, there is an additional cost of $350 per year. When employees regain low risk status, there is a decrease in costs of only $150 per year.

10. Address Mental Health Issues

Physical well-being is not just from the neck down. Research conducted by the Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) found depressed employees had health care costs 70 percent greater than non-depressed employees and those employees who were under excessive levels of stress had 43 percent greater health care costs. Classes for anger management, depression management, self-esteem enhancement, and even laughter are all being offered at worksites to address the psychological component of health.

11. Offer Incentives

The use of incentives to encourage people to participate in
wellness activities and change their lifestyles has become very popular. Incentives may take the form of paying less for health plan contributions, offering lower coverage levels, providing reimbursement for wellness programs, giving insurance premium discounts, and providing awards, such as cash, gift cards, t-shirts, water bottles, golf equipment, etc. to those who participate in wellness programs. The incentives can be used to change a variety of behaviors, including completing an HRA, participating in a health screening, attending a health fair, quitting smoking, joining a fitness club, using a self-care guide, accessing an e-health portal, etc.

12. Use e-Health as an Adjunct

Many companies are putting up an e-health portal and calling it their wellness program. They rationalize: “everybody” uses the internet and it is a low cost way to reach all their employees. Unfortunately, this view has many flaws. Not only will the organization reach less than a quarter of its employees, but it may not save any money. An e-health portal should only be an adjunct to the more traditional wellness strategies, not a replacement for them.

13. Keep Programs Current

The field of health promotion is changing. Our knowledge of how to motivate people and help them change their behavior has increased. Whatever type of wellness programming you offer, make sure it is current and up-to-date.

14. Involve Your Employee’s Family

Employees account for only about 30 percent of a company’s health care costs while dependents account for the remaining 70 percent. A program reaching only employees is going to be limited in its ability to reduce health care costs.

15. Provide Low Cost Wellness Options

Health promotion programs don’t have to be costly. There are many programs with implementation costs as low as $5 to $10 per employee per year. Some activities don’t have to cost anything at all. You could have a weight loss program by simply putting a scale in a prominent location and posting a diet plan of the week. Or you could arrange for a competition among employees to see how many pounds they can lose and award a prize to the person or department losing the most.

16. Plan for Seasonal Changes and Interests

Wellness programs shouldn’t become stagnant. Your programming should consistently be updated. New Year’s is a good time to offer health promotion programs. Spring is associated with weight reduction as people want to fit into their bathing suits. Fall is always a good time to offer wellness as people are getting back into a routine after the summer.

17. Promotion, Promotion, Promotion

You can have the best wellness program in the world, but unless there is significant participation, it will not achieve the benefits of reducing health care costs and absenteeism. Use a variety of promotional methods which fit into the corporate culture. Some of these methods may include one-on-one solicitation, posters, table tents, paycheck stuffers, newsletters, emails, video messages, exhibit tables, etc.

18. Understand Legal Restrictions

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA) provide specific guidelines for wellness programs. ADA prevents discrimination against employees with disabilities. HIPAA places regulations on confidentiality of incentives and what a health promotion program is. It is best to check with corporate legal counsel to make sure your wellness program is compliant with both of these acts.

19. Create a Culture of Health

View wellness as a corporate strategy which fits within the overall culture of the organization rather than as an isolated activity. A strong message should be sent to employees: Their health is important and the work environment will support them in making lifestyle changes. One way to accomplish this is to look at your benefit structure to ensure it reinforces wellness. For example, are employees given “well days” or do they only get time off when sick? Is there flex time so employees can balance work and family issues? Does tuition reimbursement cover wellness classes? Is the office design and equipment ergonomically appropriate, etc.?

20. Evaluate Your Program

In order to justify continuance of a wellness program, data must be gathered to satisfy upper level management. A variety of measures can be obtained. They include the number of employees who participate, changes in specific risk factors amongst the employee population, changes in absenteeism rates, changes in productivity and/or presenteeism, and employee satisfaction surveys. Perhaps the most important variable is financial data to determine if, indeed, reductions in health care costs took place.

Conclusion

The field of wellness has come a long way over the past 37 years. Worksite wellness programs are no longer a peripheral part of a company’s human resource activities, but are now a key component. We have good data to justify a program cost effectiveness. Successful organizations in the coming decade will embrace the concept of wellness and offer programs with the characteristics discussed in this article.