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Characteristics of High-Performing Wellness Programs

Follow these steps for wellness program success.

More than half of U.S. employers now have some kind of workplace wellness program in place to encourage healthier lifestyle habits and to try to prevent some chronic diseases. Ample evidence shows that wellness programs reduce health risks for individuals who choose to participate, translating to cost savings for employers and higher employee productivity.

There is little dispute that wellness programs have the power to improve workplace health and productivity while reducing costs — the industry

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standards for success. However, programs cannot achieve this success if they first fail to engage their employees. Lack of participation has become a major roadblock. A 2013 Rand Health "Workplace Wellness Program Study" showed that fewer than half of employees (46 percent) participate in a health risk assessment (HRA) or clinical screening, and of those identified as needing a wellness program, fewer than one-fifth choose to participate.

All is not lost, though. Many companies are doing much better at encouraging wellness participation than industry averages, which demonstrates that it's possible to inspire and motivate employees to care about their health and take more accountability. According to a study by a leading health management company to identify characteristics of successful wellness programs, companies with higher employee participation rates and sustained engagement over time build four key factors into their programs:

1 | Comprehensive behavior change programs for individuals anywhere on the health spectrum
2 | Meaningful incentives that appeal to employees
3 | The development of a culture of health led by senior and middle managers
4 | Compelling communications that promote the programs in a language and style appropriate to the culture.

In the study, employers who achieved participation rates of 79 percent to 95 percent understand that a wellness program is not complete or whole without each of these interdependent factors, which all must work together like a well-oiled machine to produce sustained long-term engagement.

Following is a closer look at each factor and its role in the machine.

Provide a Variety of Options via a Comprehensive Design

When wellness first gained momentum in the early 2000s, the focus was primarily on prevention of chronic disease among the at-risk population. Since that time, the concept of wellness has broadened to a greater consciousness of the need for healthy behavior change across the full spectrum of health.

The walls that separate wellness from disease management, from the management of women who are pregnant and even from the management of those in the advanced stages of one or more chronic conditions, are crumbling. At root, all health management programs are about healthy behavior change and the improvement of self-care skills.

The best wellness programs are built with a comprehensive design that includes a full spectrum of behavior change programs for a variety of health needs. They offer employees a variety of activities that include awareness, education, and guidance and education on the practice of healthy behaviors for all employees — those healthy and those at risk or with a chronic condition.

Incentives Must Be Meaningful

Companies that have high participation rates of at least 80 percent offer strong incentives as part of their comprehensive strategy. These companies do not just throw cash on the table. They understand that their employees need to perceive the incentive as equal in value to what they are being asked to do in return. For each population, that perception will be based on the individuals who make up the culture. To ensure success, companies need to evaluate their cultures, which can include relying on the knowledge of their HR professionals, and use tactics like online surveys and outside expertise.

Increasingly, incentives are being tied to benefit programs via premium discounts or lower deductibles. Other types of benefit-related incentives include access to a premium plan, contributions to a health savings account and paid time off. This approach may strengthen the awareness that

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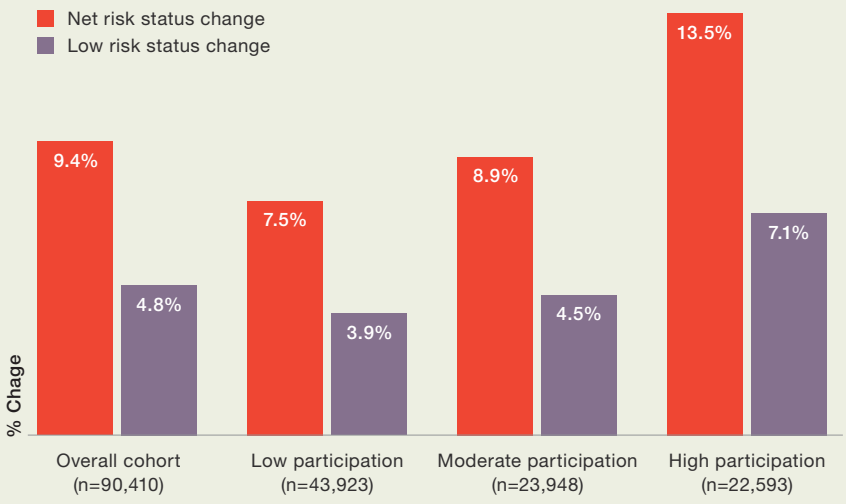
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Is Participation Alone Enough?

Data suggest that simply encouraging employees to participate in a wellness program can help lower costs. A study with several large employers examined the relationship between the level of wellness program participation (anything from taking a health risk assessment to participating in a smoking cessation program) and the magnitude of overall health risk status reduction defined in terms of the total number of elevated modifiable risk factors like diabetes, obesity, depression and hypertension. The study looked at 90,410 wellness-eligible participants from the employers and again in a subset of participants with chronic health conditions. Results showed a considerable difference in the net risk status improvement between the low-participating cohort and the high-participating cohort (7.5 percent improvement vs. 13.5 percent improvement). The additional net risk reduction high participants achieve versus the low participants translates into approximately $136 of extra annual per participant health-care and productivity savings. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1 | **Employee Wellness Participation Rates**



Source: Alere Health

healthy behaviors are directly associated with health-care costs. There also seems to be some growing interest in cash value gift cards and credit cards, which provide a tangible award that can be a favorable motivator. Some companies choose to supplement their overall program incentives with drawings for merchandise to help promote engagement in individual activities like challenges or onsite events.

Traditionally, rewards have been offered for participation in an activity or program, but more employers are tying incentives to actual health outcomes, such as quitting smoking, reducing body mass index or improving blood pressure. For example, an employer may offer an incentive of $300 a year for achieving three to four wellness goals within a 12-month program cycle.

Another trend is the use of progress-based incentives, which reward for progress in a particular area. In this approach, if an employee participates in a wellness program or achieves even slight improvements in a targeted biometric, he/she can still secure an incentive. Paradoxically, another trend that is causing considerable debate and controversy is the use of penalties.

A few of the nation's largest employers are starting to charge for smoking and biometric measures that are out of normal range.

Employers who achieve high participation rates in their wellness programs almost always have active support by senior and midlevel managers.

Not surprisingly, some employees are pushing back on this approach.

There are legitimate arguments to be made on both sides. Some are concerned that incentives not aligned with goals may lead to a revolving door of participation with no results. Others believe that participation is a goal in and of itself, and it may be enough to encourage additional and ongoing participation even if an employee achieves only small improvements in health.

Whatever incentives an employer selects must fit the culture. Financial rewards may not work in some workplace environments, where perhaps penalties may get more attention. However, the bottom line should always be on which approach is likely to generate the most support and participation from employees.

Company Leadership is Essential for Success

Employers who achieve high participation rates in their wellness programs almost always have active support by senior and midlevel managers.

Scripps Health, a nonprofit hospital system in San Diego with nearly 13,000 employees across five hospitals and 22 clinics and several administrative locations, has an award-winning wellness program with a strong culture of health backed by leadership. Scripps Health's CEO Robin Brown exemplifies Scripps' leadership. He invites employees to exercise with him for 30 minutes and then takes them to lunch. Another example is Scripps Health's Assistant General Counsel Brad Ellis. He teaches a variety of training classes at all levels that have developed a strong following over the years.

Innovative policies include discounts for healthier food choices in the cafeteria, longer walks to designated smoking areas, and slower elevators to make the stairs a more appealing option. Up to 100 exercise classes are offered each week, from yoga to Zumba, to core conditioning and kettle bell training. Classrooms are positioned in areas where employees can see participants as they pass through the hallways each day.

These are just a few of the cultural changes that have been made since the wellness program was launched in 2006. Since then, participation has increased by 51 percent to 74 percent of the population, and the number of modifiable risk factors per person decreased from 3.68 to 2.84.

Effective Communication is Key

Companies that take the time to build and develop a strong communications strategy are more likely to experience higher participant engagement rates and better health outcomes. Communicating with employees may sound easy, but effectively promoting programs takes more than a few emails. A strong communications strategy involves an analysis of the culture and employee preferences via interviews with employees, online surveys and focus groups.

Companies need to understand the best types of communications and messaging styles for their cultures. Do employees prefer more visuals with shorter messages or textual explanations with more detail? Depending on the size of the organization, a variety of communication vehicles all working together like emails, social media, employee websites, videos, collateral and/or face-to-face town hall meetings may be most effective to reach a greater number of people with different communication preferences.

Strategy for the Future

There are a number of powerful contributors to wellness program success that by themselves are not enough to produce the desired result. This may be why companies that focus on strong incentives without active leadership support or that have a well-designed communications strategy to promote their programs but lack options for a variety of employees are not getting the results they seek. The good news is that the solution is pretty simple. As the study to identify characteristics of successful wellness programs has demonstrated, this much is true: Build the missing component(s), and they will come. WS

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