WellRight

Designing a Perfect-Fit Corporate Wellness Program

Part 3: Launching Your Corporate Wellness Program

Introduction

A considerable amount of time, effort, and research goes into designing a great wellness program.

First you have to set your goals and get organizational support. Then, you need to figure out the details of the program and how it will work.

Now, the time is here to figure out how best to get your program off the ground. It's not enough to put up a few posters and call it a day. Launching a wellness program successfully will take some thoughtful planning.

Before you launch, keep in mind that a wellness program needs an implementation plan that spans at least five years. Long-term results command long-term commitments. The initial year should include services designed to engage employees and drive participation. The following years should be devoted to maintaining program momentum and adding more depth to the program's components.

To kick off your program launch, this third white paper in our series will put you on the right path with information on whether you should use a vendor, how you can develop a communication plan, and once the program is launched, how you'll measure its success.

So, let's start with the question: Now that you have your plan designed, do you need vendors to help you implement it?

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Should we use a vendor?

It may be tempting to run the wellness program solely in-house. And for very basic programs, that may suffice. However, any program that involves health risk assessments, biometrics, disease management, coaching, or multiple forms of challenges will quickly outstrip an employer's internal manpower and expertise.

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An experienced vendor can provide multiple wellness program services in their offering. This makes integration much easier, and keeps employees from the frustration of having to deal with several companies for their wellness coaching, disease management, challenge tracking, and so on.

Another benefit to partnering with an external vendor is to maintain confidentiality of employee health status. This partnering ensures federal and local compliance requirements and, in doing so, conveys confidence that personal healthcare information is being kept confidential.

A wellness vendor also provides the expertise in data measurement and analysis, because identifying trends statistically can be difficult. Additionally, the ability to correlate trends with health behaviors requires experience and expertise that may be outside the scope of internal staff.

Besides data maintenance, management, and analysis, many wellness vendors offer valuable services that will greatly enhance your wellness program, such as:

Wellness Portals

An easy way to enhance the substance of any wellness program is to use an online wellness portal. The wellness portal gives employees an easy way to input and process their HRA results. It also provides employees with additional resource information, education, and activity tracking functions that help them become more successful. As employees become more mobile and tech savvy, an online wellness portal will be much more welcome (and used) than paper tracking.

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Wellness Coaching

Some wellness program vendors offer coaching as part of their services, which can greatly enhance outcomes. Evaluate the capabilities of the wellness coaching vendor to assure they have the language capabilities needed for your employees. Additionally, check to make sure that their hours of operation match the best time to reach your employee population.

Disease Management

If a wellness program vendor offers disease management, be sure to ask for their credentials and what protocols they have in place for managing chronic conditions. Also, find out if there are any conditions they refrain from managing. Lastly, make sure that their hours of operation match the best time to reach your employee population.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

An EAP network can provide employees with emotional health services in an accessible and confidential manner. The EAP network should be able to provide a variety of counseling professionals in the areas most needed by your employees. Ideally, if your health plan distinguishes between network and non-network providers, these counselors should be providers in your health plan's provider network in case the employee (or spouse) needs to continue services.

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Smoking Cessation

Smoking cessation vendors should be evaluated for the same time and language requirements applicable to wellness coaches and disease managers. The full medical benefit applicable to smoking cessation should be included in the vendor's company profile, so that the tobacco cessation coach can help participants use all resources at their disposal. As with disease management, the smoking cessation program should be considered a long-term intervention and include, at a minimum, follow up services throughout the program year.

Proper communication of a wellness program can create interest and promote employee engagement.

What is our communication plan?

Once you've determined how the plan will work and which vendor will help you implement it, it's time to plan how to spread the word about your exciting new wellness program.

Proper communication of a wellness program not only provides the initial explanation and awareness of available services, but it also creates interest and promotes employee engagement. Here are some questions to consider:

- What will be the most impactful way of communicating this benefit to our employees?
- What current communications do our employees respond to and which ones are being ignored?
- How often should we update employees on wellness program events to keep the program front of mind?

Communication plan options

Information about your wellness program can (and should) be communicated through multiple mediums. Here are some options:

Newsletters: Paper or online newsletters can provide health-related articles on a variety of topics. Many vendors can provide these at low cost and allow customization that includes an events calendar, company logo, and success stories.

Bulletin Boards: Bulletin boards for wellness are best placed in high traffic areas like cafeterias, break rooms, employee-only restrooms, and meeting rooms. They can be used to promote upcoming programs, monthly health themes, and current program participation status totals (75% of employees received their flu shot so far!).

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Internal TV: Many larger companies have TVs or monitors in common areas, displaying important company information or news. Because the information on these screens is repeated multiple times per day, it helps employees retain what they are seeing.

Wellness Posters/Flyers: Wellness posters and flyers are typically a simple message that grabs the reader's attention from a distance: 3 steps to proper hand washing, 1-800-Quit Now! for tobacco cessation. A poster plan should have a preordained replacement date; messages tend to become an easily-ignored part of the scenery after 30 days.

Emails: Work emails are a great way to communicate materials quickly. Current best practices include designing a quick and catchy introduction and including a link to more detailed information for those interested. Wellness vendors can also use email to provide customized information to program participants.

In Person: If your company has regular all-hands meetings, these are a great opportunity to share information about your wellness program. You can explain the program, answer any questions that are raised, and clear up any confusion.

Wellness Champion: Designate wellness champions by departments, teams or locations.

What are our measures of success?

Once your wellness program rolls out, the top thing on your mind will be, "Will this succeed?"

As with any other initiative in your company, however, you need data to know if you're reaching your goals. This data will be obtained by careful measuring, about which you will want to ask some questions:

- What should we be measuring?
- How should we be measuring it?
- Over what length of time should we be measuring?

Answering these questions is generally where most wellness programs butt heads with employers' business models, which may prioritize short-term results. For health-contingent wellness programs, the first three years are usually devoted to normalizing the concept of wellness as part of the employer's business culture. Consequently, the focus is on employee engagement, motivation, and participation. Encouraging healthier behaviors takes time, so short-term financial paybacks are usually minimal.

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By demonstrating that you are carefully monitoring the metrics that are relevant to your program's goals, you can help ease executives' concerns. They may also need to be reminded that employee wellness is a long game, but a worthy one: Those employers that persevere and successfully align compensation and benefit-related incentives are estimated by Lynch & Gardner to achieve $2,500 less in medical claims per employee, 65 percent fewer total days of worker compensation, and 50 percent less in turnover for top performers.

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What to Measure

You've already set your SMART goals, but what metrics will you use to know how close you're getting to reaching those goals? Make sure you can draw a straight line from the metrics you use to your goals, so that you get an accurate picture of success. But don't be too narrow in your focus: if reduced absenteeism isn't one of your program's goals, but you notice absenteeism has dropped 20 percent since program inception, that still benefits the company's bottom line and is worth mentioning.

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Here are some of the metrics you may want to focus on:

Return on Investment (ROI) / Incidents of Preventable Expense

There is no small measure of controversy about whether the value of wellness programs lies in their ability to provide any real financial Return on Investment (ROI). Although the argument still persists, numerous published studies, most recently by the prestigious Rand Corporation, show that properly structured programs can have returns of $1.50 for every $1.00 spent.

Granted, finances are more difficult to quantify because multiple variables account for medical cost increases, including: provider specific healthcare inflation, increased utilization of services, more expensive medications, and changes in provider network prices.

If employees are making fewer claims but prices have gone up, ROI will tell an incomplete story. Consequently, be sure to include behavioral measurements when evaluating a program's success, especially in the short run.

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A best practice for establishing ROI requires you to analyze your medical claims history to identify preventable medical costs. This may require the assistance of a wellness program vendor. The combination of claims data (where we are currently spending money) and HRA results (where will we be spending money in the future) provide a roadmap for targeted conditions.

Starting with year 4, a mature program should be able to show reduced incidents of preventable expenses related to uncontrolled diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. It is important to maintain consistent employee participation in behavior modification programs or support services, such as maintenance coaching, annual screenings, and repeated individual health messaging, for those efforts to have a long-term health cost impact.

Better Medication Adherence

During a program's first few years of operation, medication usage will probably increase. Such cost increases are not unexpected and can actually be a positive sign, indicating that employees are talking to their doctors about their health conditions and are now taking steps to improve their numbers. This can serve as a harbinger of lower long-term healthcare costs, as employees get chronic conditions under control. To mitigate these short-term increases, cost

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containing measures could include incentives to use generic medication whenever possible.

Participation Numbers

What percent of the population is participating? This information is crucial to any program's success, and here is where wellness plan design can have a significant effect. Without mandating program participation (a dangerous approach) or providing large enough incentives to motivate change, the likelihood of getting large numbers of the employees to participate during the first three years is pretty slim. But remember, participation alone is not the long term measurement of success. Participation will measure your reach and level of interest, but outcomes and repeat participation will provide a better quality measurement.

Value on Investment

Focusing solely on ROI gives an incomplete picture of a wellness program's success. Instead, experts like Dr. Ron Goetzel embrace the idea of Value on Investment (VOI), focusing on population health improvement, productivity, job performance, and the ability to attract and retain talent. By focusing on cost-effectiveness (as opposed to cost-benefit), you can analyze the breadth of results you're getting for your investment.

Sick Days

In addition to medical claims and health risk scores, you should measure the impact of wellness program participation on need for sick days, and paid time off for sick days. Again, look at these numbers carefully. If employees were blasé about their wellness prior to program implementation, they may have come to work while sick, resulting in a low sick-day rate that painted an artificial picture of employee wellness.

Employee Retention

In addition to medical claims and health risk scores, you should measure the impact of wellness program participation on employee retention. In a 2006/2007 survey, employers estimated the replacement costs due to employee turnover to be $15,000 per incidence (Salary.com Employee Job Satisfaction & Retention Survey 2007/2008: An Employer Versus Employee Overview). "Staying" interviews or surveys can uncover the reasons why employees are choosing to stick around, giving you valuable data on whether the wellness program is a factor.

Participant Satisfaction

A wellness program should always include opportunities for participants to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the programs. For example: at the end of an eight-week walking program, participants should be polled to evaluate the likes and dislikes of the program along with their likelihood to participate again. Similarly, non-participants should be polled to determine the reasons for abstaining from participation and how they might be encouraged to participate next time.

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Health and Healthcare Data

Healthcare data is crucial to determine the extent of which specific healthcare problem areas exist in your workforce. Not only does this data help you design your program, it provides an effective way of measuring it. If claims related to diabetes plummet

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after the first two years of a wellness program's implementation, that is a strong indicator of success.

Access to medical claims data for self-insured plans is easier than if you have to rely on reports from your insurance carrier, but, in either case, the effort will pay dividends for wellness plan design and the attainment of the plan's desired outcomes.

In addition to medical claims, advanced programs will use third-party providers to integrate claims data from Workers Compensation, Employee Assistance Programs, and dental plans. This approach is expensive, but it provides the most comprehensive assessment of the health status of your employee population.

However, whichever approach you use to gather claims data, concerns and compliance with all of the applicable HIPAA privacy requirements and prohibitions is essential: from Business Associate Agreements to the protection of your employees' Protected Health Information (PHI) in all of its forms.

The well-being of employees has often been neglected by companies. However, more and more employers are realizing that healthy employees who feel valued are more engaged, energetic, creative, and productive. And by taking the time and effort to carefully design a wellness program that fits their needs, your company can reap the benefits of a wellness-focused workplace.

If you missed Part 1 and Part 2 in this series, download them now to get the full guide.

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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