

Why Every Employer Needs A Wellness Program

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Business leaders have long recognized that workers' poor health significantly impacts the ability to run a successful enterprise. Wellness became widely accepted as a concept in the 1970s, and workplace wellness programs gained widespread popularity during the 1980s (Pelletier KR 2011). As a daily gathering point, the workplace is an ideal place to reach individuals with health information and incorporate healthy behavior into the daily routine.

Workplace wellness programs are still most prevalent in North American companies, principally motivated by the reduction of healthcare costs (Buck Consultants 2012). The growing body of evidence of clinical and cost-effectiveness has now shifted the debate in North America away from whether workplace programs should be implemented towards how programs should be optimized. The rest of the world seems to be following North America's lead, with 47% of Asian companies, 43% of South and Central American companies, and 33% of African or Middle Eastern companies running wellness programs (ILO 2020).

With the vast majority of evidence and advice centered on high-income settings, designing and implementing a wellness initiative in a low or middle-income setting can be a daunting prospect. A successful case study of a Zimbabwean organization that has implemented an effective wellness program in Zimbabwe Platinum Mines (Zimplats). In response to the high prevalence of HIV in the mining industry Zimplats initiated a workplace wellness program focused on HIV and AIDS in 2003. The program uses a wide variety of prevention and treatment approaches and aims to prevent the spread of HIV, manage its impact on infected employees, and reduce disease-related stigma and discrimination.

Interventions for employees include a network of peer educators who provide counseling and can make referrals to testing services, free condom distribution (and associated education activities), and the provision of free antiretroviral treatment to employees and eligible dependents. In addition, nurses have received training in the treatment of opportunistic infections, the use of antiretroviral drugs, and rapid diagnostic testing for HIV, malaria, and syphilis. Recognizing the connection between the health of its workforce and that of the surrounding community, Zimplats has now extended the program beyond its workers.

WHAT IS EMPLOYEE WELLNESS?

Employee wellness programs or wellness plans are a form of health benefit that many employers provide – in one form or another – in addition to health insurance. The definition of a wellness program is a program that helps employees stay healthy or – in some cases – helps them improve their health. Wellness program ideas can range from ideas that have a specific purpose, such as helping the employee to stop smoking or to lose weight; to onsite gyms or gym memberships; to incentive programs that provide rewards for participation or in achieving the desired results.

Unlike insurance programs in which companies must sign up for and must choose options that last at least one year, wellness programs can be ongoing or they can be one-time events or activities. Some companies contract with businesses to provide and run their employee wellness programs for them, whereas other employers organize a smaller program on their own. Companies are not required to provide employee wellness plans or programs, nor are there are rules that businesses must follow regarding such plans.

REASONS WHY YOU NEED AN EMPLOYEE WELLNESS PROGRAM

Having an employee wellness plan can help you attract and keep good employees because they view it as a benefit they'd like to have at work. But wellness programs also provide benefits to the company that can affect and improve your bottom line.

Curbing absenteeism - Employers have always struggled with absenteeism and the loss in productivity it causes. Yet, when workers come to work when they're sick, they're spreading germs throughout the office so everyone tends to become ill. If employers could find a way to keep employees healthier, there would be less absenteeism.

Improving morale and productivity - Health experts say that exercise releases endorphins that help improve mood. Happier people have a more positive outlook, which can translate to more energetic workers, better problem-solving, and increased productivity. Participating in non-work activities together also strengthens employee relationships and your company culture.

Increasing employee retention - Employees feel valued when their companies invest in their well-being with wellness programs. This, and their positive attitude towards their work, makes them more likely to stay at their jobs.

Saving money - Studies of the benefits that employee wellness programs can bring to a business show that for every dollar spent on wellness activities and programs, employers saved \$3.27 per employee in health care costs.

HOW TO IMPLEMENTS A WELLNESS PROGRAM

Step 1: Conduct Assessments - Obtaining information about the health of the workforce and the organization's willingness to make improvements based on this information is a critical step in developing an employee wellness program. This information will enable the employer to design programs and services that are most beneficial to both the employer and the employee.

Step 2: Obtain Management Support - Support from management is essential to building a successful wellness program. As with any initiative, management buy-in is critical for funding purposes, for obtaining support throughout the organization, and for approving policies and processes related to the program. Management can provide additional assistance by helping link the health promotion objectives to business outcomes, thereby positioning wellness as a fundamental part of the organization.

Step 3: Develop Goals and Objectives - Using the information gathered from the workforce assessment, employers can establish goals and objectives for the program. For many organizations, a key goal is to improve workers' health and thereby reduce health care costs. Other goals may include reducing absenteeism, boosting worker productivity, and increasing retention. Wellness program goals and objectives are statements of broad, long-term accomplishments expected from the program. Each goal has one or more objectives to ensure that the goal will be accomplished.

Step 4: Establish a Budget - Establishing a budget is a critical step in creating the wellness program. Without funding, the program will stall. When creating a wellness budget, organizations should include the cost of incentives, marketing, and program design in the budget. Typical items in a budget would include screening vendor/other provider fees; incentives for participation; promotional materials; meeting provisions; pedometers/fitness trackers; HR representative and committee member time.

Step 5: Design Wellness Program Components - Employers have great latitude in designing the wellness program. There is not one standard program, as each will vary based on organizational needs and resources. The wellness program may range from a very simple program to an elaborate multi-prong program. It is important to include a variety of components that target risk behaviors and the needs and interests of the employees. Organizations can use the resources obtained in previous steps of organizational assessment, wellness committee data gathering, and budgetary constraints, as well as in the goals and objectives, to determine the types of wellness programs to include in the design.

Step 6: Select Wellness Program Incentives or Rewards - Incentives or rewards are an effective tool to change unhealthy behaviors, to adhere to healthy behaviors, to increase participation rates, or to help individuals complete a program. The argument for rewarding employees for participating in a wellness program pulls from the basic principles of behavioral psychology: People are driven to act by the positive consequences they expect from their actions. Building a rewards system into a wellness program is a great motivator. Rewards can take many forms, including points that can be exchanged for goods, gifts celebrating accomplishments, or monetary awards. Over time, the motivation for rewards shifts from an external incentive to intrinsic reinforcement. Effective incentives will be commensurate with the effort required to practice the desired behavior.

Step 7: Communicate the Wellness Plan - The next step is to write and communicate the organization's wellness policy. This policy statement should include the organization's intent, level of involvement, and rewards and incentives system with respect to employee wellness. In communicating the reward system to employees

Step 8: Evaluate the Success of the Program - As with any investment or project, evaluating the effectiveness of the wellness program is important in sustaining management and employee support and in revising or implementing new programs. Employers should have established metrics and baselines at the rollout of any wellness initiative, which will vary depending on the programs implemented.

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