

Tough Business Climate? Employee Wellness Programs are a Proven Investment

“Luck: When preparation meets opportunity.”—Seneca, Roman Philosopher

It is no secret...financial times are tough. Surviving a tough business climate requires discipline, planning, creativity, and quite a bit of luck. As referenced in the quote above, “luck” can sometimes be influenced by being pro-active. If, for every dollar invested, an employer could, on average, recoup three times that amount in return, most would agree that would be a “sound” investment. That can occur with an investment in employee wellness programs. Nationally, companies are implementing comprehensive employee wellness programs to improve employee health and wellness, as well as to strengthen financial health. Obviously, a businesses’ greatest asset, its employees, can also be its greatest financial burden. The health and well-being of employees significantly influences company costs and ultimate financial well-being. Proper employee screening(s) and convenient access to health-related resources are necessities to maintaining a healthy work force and bottom line.

As with most employees, there is not a definitive line drawn between work and home. Most commonly, these elements overlap and affect one another. The term “work-life” balance is discussed quite often these days. In that employees spend their most productive hours at work, this environment can be a catalyst for reinforcing various health-related behaviors or decisions. Recognizing this, employers are opting to take pre-emptive action and make these resources available. These include health risk appraisals, lunch time educational classes, on-site vaccinations, or health improvement incentives that impact employer-sponsored healthcare coverage through increased employee participation.

Exercise, weight management, and smoking cessation resources are staples of such programs. These resources can often provide the strongest component to improved employee health: knowledge. In attempting to obtain simple answers, individuals are often bombarded with complex, dynamic medical information that seems to be applicable one day and contradicted the next. This frustration and confusion further fuels a general disdain for medical information. In reality, the value of this information is lost in translation: every individual’s health is relative and based upon various elements of their particular health equation. An example would be managing one’s cholesterol levels. It is often not enough to recommend to an employee that attentiveness to their cholesterol is important. It is essential to explain “why” being attentive to cholesterol levels is important. Recommendations should be dismantled and the reasoning explained in a manner that can be assimilated by the individual. For the employee who patronizes a fast food drive-through 3 times a day, recommending “moderation” may be interpreted as patronizing the drive through a couple times a day. In this example, moderation must be defined. Education provides the basis for decision making. Incentive then needs to be introduced in order to affect action (motivation). Examples of incentives for participation range from pedometers, gift cards, cash, or employer paid fitness memberships. Many companies have structured wellness programs that provide for lower employee insurance premiums if they meet various participation levels or health goals related to their particular wellness program.

A recent study by the American Institute for Preventative Medicine found 62% of companies, ranging from small to large, offer some type of wellness program. Even in forward-thinking employer environments where wellness programs are consistent offerings, the focus on physical well-being may overshadow the importance of psychological well-being. A comprehensive wellness program provides for both psychological and physical health resources. Employer-based wellness programs are also attempting to encourage wellness by offering healthier food choices in company cafeterias and vending machines, as well as offering on-site fitness resources. The responsibility for an individual's "health status" is shifting from what has historically been an employer burden of benefit provision to a shared approach with the employee engaged at a higher level. This means that all employees are given opportunities to improve their health and participation is encouraged through a variety of incentives. These programs are not just for the boardroom elite: they include everyone from introductory-level employees to senior management.

Consider the following: 67% of Americans meet the criteria for being either obese or overweight. Chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and depression are on the rise. Over the past 5 years, healthcare premiums have risen an average of almost 12 % annually. According to estimates by the American College of Occupational Health and Environmental Medicine, in conjunction with Integrated Benefits Institute, the cumulative cost of an employer's medical and pharmaceutical cost added to productivity related losses (absenteeism and presenteeism), the average estimated full-cost impact in the United States is nearly \$13,000 per employee. Using U.S. Department of Labor statistics, the overall annual cost impact on the workplace is an estimated \$1.7 trillion. Other sources put this number closer to \$2.2 trillion. Johnson & Johnson, long a leader in corporate wellness, demonstrated a cost savings of \$8.5 million a year through a 4 year wellness program that involved 18,000 workers, according to the American Institute of Preventative Medicine. Successful wellness programs include: resources, convenience, consistency, motivation (incentive), and usage tracking to ensure compliance and demonstrate effectiveness.

Employers now recognize the benefit of assisting employees with preventative health care tools facilitating improved self care. The assumption of responsibility for personal health is slowly shifting to the employee. This also represents a significant shift in the structure of how employer provided healthcare benefits are allotted. Ironically enough, this approach also mirrors a societal shift in western healthcare noted over the past 20 years, that being from a proposition of treating symptoms to that of avoiding cause through prevention.

Submitted by:

Thomas M. Miller, III, MS, Supervisor, UVA-WorkMed

Ceci Rumsey, Wellness LPN, UVA-WorkMed

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