

Truth or Consequences

Selecting health risk appraisals

A Special White Paper Report by Scott Foster, Corporate Wellness Expert



Most people would agree that even the most innocuous assumptions about health care can have unintended consequences. For example, the caduceus (a winged staff with two snakes wrapped around it) is often incorrectly used as a symbol for medicine or doctors in place of the Rod of Asclepius (which consists of a *single* serpent entwined around a *plain* staff). The main reason for the modern confusion over these symbols occurred when the caduceus was adopted by the Medical Department of the United States Army in 1902. The truth was uncovered several years later by the librarian to the surgeon general, but the symbol was not changed.

That particular inaccuracy didn't cause serious problems. However, the mistake of confusing one Health Risk Appraisal (HRA) with another can have ominous consequences.

Developed in the 1970s by Indianapolis physicians Lewis Robbins and Jack Hall, HRAs calculate patients' total health risks. Although HRAs are wildly popular with organizations interested in controlling medical costs (including insurance companies), overall implementation of HRAs has been tempered because they vary so widely in quality, accuracy, and impact. Like the ancient symbols described above, HRAs are similar, but not at all the same. Recognizing the distinctions among them and choosing one that provides accurate assessments, measurable outcomes, and quantifiable ROI will have a direct impact on your success at managing your corporate wellness program. As the renowned management theorist Peter Drucker says, "What gets measured gets managed."

In fact, none of this is problematic if you choose the right wellness firm. To that end, there are seven important characteristics of HRAs that you should keep in mind when partnering with a wellness firm to help implement/manage your corporate wellness program.

Current Guidelines

The top five chronic and costly diseases (i.e., heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes) are caused by less than ten modifiable risk factors and cause more than two-thirds of all deaths each year. The diagnosis and treatment guidelines for those risk factors such as high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol, and diabetes change regularly, due to ongoing advances in medicine. Your HRA should be current and updated at least once each year.

Follow-up

HRAs are exponentially more effective when combined with a reinforcement of the results through follow-up communications. All participants should be contacted within three months of the assessment (urgent concerns should be addressed sooner). The follow-up should include a clear summary of the participant's overall HRA score and identified risks. Resources should be included based upon the participant's readiness for change along with contact information for questions and continued coaching. The more innovative HRAs automate follow-up by self-generating targeted e-mail and postal mail communications.

Advanced Technology

Results, reports, and coaching should be immediate. The sooner you receive lab processing or reports, the faster the health of your employees and your bottom line can begin to improve. The HRA should be also in a digital format, provide automatic results comparisons, and be secure and permanent-data-storage compliant with the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Personal Attention

Participants make lifestyle changes when they have a good experience and when they feel that you value them in your

organization. Their experience is greatly enhanced when you provide a convenient program that exceeds their expectations. For example, host the HRA in an onsite conference room and provide appointments that are conducted on time. Provide an HRA that provides little or no paperwork. Implement the program with completely confidential assessment and coaching (e.g., a private room with the door closed). Establish a one-to-one staff-to-participant ratio to improve the experience and response. Stay away from health fair environments (also called assembly line, cattle call, wellness on a shoestring, or community health). They often don't work, are not well received, and are a waste of time and money. Ditto for HRAs that are offered online only or without actual biometric measurements (e.g., blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes risk, et cetera).

Effective Data and Reporting

Participant reports should be no more than one to two pages long. They should clearly communicate results by individual risks and include specific interpretation, recommended follow-up (with time frame), and overall score. Similarly, the organizational report should summarize trends into concise executive reports. Forward-looking HRAs such as Wellco's HealthHammer also organize participants by individual risks, aggregate risks, and risk clusters (i.e., metabolic (high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol, diabetes, et cetera), behavioral (stress, work-life satisfaction, et cetera), safety (alcohol, no seat belt, et cetera), and low-risk (less than 3 overall/aggregate risks).

Customization and Integration

Data collection and reports should be customizable based upon your medical claims, specific goals, and needs. Future programs should be integrated into the HRA for targeted communication, assessment and reporting. Your HRA should store, track and report criteria for incentives, consumer-

driven health plans and emerging plans with variable deductibles. You may also want to brand your program or market your organization by including your logo, slogan, and contact information.

Qualified Staff

The data from your HRA is only as good as the staff that collects and interprets it. Is the wellness staff specifically qualified and trained for preventive health? Often, the staff consists of temporary health care

workers with no specific wellness program training. Eventually, that kind of limited expertise can lessen your plan's effectiveness as well as employee participation.

Make no mistake about it: when you focus on the seven most important characteristics of a strong HRA you are well on your way toward a healthier workforce and bottom line.

Scott Foster is a partner and corporate wellness expert, for Wellco, a leading provider of corporate wellness systems for organizations who want to stop employee health risks before they become more dangerous and costly. Scott has generated millions of dollars in cost savings for clients such as Chrysler, Home Depot, MetLife, SBC, and 3M. He is a consultant for the Michigan Department of Health, Chairperson of the Michigan Cardiovascular Business Alliance, a featured columnist for "Health Michigan" and an executive committee member of the Oakland County Wellness Coalition. Scott is facilitator for wellnessroi.com, a resource that provides interviews and commentary from the nation's wellness superstars. Often featured as a media expert, Scott is certified as a Health Promotion Director by the world-renowned Cooper Clinic in Dallas, and he was awarded a Lipid Clinic Facilitation certificate by Chicago's Midwest Lipid Clinic. Scott has previously served as a hospital administrator and clinician. For more information, contact Scott, toll-free, at (866) 636-WELL (9355) or visit

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