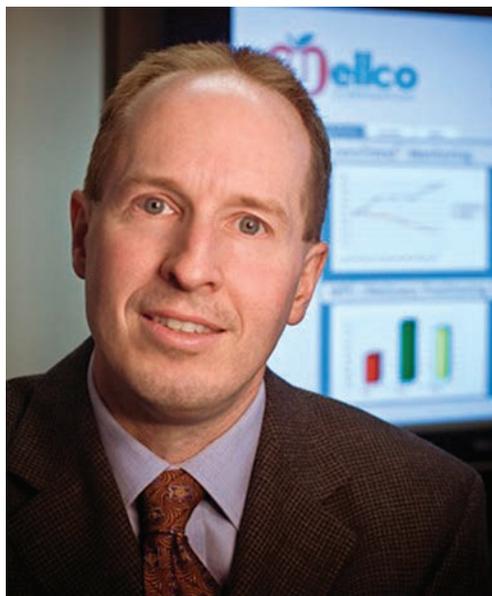


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Why it Pays to Redefine Your Wellness Program



By Scott Foster

“Wellness,” said Dan Rather on a 1979 episode of 60 Minutes, “There’s a word you don’t hear every day.” Since that fateful moment in television history, wellness has moved from a fringe concept that was rarely uttered in conversation into a word that is heard regularly in interpersonal conversations, media, and in business, medical journals and publications.

Corporate wellness has grown into a \$2 billion industry in that timeframe and has been incorporated into primary care medicine, corporate benefits packages, and government health initiatives. It has also become a buzzword used by health plans and brokers to up-sell services.

Unfortunately, recent research indicates that while 90 percent of U.S. companies offer some aspect of wellness programs, only half of them have tried to measure the program’s success. Even sadder is the news that fewer than seven percent of the wellness programs offered are good enough to make a difference.

Most wellness programs have an effective shelf-life of two years or less. This leaves companies frustrated over poor employee engagement, low support among company leadership, and few results. Many companies abandon these initiatives altogether or start over entirely.

Harvard economists and scientists have

found that when employers utilize current, comprehensive wellness programs, medical costs fall by \$3.27 and absenteeism is reduced by \$2.73 for every dollar invested in these programs. Of course, you must have the right wellness strategies in place to achieve results like these.

Here are eight action steps to redefine your wellness program so that you too can achieve similar results.

1. Provide Information and Education to Employees and their Families

As a successful business, it’s important to provide education about individual and group health to your employees and their families. Do this in a manner that helps them develop the skills to make necessary lifestyle changes while also acknowledging varying degrees of motivation. A few ways you can do this include:

- Provide newsletters, handouts, website access, and payroll stuffers with relevant information.
- Create a lending library with helpful health materials including books, brochures, videos, etc.
- Offer regular, onsite speaking programs, wellness coaching, and multi-week challenges

2. Give Employees Opportunity to Assess Their Own Health Risks

Provide an appraisal of health risks and related feedback from a reputable resource. You should also make sure the assessment is confidential and includes measurements for diabetes, blood pressure, cholesterol and BMI (body mass index). More effective assessments provide employees with an overall wellness score and employers with a dashboard of health trends, conditions, clusters and avoidable costs.

3. Offer Real Improvements and Not Just More of the Same

Your employees don’t want more health resources, they want better health resources. They are already bombarded with far too much benign information with little value. Present only the most reputable experts and information. Don’t simply pile something else on top of other ineffective information. Give them something better instead.

4. Improve Engagement by Incentivizing Participation

The average participation rate in wellness programs is 40 percent. That number doubles with an incentive of \$200 or more and exceeds 90 percent when the incentives relate to health benefits. Consider this as you work to improve participation and impact.

5. Create a Supportive Culture of Health Within Your Business

Make it easy for employees to make healthy choices by providing healthier snack options in break rooms and meeting areas. Offer fitness opportunities. Implement wellness policies affirming organizational health support.

6. Don’t Sacrifice Quality for Costs

Current research from Harvard indicates that the most effective programs costs between \$65 and \$285 per year per employee. If you don’t have the budget to offer this, consider offering a pilot program to a smaller group of employees. The results speak for themselves and often leave room to offer future widespread coverage.

7. Don’t Treat the Wellness Program as an Island

These programs cannot be effective as a single initiative from Human Resources. Incorporate them into the corporate culture and use one program or service to link to others. Then, employees get the maximum assistance that’s available to them, including referring into your existing, often underutilized, benefits.

8. Evaluate the Program

The bottom line is that wellness must work in order to be a cost-effective measure for your business to take. You need to track and report participation, results, costs, and effectiveness of your health program.

During the last 30 years, the term wellness has undergone many transformations. Including the strategies above in your wellness program will ensure it lasts well into the next decade for your business.

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