

Increasing Employee Participation & Engagement



White Paper: **Increasing Employee Participation and Engagement**

Having trouble getting employees to participate in wellness programs? The key lies with offering multiple choices of programs that fit with what employees need and view as important. New research demonstrates that participation rates increase when programs are flexible, accessible, supported by senior management, well-communicated and credible. They are also more successful when employees have a personal interest in the program and offerings are multiple, convenient and occur during the workday. Hectic personal schedules combined with the fact that workers spend a large proportion of their time at work means that the more activities you can make available at the workplace – the more employees are likely to participate. An annual, organization-wide Health Risk Assessment (HRA), targeted coaching, a variety of wellness challenges for employees to choose from, linking participation to health outcomes and an effective incentives program are key components to the success of workplace wellness strategies.

The Health Risk Assessment

Best practices dictate that the first step in designing wellness programs is to offer a Health Risk Assessment (HRA). The HRA is a confidential survey that provides each participant with a complete report about their current health and lifestyle based on up-to-date guidelines for optimal health. An aggregate report for the whole organization, *that does not identify individual employees*, is then created for the employer. This report outlines the major health issues in the organization, the readiness of employees to change, their interest in specific wellness interventions and the recommended interventions to address the identified health issues.

Research demonstrates that HRAs are valuable to the success of workplace wellness programs. HRAs are critical to raise awareness, motivate, set goals, measure results and identify issues. They are the first step in implementing a workplace wellness strategy and allow for programs to be designed to address employee-identified issues.

When HRAs include clinical screening for BMI, cholesterol, blood pressure and glucose, as well as a follow-up by a health professional to review results, participation and engagement are increased. It is good practice to allow employees to complete their clinical screening and the HRA questionnaire, print their personal reports and then receive a consultation on their results ideally during the same time period¹ or as soon as possible after completion of the HRA.

Targeted Coaching

Targeted coaching is a key component to increasing participation and engagement rates and is important for both high and low risk employees. It should begin as soon as possible after completion of the HRA and is valuable to empower both low risk employees to maintain their low risk status and high risk employees to adopt healthier lifestyle behaviours. A two-prong approach is normally used; one way is to have employees contact the coach with their own health questions. Having employees take the initiative to contact the coach with their wellness questions and issues encourages them to take control and self-manage their wellness. Similarly, coaches may contact employees based on identified areas of need such as different categories of wellness scores, and/or specific risk factors such as elevated blood pressure or cholesterol. In either of these cases, it is important for coaches to guide employees in finding solutions to their wellness challenges and help them set and track their health goals. It is recommended that no limits be placed on how often employees may contact the coach. If limitations have to be placed, at least two contacts are required to secure employee engagement in making the necessary lifestyle change.

Wellness Programs

Research indicates that while participation in either a HRA or wellness activities alone results in savings, participation in both results in greater benefits. This suggests that the sum of various wellness interventions provides a greater benefit than the impact of the individual elements alone.² A gold standard to aim for is that **at least 60%** of employees take part in an annual Health Risk Assessment and two

¹ Edington, D. (2009). *Zero Trends: Health as a Serious Economic Strategy*. Health Management Research Center, University of Michigan.

² Serxner, S.A., Gold, D.B., Grossmeier, J.J., and Anderson, D.R. (2003). "The relationship between health promotion participation and medical costs: a dose response." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, **45**(11), 1196-2000.

wellness activities. We also know from research that participation is heightened if activities are group-oriented and foster positive peer pressure, camaraderie and recognition. For example, many wellness challenges and activities can be completed as a team, allowing employees to compete in a friendly manner and reach goals individually and as a group. Online interventions can also include a social media component that allows employees to talk with each other, offer wellness tips, exchange information they found helpful and/or organize wellness events. Offering multiple activities and challenges for employees to choose from increases the likelihood that they will find something suited to their interests and personal goals.

Linking Incentives to Participation

Incentives plans are particularly important when considering that although over 60% of employees believe workplace wellness programs are a good idea, only about 30% usually participate in them.³ One proven way to raise participation is to offer appropriate incentives. Different types of incentives have been shown to generate different rates of participation. For example, incentives such as water bottles, mugs and t-shirts result in about 10% to 15% participation; gift cards, movie passes and other merchandise can result in 15% to 50% participation, while cash incentives such as reimbursements for medical plans or draws for travel/weekend outings etc. can result in 35% to 75% participation. It is important that the wellness program and incentives are communicated clearly. It is also important that the incentives are linked to specific health outcomes or goals. When employees reach the specific outcome or goal, they are rewarded, either directly or by placing their name in a draw for the major reward. Other effective and low-cost incentives relate to recognition and include congratulatory certificates/plaques signed by the organization's President, Chief Executive Officer or senior manager and offered to employees who reach pre-determined wellness goals. Write-ups and recognition in company-wide newsletters and social events are also an excellent way to increase motivation and enthusiasm in workplace wellness and demonstrate the organization's commitment to creating a healthy workplace.

Communicating to Employees

Communication is essential to the success of workplace wellness programs. Best practice communication strategies are typically three-pronged with the original message and invitation coming from the President or Chief Executive Officer of the

organization. This message is usually high-level, announces that the organization will launch a wellness strategy, indicates the organization's support and commitment and sends the "I care" message to employees. A separate communication is sent to middle managers as commitment from all levels of management is key and employees' immediate supervisors are expected to support employees in participating in the wellness offerings of the organization. A more detailed message from the Human Resources Manager, or other senior official, informs employees about the wellness strategy and programs. Communication from the wellness coordinator, or equivalent, then follows outlining program specifics and the process for participation. Communicating the processes of the program is crucial to encouraging participation as employees need to know how to register, participate in and complete the program. They also need to be aware of the criteria that need to be met in order to qualify for incentives and who they may contact if they have questions or concerns. Wide distribution of promotional material for the wellness offerings is also included at this stage. A few days prior to the launch of the wellness interventions, an announcement is sent to all employees from the wellness coordinator.

It may be necessary to communicate each aspect of the wellness program separately as employees may have different questions or concerns about a Health Risk Assessment than a wellness activity. For example, employees may have concerns about privacy and confidentiality when their personal health information is collected as part of an HRA. Thus a critical aspect of a communication strategy for the HRA or other wellness intervention, involves reassuring employees that their information is being collected and stored in a confidential manner and that any communication, for example, between the employee and their coach is done in a private and confidential manner.

In summary, principles of effective communication for wellness strategies dictate that communications are CEO-driven; messaging is clear and consistent and widely-circulated. Communication around participation and incentives should also touch on the following: letting employees know the organization cares about them, emphasizing the value of health, referring to the program as a benefit and a great opportunity, letting employees know their participation is voluntary and outlining



the incentives/recognition employees can expect for participating.³ A participation rate of 100% should be expected, knowing that it is not likely that 100% participation will be achieved. However, setting the bar high sends the message that the program is valuable and that the organization is committed to wellness. As previously mentioned, a gold standard is for **at least 60%** of employees to participate in a HRA and at least two wellness interventions per year. Consistent communication is critical to achieve this goal. And finally, it is important that wellness “be in the conversation” as a standing agenda item at management, staff meetings and workplace events.

Watch for our next white paper on the Health Risk Assessment and our webinars on this and other topics.

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³Hunnicut, D. (2008). “Utilizing Incentives to Maximize Participation”. Wellness Council of America. <http://www.welcoa.org/freeresources/index.php?category=8>