

Wellness programs: A leading health care trend for employees

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In today's environment of continuously rising health care costs, wellness programs are gaining the attention of both larger and smaller organizations. Increasingly, employers are focusing on these programs as a means of containing costs as well as positively impacting employees' health and enhancing productivity.

The following is an overview for employers who have an interest in initiating wellness programs in their organizations. It outlines contributing factors, examples of what can be included, and considerations for implementation.

Factors contributing to a focus on wellness:

- The prolonged economic downturn has been pinpointed as a catalyst forcing more U.S. employers to take aggressive measures to control rising health care costs and motivate employees to improve their health, according to a survey recently released by Towers Watson consultants and the National Business Group on Health.
- Poor diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use and problem drinking have been identified as leading contributors to diseases and deaths. By adopting healthier behaviors, employees can reduce related diseases, including cancer, diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease and strokes.
- Obesity is growing faster than any previous public health issue the nation has faced, according to findings from a study by Kenneth E. Thorpe, Ph.D., Emory University. If current trends continue, it is anticipated that 103 million adults will be considered obese by 2018 and obesity-related expenditures (\$344 billion) will account for more than 21% of this country's direct health care spending.
- The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 includes provisions that are supportive of wellness programs. For example, it provides grants for up to five years to small employers that establish wellness programs (funds appropriated for five years

beginning in fiscal year 2011). The Act also permits employers to offer employees rewards, as stipulated, for participating in programs and meeting health-related standards.

Examples of what is covered in current wellness programs:

- Health fairs
- Mobile and on-site health screenings
- Health risk assessments
- Fitness classes and activities
- Health coaches and other professionals specializing in wellness
- On-site fitness centers or compensation for off-site memberships
- Programs designed for tobacco cessation, weight control and stress management
- Disease management programs targeting chronic conditions
- Healthy choices in workplace cafeterias and vending machines
- Training on health-related topics, such as exercise and nutrition
- Flu vaccinations
- Newsletters and other communications containing wellness information
- Workplace areas that encourage walking.

Considerations for program implementation:

- Look at a wellness program as a part of your overall health care strategy.
- Obtain up-to-date information on developments in wellness programs prior to making decisions regarding implementation.
- Determine the scope and comprehensiveness of the program based on organizational objectives and cost-benefit assessments.
- Focus on developing a program that will engage employees in pursuing preventative measures, changing unhealthy behaviors, and becoming better-informed health care consumers.
- Pay attention to applicable laws that impact certain components of wellness programs (e.g. health risk assessments) and create potential liabilities for organizations, such as the

Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, Americans with Disabilities Act and amendments, and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

- Decide whether to offer incentives (e.g. rewards, bonuses, discounts) for participating in and/or completing specific health-related activities.
- Assess potential downsides, such as employees' perceptions and legal risks, prior to designing a program that requires mandatory participation and/or includes negative consequences.
- Consider consulting with an attorney to ensure that the program complies with applicable laws, especially those related to privacy and discrimination.
- Base the selection of each vendor not only on the cost of services, but also on a track record of delivering effective results.
- Build trust with employees through clear and open communications at the inception of the program.
- After implementation, stay abreast of ongoing changes in the complex health care and legal landscape.
- Request feedback from employees to understand their perspectives regarding the program.
- Review and monitor the program on an established schedule to assess its effectiveness in meeting predetermined criteria, such as costs and outcomes.
- Communicate with employees on a regular basis about the wellness program, including its objectives in promoting healthier lifestyles and the win-win results that can be achieved for them, personally, and for the overall organization.

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