

## WHY WELLNESS MATTERS

Unless you've been out of the country on assignment for the last few years, you know that employer-sponsored wellness programs, designed to positively impact long-term health, are a hot topic. Wellness programs serve a dual purpose: to improve the health and resulting productivity of workers and to reduce the level of healthcare utilization and claims costs. For large employers, such programs are often bundled with health care plan administration, in which incentives are offered to initiate and maintain employees' good health habits and consistent treatment of chronic conditions.

Employers measure success in their wellness initiatives via assessing the cause of high health care resource utilization, surveying employees to determine what potential behaviors are likely driving these conditions, analyzing how to best address employee ailments and then communicating and implementing the chosen wellness program.

But how does the small employer with limited staff and funds incorporate wellness programs? There are actually numerous avenues to consider. Small employers offering group health insurance can tap into their health insurer and/or broker, as many insurers today offer pre-packaged employee wellness plans. In addition, many non-profit organizations have websites that offer free information (Alzheimer's Association and the American Cancer Society for example). Additional inexpensive approaches to introducing wellness include off-site fitness program subsidies, fitness equipment discounts, employer-sponsored sports teams, wellness competitions and fitness challenges, on-site exercise classes and walking trails, on-site flu and pneumonia shots, preventive wellness screenings and workshops on healthy lifestyle practices (such as meditation, yoga, healthy snacking and healthy cooking).

Local vendors (chiropractors and fitness centers, for example) are often happy to run onsite informational programs at no cost, since such exposure will likely bring them new customers and clients. Employers can also create or purchase weekly/monthly wellness newsletters (hard copy or online format). And firms with a cafeteria can work with their food service vendor to incorporate healthy meal offerings into their existing menu. As a specific example of creativity on limited resources, the small, non-profit human services agency in Northeast Philadelphia, SPIN (Special People in the Northeast) recently initiated a no-cost program called "Walking Wednesdays," in which employees walk as a group during lunch or after work.

But as the above-mentioned wellness programs are hoped to reduce risk, produce healthier employees, lessen absenteeism, increase productivity and enhance morale, a few critical components are missing: the all-important assessment tools and metrics, one-on-one consultations, health coaching backed by an educated and professional team and customized incentive and communication plans – all of which can be purchased in some form through a wellness vendor.

**Michael Sommar**, President of mps communications and a PEBA member, cautions that employers considering wellness programs should resist the temptation to implement so-called ‘free’ wellness programs and communication, citing the old adage, ‘You get what you pay for.’ Communication designed by his firm takes into account corporate culture and other demographic factors before decisions are made. In the long run, Sommar notes, time spent on wellness program development will pay off in measurable outcomes.

Temple University alum **Lee Dukes**, now based in Indianapolis, is the President of Principal Wellness Company. Lee believes that a strong wellness program absorbs the culture of the employer and focuses on programs that align with that culture. While it’s true that many wellness vendors cater to large employers, there are reputable vendors that serve the small employer market. Dukes suggests that small organizations searching for the appropriate wellness vendor check with their local wellness council (or an organization such as PEBA) for a directory of such firms.

Whatever the choices made, wellness initiatives should include easily accessible and informative communication materials that support workers’ sustained behavioral changes. Further, wellness initiatives should award results, not just behavior, and should ultimately align a strategic outlook with HR strategy to encourage employee longevity. Finally, though wellness-driven changes in risk factors may occur in the short run, realize and remember that overall improvement in employee health and the lowering of medical claims and associated costs typically takes years.

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