Employee wellness programs

Focusing on lifestyle behavior changes  Interviewed by Amy Dison

Because health care can be their largest expense, companies often search for ways to reduce such costs. “As the cost of health care increases, worksite health promotion programs with evidence-based designs and thorough evaluation techniques help companies and employees to reduce their cost while having more productive employees,” says Rose Gantner, Ed.D., senior director of health promotions for UPMC.

Typically, traditional programs focus on care or disease management of people considered high risk for chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure or high cholesterol.

Smart Business spoke with Gantner about using small obtainable steps to have sustainable long-term behavioral gains with the help of worksite programs that would be beneficial and effect positive changes in habits and attitudes.

How can employers develop an effective worksite program?

Employees’ health is a key to business success. This means employers to have align their programs with their business priorities. Such programs are designed to improve health conditions and reduce employees’ risks, increase productivity, increase creativity, decrease absenteeism, and help increase morale and retention of staff.

For a program to be truly effective, employers must realize no two people will need exactly the same plan. The key is developing smart goals for employees. These should be specific, measurable, attainable, timely and realistic. Also, some people will prefer online activities, on-site groups, telephonic health coaching or print materials.

What are the key components of a work-site program?

Developing a program requires the assessment of the work site, such as the culture, the environment and the facility. Other assessments, such as a health risk assessment and biometric screenings are also recommended. These assessments can provide an employer with general information about health status such as how many employees are smokers, are overweight, or have chronic conditions as well as predict future risks.

Focusing on the design for incentive reward systems is necessary and involves communicating a tailored and targeted action plan for each employee. An intervention phase helps employees understand their health status and learn improved skills and knowledge on how to help employees change habits while making good daily decisions to improve their health. Finally, results need to be monitored and changes tracked over time.

How do employers initiate a work-site program and get employees involved?

The hardest part for most employers is engaging employee participation. Senior management needs to support such efforts. Incentive plans often are used to engage employees and monitor participation. Incentives should be used pro-actively. Employers should be rewarded for taking steps to prevent health risks such as getting tested for cancer annually after the age of 40, or for diabetes if they are overweight. Employees can also be rewarded for annual checkups, using medical online tools, engaging and enrolling in lifestyle behavior change programs, and using community resources.

How can employers create a plan for their employees’ needs?

Collaboration is necessary to improve employee health and reduce health care costs. A wellness committee should be created within the company made up of representatives from various departments. The committee can determine a plan of action, such as having a health fair, exhibits, assessments, team competition for walking, etc. Other issues for consideration may include food selection in the cafeteria, the air quality in the building, and the company’s smoking policy. Smaller companies may not need a committee, but they can encourage employees to use Internet tools that help them manage their activities.

Employers can work through their health care company to provide employees with pharmacology such as nicotine patches and gum for smokers, and employer tool kits that include pedometers, nutrition book and stretch bands for people who are overweight.

How does developing such a program benefit a company?

If wellness programs are properly implemented, they can reduce up to 60 percent of health risks as well as major reductions in the cost of chronic care for employees. There is a direct correlation between decreased absenteeism and increased productivity. The aim is to improve employees’ knowledge, attitudes, and understanding of their behavior and choices as well as to reduce risks and health costs.

Cost/benefit analysis and cost-effective analysis can be used to measure the money saved vs. the cost of the program and the nonfinancial benefits of wellness programs. Nonfinancial benefits can be seen, for example, in the smoking cessation rates, reduction in overall weight and increased physical movement, changes in health status and changes in cholesterol levels.

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