

## Patient Advocacy Group Shares Solutions to Fuel Greater Participation in Workplace Wellness Programs

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By Melissa Kostinas, Director, Workplace Wellness Campaign, The New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute (NJHCQI) | Aug 29, 2013

Workplace wellness is not a new concept, but it is definitely one that is recently gaining more importance.

With non-communicable diseases on the rise, many people are becoming more concerned about what lifestyle choices can be made to avoid them and stay healthy. Furthermore, businesses recognize the cost of stressed, out of shape, non-productive employees: increased health insurance costs, absenteeism, retention problems, and loss in productivity. Trying to take a more active role in the health of their employees, employers are creating and implementing wellness programs that encourage healthy behavior. Through incentives and rewards, companies are encouraging their employees to make healthy lifestyle choices like eating well and exercising regularly.

Despite the benefits of these programs, their success and sustainability can only be achieved through employee participation – which has been a challenging feat for many employers. Without high participation, programs will result in limited return on investments for employers and might discourage them from implementing other programs in the future. Because of this risk and the tug of war between cost and benefits, some companies find it too difficult and futile to implement workplace wellness programs.

Fortunately, there are solutions that help employers increase participation. First and foremost, companies should be focusing on the employees themselves – their needs, schedules, and interests – and design programs tailored to these considerations.

Employers should ask their employees: What gets you healthy? What motivates you to do what everyone knows is healthy behavior? We all have reasons for not doing what we know we should – time, access, knowledge, and cost. All these factors contribute to our denial.

Employees are busy, so the more a company can incorporate healthy eating and activity into existing schedules the more likely they are to embrace them. Easy access to workplace wellness programs makes a big difference. Onsite, or nearby programs offered during breaks or outside work hours also are great ways to tackle the time and access excuses.

Information and knowledge, while seemingly obvious, helps to motivate employees too. Of course we know we should exercise, but do your employees know that physical activity helps to prevent back pain? It increases muscle strength and endurance, and improves flexibility and posture. With this knowledge, maybe the next time they get that twinge in their lower back they might think about exercise instead of painkillers. Providing reduced or no-cost programs will also boost participation rates. Coupled with incentives, like bonuses or rewards (e.g. allowing employees to trade in some of their unused sick days at the end of a year for an extra vacation day), rates of participation are likely to increase.

There are also management steps that can be taken to increase and maintain participation.

Unless employers are committed to employee wellness, the workplace wellness program becomes another ineffective plan that sounded good on paper but never achieved the anticipated results. The executives at Valley Health System understood the importance of managerial commitment. When they created Valley Health Workplace Connection the program managers worked closely with the health system's managers to make sure all higher-level staff understood the importance of their involvement. Today, Valley Health Workplace Connection is a very successful workplace wellness program with high participation and employee satisfaction.

To ensure such success, workers from all levels should be actively engaged in programs. Planning should include processes to maintain communication with staff and the creation of program committees to guide intervention, observe participation, and adjust programs accordingly.

Additionally, program designers should consider all the major health risks in their targeted population as well as their business' needs. Different programs should be offered at different levels, depending on characteristics of the recipients. The key is integrating health into the business. Policies governing the workplace wellness program should align with the organization's mission, vision and values. They must affirm and communicate the value of good health and show commitment to engage workers in health enhancement. Again, a program is only effective if it reaches the intended audience and motivates them.

Pfizer recognized this and found that using programs like Keas got their employees more involved because it was engaging but less invasive. By making wellness a challenge and incorporating games and goals into the plan, Pfizer overcame the primary challenge in any wellness program — participation.

The bottom line is that wellness programs are gaining steam, but there are challenges. Having the support of management and creating a program that meets your employees' needs will allow your program to overcome those challenges. Be creative and remember: Wellness can be fun.

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