

What's In It for Me?

Creating well-being programs that engage employees and produce results

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Employee wellness and well-being programs have become a standard component of employer strategies to save healthcare dollars and improve productivity. One survey puts the number at 98% for large employers and 73% for small organizations¹. While this and similar surveys document how pervasive wellness programs have become, unfortunately not all programs truly engage members, leading to less than optimal results. This paper offers some key considerations to build better engagement.

A recent publication by Brodeur Partners² based on an online survey of 542 working adults provides some insights into the challenge. The survey found that only 34 percent of those polled said they have a health and wellness program at work, suggesting a wide gap between purported program availability and actual employee awareness and utilization. Clearly, organizations that see low awareness and low interest need to market the value of their programs more effectively.

In a nutshell, we must find a better answer to the question “What’s in it for me?”

For the past several years we have tried to answer that question with money. According to a recent Price Waterhouse Coopers publication,³ 87% of employers offer some form of incentive for participating in wellness programs, most being financial in nature. According to the National Business Group on Health and Fidelity Investments survey⁴, employers said they expect to spend an average of \$693 per employee on wellness incentive programs this year, up from \$594 in 2014 and \$430 five years ago.

Yet we know money alone will not do the trick and there are diminishing returns on the cash spent to incentivize participants. A large study funded by Alegeus Technologies with 5,000 participants found that over 80% of respondents would participate in commonly offered wellness programs for between \$100 and \$250 per year⁵, implying that better designed, delivered and communicated programs could be funded by reducing the amount of excess money spent on incentives.

What works? 5 suggestions for success:

1. Deliver better communications.

There need to be multiple channels and attempts to communicate in order to reach the majority of your employees. Don't overlook old-fashioned ways of getting the message out. Invest in a large tripod or two that can be placed in strategic areas around the workplace and used to announce programming events. If you have wellness champions (employees who volunteer to serve on a wellness committee and advocate for the program), use them to spread the word literally around the workplace by discussing what's happening in the program, handing out flyers, etc. Emails are great, but remember not everyone in your organization may access it on a regular basis.

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation. (2014). Employer Health Benefits 2014 Annual Survey.

² Awareness and Acceptance: Key challenges for workplace wellness success © Copyright 2015 Brodeur Partners

³ Health and Wellbeing Touchstone Survey Results – 2015 by Price Waterhouse Coopers

⁴ NBGH - Online survey fielded from December 2014 through January 2015 among clients of National Business Group on Health and Fidelity Investments. Metrics based on responses from 121 companies.

⁵ Source: What's Next for Wellness Incentive Programs? June 2, 2015 - Alegeus Technologies

2. Value the participants' time.

The message should be "Give me 20 minutes and I'll give you..." Examples include:

- ✓ Information they can act on to feel better now and assure a better health future. From conducting an initial biometric health screen (We don't advocate for annual screening without cause) to a conversation with a health coach, keep it short and sweet. Every program activity should be able to be completed in a reasonable time frame. Think 20 or so minutes.
- ✓ Rewards and recognition programs that is easy to follow and document. While you may have a great health portal, if participants have to spend an inordinate amount of time documenting their activity, it won't inspire use. If possible, engineer documentation into the process for example utilizing technology to automatically upload activity data into your system. Think no more than 5 minutes each week required for documentation.
- ✓ Activities that get results. It is highly possible to get real benefits from 20 to 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week. For example, a brisk 20 minute walk at lunch several times a week is enough to provide you with cardiovascular, mental health and weight management benefits. We need to encourage activity wherever and whenever possible instead of considering only stringent fitness programming as valid.

3. Value participant choice.

The message should be "Wellness Your Way". An important movement in healthcare is the recognition of the need for a consumer-focused approach to service delivery. This same approach and attitude should include wellness services. A recent GuideSpark Wellness Survey found that 63% of employees say they would participate in wellness programs if they were better suited to their lifestyle⁶. As consumers we want and value choice and the flexibility to practice health improvement on our own terms. We want personalization and customization options in our programming around those choices.

To answer "What's in it for me?" the program should have some understanding of the life context each individual brings to their health pursuits. "Why do I want to change, what barriers are in my road, how can you help me succeed?" We should ask those questions and be prepared to have answers that help.

4. Visibly recognize and reward progress.

While there may be a place for cash-based incentives tied to premium reductions, don't forget the value of physical items that have the potential to provide ongoing recognition of achievement as well as impact organizational culture. For example, one of our clients provided nice oxford shirts embroidered with their program logo to everyone who reached a certain point level based on active program participation. Employees really loved the shirts as another work outfit option. There was pride in the fact they had to earn it and it was also an ongoing reminder of the program.

We always recommend trying to balance a progress-based incentive system with the desire for outcomes. For most participants practicing a healthy lifestyle is a journey with successes and failures but if they are moving in the right direction that should be recognized.

⁶ Source: 2014 GuideSpark Wellness Survey

5. Culture trumps everything.

One irony of being able to address individual wellbeing is the truth that it is hard to practice living a healthy lifestyle in isolation of the environment we live and work in. We spend a lot of time at work and the culture of the organization can be health supporting or health defeating. Recent publications have highlighted the importance of corporate culture in fostering high performing, healthy and engaged employees⁷. The underlying message is that often times the silent subtle norms of how a company treats its employees and how it operates has more impact on health than more visible policies and programs such as wellness.

The message: it is important to spend an equal amount of time assessing and working on the culture of the organization so that tools and resources being offered to employees to impact health actually have a chance of working. Making sure leadership walks the talk on health by actively participating and promoting your wellness efforts is a great place to start.

In conclusion, as wellness providers, administrators, and sponsors, we have to ask ourselves have we answered the question "What's in it for me?" from our prospective participant's point of view. We know that we all want to be healthy and have energy for the things we enjoy in life and to live with purpose, but helping each unique individual achieve that is difficult.

Remember to:

- ✓ Share personal stories of success so that others see what is possible
- ✓ Provide options and choices around programs and participation
- ✓ Ask employees what they want and need to be engaged in your program
- ✓ Understand the role of your culture

These will help your program succeed for the organization and employees.

About the Author

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⁷ 3 Simple Ways to Tell if You Have A Thriving Workplace Culture - August 13, 2015 By Rosie Ward