

Wellness innovation

Wellness programs that work

What employer doesn't want productive employees, fewer sick days and low insurance claims? Since offering standard wellness programs isn't enough, it is now widely recognized that health plan carriers and employers need to find new solutions that promote employee participation.

"Many well-intended wellness programs haven't worked in the past," says Steve Russell, vice president of product development at Vista Healthplans. "To change results, health plan companies and employers should collaborate on new wellness strategies that fit into employees' busy schedules."

Smart Business spoke with Russell about innovative wellness programs offered by select health plans.

Why are wellness programs important?

Encouraging wellness is more powerful than treating sickness. Fit and active individuals in general have higher energy levels and stronger immune systems. Healthy employees tend to be more focused and productive and have fewer sick days.

Lifestyle changes can also help to reduce the effects of chronic illnesses like diabetes or asthma. Additionally, a healthy diet and regular exercise can improve employees' psychological health by increasing positive emotions and reducing stress.

What online tools can help with total employee wellness?

One of the most effective ways to help employees evaluate their current health picture is to have them use a health risk assessment (HRA) tool. HRA tools can help employees to pinpoint areas that could lead to serious illness in the future. These could include everything from weight to blood pressure to smoking. To help motivate employees to take an HRA before plunging into fitness activities, some health plans require the HRA prior to offering discounted fitness club memberships.

Armed with an objective, comprehensive HRA, employees can use other online tools that help to manage their diets, follow practical exercise pro-



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grams, and participate in disease management programs. Once employees know they need improvement in an area, they can tackle the problem with useful information and online coaching available through comprehensive online wellness services.

Other online services not only provide extensive information, tools and techniques, but also have a supportive community. Wellness programs that include access to interactive smoking-cessation tools can connect smokers with an online community that offers support.

How can fitness club programs cater to individual needs?

Practical programs achieve positive results. This means that fitness club programs need to look at employees' lives and cater to their schedules. Health plan carriers can offer programs where employees have a large fitness network from which they can choose a facility that fits them. Busy women can join Curves, a network of women-only gyms based on effective 30-minute workouts. People that work second or third shift can join a 24-hour fitness club that allows them to exercise on any day at any time.

What kind of discounts and services encourage participation in wellness programs?

Progressive health plan carriers want to encourage employee wellness. Some of these providers offer free access to powerful online wellness tools and discounted or free fitness club memberships as part of their standard program. These initiatives show a health plan's commitment to improving employees' health, which benefits companies and communities.

By taking away the cost and convenience barriers to participation, innovative health plan companies make wellness accessible to all employees. Additionally, cutting-edge wellness programs give employees incentives. In some programs, employees can earn points whenever they participate in activities like going to the fitness club or using the online tools. Employees can then redeem these points in quarterly or annual contests or use them for discounted fitness materials.

How can employers create a work environment that promotes wellness?

As partners in employees' wellness, employers need to help promote participation in the program. That includes allowing employees to participate in onsite orientation and training sessions for online and fitness club programs.

Another key to effective programming is giving employees access to computers where they can use the online tools. This ensures that everyone has access to the important Web-based tools.

Most importantly, employers need to have an environment where wellness is truly encouraged. This could mean allowing employees to take a slightly longer lunch to attend an exercise class or offering healthy options in the cafeteria. When an involved employer and an innovative health plan join forces to improve employee wellness, it truly creates a synergistic effect.

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