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Behavior change: The focal point of successful employee well-being initiatives

BY SHAWN MOORE

Employers increasingly understand the importance of employee well-being as they navigate the changing paradigm of health care.

Optimal employee benefits strategies are supported by a culture that promotes better health at lower costs and top-down reinforcement of that goal.

Employers of all sizes are investing in initiatives and solutions that will drive improvements. Yet, many strategies fail to acknowledge and address the proverbial elephant in the room: Changing employee behavior is hard.

The reality is that 40 percent of a person's health is dependent on behavioral patterns, and one study found that less than 3 percent of Americans live healthy lifestyles.

If employers want to positively move the needle on health outcomes, they must first understand employee behavioral patterns and then implement tactics that focus on the fundamentals of behavior change.

Understanding why “culture” is not enough

Creating a culture that promotes well-being is a critical first step to awareness and action. But it's not enough.

Employers must also help employees find the bandwidth to identify and change risky health behaviors such as poor diet and nutrition, lack of exercise, substance and tobacco use, and lack of sleep.

In addition to these risky behaviors, employers also need to support employees with high-cost, chronic conditions maintain compliance with evidence-based care plans.

For instance, is an employee with high blood pressure compliant with medication adherence? If not, how can the employer improve the outlook?



If employers want to help health and wellness outcomes, they must first understand employee behavioral patterns and create strategies from that. (Photo: Shutterstock)

Employees, by and large, want to improve their health, but they are distracted, overwhelmed and increasingly stressed.

In fact, the World Health Organization has deemed it the “health epidemic of the 21st century,” attributing \$300 billion a year in U.S. workplace costs to stress.

When employees are consumed with the stress in their lives—whether financial, workplace-related or family demands—they simply do not have the margin to focus on their health.

This viscous cycle leads to rising costs associated with medical epidemics such as diabetes and hypertension, as well as absenteeism and productivity lags.

Behavior change is challenging because each employee's health situation is different.

Many employers lack the data capabilities needed to identify at-risk employees, help them understand how they can improve their personal health outlook and match them with the right tools to motivate change.

Behavior change: advancing employee well-being initiatives

The best employee well-being strategies start with the right culture and then address behavior change across three buckets: the why, the how and the nudge.

1. The why

Behavior change begins with personal motivation. One employee's desire to enact change may be very different from the person sitting across the room. Some people change with small steps, while others have big epiphanies.

The best approach is to use strategies and tactics to help move people towards autonomy by maximizing choice, respecting individual goals and trying to help individuals find meaning and hope in their achievements.

Rich data and analytics are a critical component of creating this type of personalized approach that will resonate with individuals and help them get in, and stay in, the process of change.

2. The how

Many employees want to improve their health; they just simply don't know how. For instance, a busy executive may not have enough time available to dedicate an hour a day to the gym, and decides that exercise is out of reach.

Yet, helping people shift their perceptions about making healthier choices can dramatically increase the amount of activity for that executive.

Encouraging that person to park at the back of the parking lot, take the stairs instead of the elevator or scheduling "walking" meetings are all steps forward to make physical activity attainable.

Helping employees creatively identify realistic ways to adopt healthier behaviors gives people confidence to support lasting change.

3. The nudge

Once an employee has identified personal motivation for change and understands how to achieve his or her goals, the next step is ongoing empowerment.

What does it take for an individual to stay motivated and keep going? Is it financial reward or an intrinsic satisfaction?

The answers to these questions vary based on the individual, but they are a critical piece of the equation.

Advanced infrastructures exist that provide the analytics insights needed to first identify at-risk employees, help them determine the "why" and engage them for ongoing behavior change success. Specifically, mobile applications that track employee behavior provide a crucial data backdrop needed to uncover motivation and identify behavior change opportunities.

For instance, if an employee indicates poor eating habits, options for improvement including food substitutions or portion control can become the main message. Employees can then determine the most sustainable actions for their situation.

Digital engagement also provides ongoing tracking to create awareness and accountability. Employees become more familiar with personal habits, opening the door for change.

In addition, they can track and celebrate progress over time, contributing to ongoing motivation. App push notifications can become a literal "nudge" to keep users motivated and on track.

Forward-thinking sustainability

Employers that combine the right infrastructures and tools with a supportive top-down culture are best positioned for success.

Conducting a full culture of health study to identify gaps is a good starting point. The next step is deploying an infrastructure that lends easily to behavior change strategies and supporting it with programming that helps employees make needed changes.

Ultimately, companies need to think bigger and better when it comes to employee well-being. In the case of Prudential Financial, bigger and better equated to an investment in walking trails through downtown Newark. For another company, it might mean allocating time in the work day for exercise or bringing in nutritionists on a regular basis to work with employees.

The key is making it as easy as possible for employees to achieve behavior change.

This includes a strong, deliberate focus on culture, both within the organization and across the community, as well as a deeper understanding of the principles of behavior change with a thoughtful approach to the why, the how and the nudge. In the end, all stakeholders win.

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