



Cultivating a culture-driven wellness strategy to get the best from employees

by Sara Janak

Years ago, most workplace wellness plans focused exclusively on weight loss and smoking cessation.

Now, many employers have shifted to a holistic approach to wellness that goes beyond just physical health.

Companies who consider the eight dimensions of wellness as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) — emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social, spiritual — will see the most return on investment, said Theresa Nelson, interim president and CEO of WELLCOM.

“Companies who are successful with employee wellness are the ones who are creating a healthy worksite culture and supportive environment to allow those employees to make healthy choices, so they can make it a habit,” she said.

Wellness efforts also are more likely to succeed when there’s strong leadership support.

“Wellness is just integrated into their business strategy,” Nelson said.

To create an environment that promotes healthy choices, an employer can offer perks such as bike parking, relaxation or mindfulness rooms, ergonomically sound workstations and healthy vending and cafeteria options.

Some companies, Nelson said, have a garden of fruits and vegetables on their grounds. Not only is it a source of healthy food, but also a calming activity that can help with stress management.

“Sometimes the gardening itself is therapy,” she said.

The goal for many companies is to boost employees’ overall happiness.

“I think you’re seeing more and more employers using their wellness plans to increase employee engagement, make their employees generally happier, and to use the programs to distinguish the employer



Kirsch

so that they’re more of a desired employer, or an employer of choice,” said Pat Bourne, senior vice president and local practice leader at Aon Risk Solutions.

Employers are also working to simplify their wellness plans.

“Sometimes they’re so complicated that people don’t even know how to engage,” he said.

Tools such as fitness trackers and online portals can make it easier to participate and increase the chances of employees sticking with a wellness initiative, Bourne said.

A program offered by UnitedHealthcare, called Real Appeal, provides online tools to help employees reach weight-loss goals, said Allison Brungardt, health strategies consultant at UnitedHealthcare.

It includes weekly online classes and sessions with a digital health coach as well as exercise DVDs, an electronic scale, a blender, fitness guides and an activity tracker.

The program also can facilitate more

social interaction, Brungardt said. Employees often join forces to meet health goals by talking walks together throughout the day and holding each other accountable.

“We’re seeing when the employer sponsors this, that individuals are starting to talk about it and they sign up for the program together,” Brungardt said. “They may have their own individual goals that they’re working on, but it’s becoming more of a social thing at work.”

Identifying why employees have poor health habits or significant stress is another way companies can improve wellness programs.

“Perhaps there is financial troubles, difficulty sleeping, maybe they’re caring for an elderly family member,” Nelson said. “The list goes on and on.”

A rising number of employers are emphasizing financial wellness.

“It would be great if nutrition and physical activity were important to everyone, however, when employees are struggling financially, it is difficult to focus on health,” said Cara Kirsch, vice president at SilverStone Group. “That is why financial wellness is becoming an important part of an employer wellness strategy.”

Educational resources can help employees navigate money issues and reduce financial anxiety.

“Employees are trying to figure out how to balance creating an emergency fund with paying their out-of-pocket costs for their health plan and keeping stress to a minimum,” Kirsch said. “Financial wellness plans support employees in understanding the importance of creating a budget, emergency savings and retirement planning and also promote a culture that shows employees the organization cares about them and their families.”