

Wellness Programs Vital for Companies

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



To survive in these challenging economic times, businesses are looking for ways to cut costs. They strive to be “lean and mean.”

But recent studies provide mounting evidence that cutting employee wellness programs is – as the old saying goes – “penny wise and pound foolish.”

Researchers at the University of Rochester Medical Center reported the sedentary, stressful conditions of the typical American work place often lead to weight gain and even obesity.

Researchers found that exercise is critical to managing stress and keeping a healthy weight. Their findings were reported in a recent *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

“In a poor economy, companies should take care of the people who survive layoffs and end up staying in stressful jobs,” epidemiologist Diana Fernandez said in a university press release.

“It is important to focus on strengthening wellness programs to provide good nutrition, ways to deal with job demands, and more opportunities for physical activity that are built into the regular workday without penalty.”

In a separate study, MetLife reported that the economic crisis is taking its toll on worker health and productivity.

According to MetLife’s eighth annual “Employee Benefits Trends Study,” which was released in April, 68 percent of employees surveyed said that over the last 12 months they were affected by increased feelings of job insecurity, a decrease in the quality of their work, an increase in their workload or being distracted at work because of financial worries.

“In a still-fragile economy, organizations are searching for ways to maximize their benefits programs to improve employee productivity, as well as control costs. Programs that help improve employee health and financial security can be strategic tools for helping address these objectives,” said Anthony J. Nugent, MetLife’s executive vice president, U.S. Business, in a company press release.

“The ‘next benefits frontier’ will focus on providing employees with access to these programs along with the education needed to become a healthier, more financially secure workforce.”

Some of the wellness goals noted in the MetLife study included: regular checkups; weight loss; increased exercise; improved diet and nutrition; blood pressure and cholesterol management; lowered stress levels; reduced alcohol consumption; and smoking cessation.

Providing access to health and wellness programs, work/life balance programs, and financial advice and guidance in the workplace may prove to be a “win-win” for employers and employees alike, the company concluded from its study.

Wellness programs are slowly becoming popular with both employers and workers. But researchers have concluded they still are underutilized.

“More than ever before, employers are recognizing the value of a healthy workforce and are viewing wellness programs as an investment to help address their business objectives,” said Dr. Ronald Leopold, MetLife’s vice president, U.S. Business. “However, many appear to be underestimating this tool, especially compared against the perceived value by their employees.”

Recently passed federal health care reform legislation recognizes the benefits of employee wellness programs in containing costs, including health insurance premium costs. It’s part of the movement away from a health care system that focuses on “sick people” and places more emphasis on keeping people from getting sick.

Incentives have been included in the legislation for employers to provide wellness programs and for workers to participate. These incentives can include corporate policies that encourage healthy behavior, such as exercise, or discourage unhealthy behavior, such as smoking.

But employers must take care when implementing “incentives,” particularly if they can be viewed as punitive. For example, an employer may wish to give a non-smoking worker a discount on his/her health insurance premiums, rather than charging the smoker a higher premium. Whatever incentive system is developed, equity consideration must be given to workers who have particular health problems that would exist regardless of lifestyle changes.

Crafting an effective and fair employee wellness program can be achieved through the efforts of a company’s well-informed staff, working with a human resources consultant.

Both employers and workers share the benefits of an effective wellness program, as it makes both the company and its workers healthier.

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