

Employee Health

the Next Frontier in Corporate Strategy

Companies that elevate **employee wellness** programs from a simple perk to a broader corporate mission—for every employee—will have greater success.

FACED WITH THE DUAL CHALLENGE OF health care reform and rising health care costs, companies interested in improving their bottom line are focusing on disease prevention, improved fitness, weight-loss programs, and smoking cessation. “The earlier people address these issues, the less likely they are to get sick,” says Dee Edington, Ph.D, founder of the University of Michigan’s Health Management Research Center and chairman of consulting firm Edington Associates LLC. “It’s the best way to cut health care costs.”

A well-designed organizational and employee health program can also boost productivity, improve morale, and energize the workplace—placing companies, says Edington, at the next frontier in corporate strategy. Employee wellness programs predate health care reform, but their impact has been limited because of low participation. Recent industry data suggest that relatively few employees participate in wellness programs despite the high penetration of these programs.

Why not? Companies offer wellness as a perk, but then fail to make it part of a shared vision of corporate values, says Deborah McKeever, president and COO of EHE International, a 101-year-old company that has pioneered corporate physical exams and employee health and lifestyle management programs.

“What’s important to the company becomes important to employees. It’s an expression of loyalty,” says McKeever. “Companies need to develop a unifying and credible vision that elevates health from simple perks to one of inclusion in the corporate mission statement.”

While some perks such as physical exams and personal

trainers have traditionally been reserved for top management, companies would be wise to design inclusive benefits that extend to all employees. They start with a physical exam for early detection and identification of risk factors for diabetes, hypertension, and other preventable conditions, stress reduction workshops, and work-life balance initiatives. Companies need to make these initiatives a corporate priority, with executives embracing wellness both for themselves and all employees. The role of the organizational climate must also be examined for a healthy and high-performing workforce to grow.

Current labor trends appear to be driving the push toward organizational health programs, as an improving economy makes it harder for companies to retain employees. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that 2.5 million Americans voluntarily left their jobs in August, up from 2.4 million a year earlier. Of the 18% of workers who recently told employment website CareerBuilder that they’re dissatisfied at work, 65% said they didn’t feel valued by their company. “Health is personal and no other employee benefit offering says ‘I care about you’ more than a robust wellness program,” says McKeever.

A shared-values approach sends a clear message that a company values its employees and is committed to their success. It is a message, Edington says, that resonates with today’s workers, who were raised in a culture that values meaning and purpose as much as financial success. “We are on the edge of a sea change,” he says, noting that the conversation is shifting from health care and focusing on health instead. “Health is a win-win organizational value.” ●



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