

New resolutions

How to build a successful wellness strategy for the new year **Interviewed by Meredyth McKenzie**

Many of your employees this month are developing professional and personal goals for the coming year, and many of their personal goals deal with wellness.

By developing a corporate wellness program, you can help your employees achieve these goals and reap numerous benefits for your company, including decreased health care costs and increased productivity.

“The key to having a successful wellness strategy is identifying the health needs of your population, selecting the appropriate interventions and evaluating your success,” says Kristine Sapak, manager of member and corporate wellness at Priority Health.

Smart Business spoke with Sapak about how to create a wellness strategy and build that into a successful corporate wellness program.

How do you begin to build a successful wellness strategy?

The first step is to assess the population. You need to look at your resources, budget and needs. Do you need to reduce absenteeism? Do you need to reduce health care costs? Look at your goals and assess what you’re trying to accomplish. Are you trying to improve the health of your work force, or are you trying to improve their health by X degree in X year? Employees also need to assess their health status and look at their health risks, needs and interests to determine if they need to be doing something more. Employees also need to be educated on how to affect their health risk.

Then you have to start looking at changing behaviors. You may think employees are solely responsible for changing their behaviors, but that’s not the case. You also need to think about changing your corporate culture to support their efforts.

Does your company encourage walks on lunch breaks? Do you encourage people to go to the doctor for care? Do you have a culture that embraces tobacco cessation and is supportive of people who want to quit? Do your company-sponsored meals include healthy options?

The final step is to evaluate. Employees have to look at where they are on a regular basis and determine if they’re improving. Have they decreased their health risk or maintained their status? Have they improved their quality of life? You also need to evaluate your wellness program through participation, the overall health



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risks of the population and employee feedback.

What are some key things you need to do to create a successful wellness strategy?

The Wellness Council of America recommends that you:

- Concentrate on senior-level support.
- Create a cohesive wellness team that can help administer the program, give feedback and reach into different areas of the company.
- Collect data to help drive your health efforts.
- Craft an operating plan. You have to decide where you’re going, what the goal is, who will be involved and what the budget is. The key is to look at wellness as a business strategy.
- Choose appropriate interventions for the population.
- Create a supportive environment.
- Carefully evaluate outcomes.

You should work with your health plan and determine whether you want to imbed a wellness program into your health plan with benefit design coverage or offer it in conjunction with the plan. The two should mirror each other and work together.

You should also look at other community organizations, such as health departments

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or groups that can provide various services to your employees. Don’t take everything on; instead, get in the mindset of partnering with those around you. Take advantage of these resources, including community walks and runs.

How can you use incentives to encourage employees to participate in a wellness plan?

You need to find incentives that will engage employees and drive participation. Incentives should grab people who wouldn’t normally participate and help those at a healthy status maintain that status. People are so busy that they sometimes need a small reward to encourage them to take time to focus on themselves.

Examples of incentives include cash, reduced insurance premium, contribution to a health savings account, gift cards, merchandise, a paid vacation day, contributions to 401(k) accounts, discounts and subsidies.

How do you evaluate the program to make sure you’re getting the intended results?

You first need to look at participation. People talk with their feet, so you have to find out if they are attending programs. Then you ask for feedback. Find out if the programs drove employees to make health changes, taught them something new or provided them with actionable information.

Then use that feedback to modify your programs. You can look at programs embedded in the benefit design and compare them against claims to see if you are maintaining or reducing health care costs.

How can you make your program flexible to adapt to changes in your business?

Like most business plans, you look at it every year, re-evaluate and make tweaks as appropriate. A wellness program should be flexible enough to meet business demands. You may find that as your business is growing, you want to incorporate more technology into the program. Or you adopt a health coaching program if employees want more one-on-one intervention. There are a lot of options to use different communication methods to reach and educate people in different ways. <<