

# Measuring your health ROI

How investing in wellness programs leads to positive results **Interviewed by Amy Borghese**

**E**mployers today are implementing workplace programs that are designed to promote a culture of wellness. A recent case study allowed experts to evaluate which wellness programs were effective, the return on investment for employers and the overall importance of wellness programs for companies.

For employers to create a culture of wellness and find effectiveness, they must create awareness and introduce activities that support wellness and healthy lifestyles, says Bob VanEck, associate vice president of Clinical Quality Improvement with Priority Health.

*Smart Business* spoke to VanEck about the success of wellness programs and how solid workplace wellness programs can contribute to overall employee health and lower health care costs.

## What did the case study evaluate?

For this case study, a group of more than 13,000 employees was introduced to the wellness culture for an extended period of time. Not all of the employees chose to participate. To evaluate the effectiveness of the wellness programs, experts reviewed the biometric screening data of the participants. The data measured very basic and important information of a person's overall health, such as glucose levels, cholesterol levels, blood pressure and weight, and also evaluated immediate health risks and risk behaviors. A nurse or health coach was on hand at the end of the screening to discuss the results.

In this study, experts were also able to review the claims of the same group of individuals. By comparing the biometric data and diagnosed conditions from claims, experts were able to demonstrate to the group members how their health behaviors affected the costs of their health care.

## What did the results show?

That a person's weight has a direct impact on his or her health. Of the general population without diabetes or cardiovascular conditions, 52 percent of the population was overweight or obese; for those who suffered from diabetes or cardiovascular



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conditions, 83 percent were overweight or obese. Weight stood out as a key factor in the health and health care costs, as diabetes and cardiovascular conditions are two conditions with the highest associated costs.

Another costly set of conditions are degenerative orthopedic conditions (the wear and tear of necks, backs and knees). Weight had an effect on those conditions, as well. In those people without degenerative orthopedic disease, 60 percent were overweight or obese. For those people with degenerative orthopedic disease, 83 percent were overweight or obese.

Weight also affects health care costs. Obese employees cost 71 percent more in health care costs than those employees with a healthy weight even if they have the same health condition. Obese employees have a 27 percent greater overall health care cost even if they do not have a diagnosed health issue.

There were positives found in the study, as well. People who reported they were more physically active had lower costs for chronic conditions. Some conditions are hereditary and cannot be avoided, but this study showed that with physical activity health care costs will decrease.

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## What is the importance of the information found in this study for those people who manage company health care plans?

Different companies utilize different plans and change wellness programs as needed to fit the needs of the employees. This study demonstrated that there are significant cost savings found in managing employee weight. In this case, offering incentives for participation in healthy behaviors led to more employees with healthy weight. Such information helps employers redesign their wellness programs to increase effectiveness.

## How can employers present this information to employees to increase participation and effectiveness?

Celebrate the accomplishments of employees. It doesn't have to be about completely eliminating health care costs or eliminating disease completely. Rather, it should be about creating the healthy culture and maintaining healthy habits.

The culture of wellness takes time to build. Employers may want to start with general classes and offer health risk appraisals. These programs will make employees aware of healthy and risky behaviors and create the building blocks for the wellness foundation and participation. It is important for employers to understand that this is a new era of a culture of wellness.

## Are there other areas where employers should focus wellness attention?

Smoking cessation is a great place to focus. Offering incentives for smoking cessation is also cost effective for employers as smokers often have high health care costs.

Another area of interest noted in this study was the importance of healthy coping skills. Sometimes overeating and smoking are simply coping mechanisms. Employers can offer programs, classes and incentives, but they cannot control the way individuals cope with stress and/or their surroundings. <<