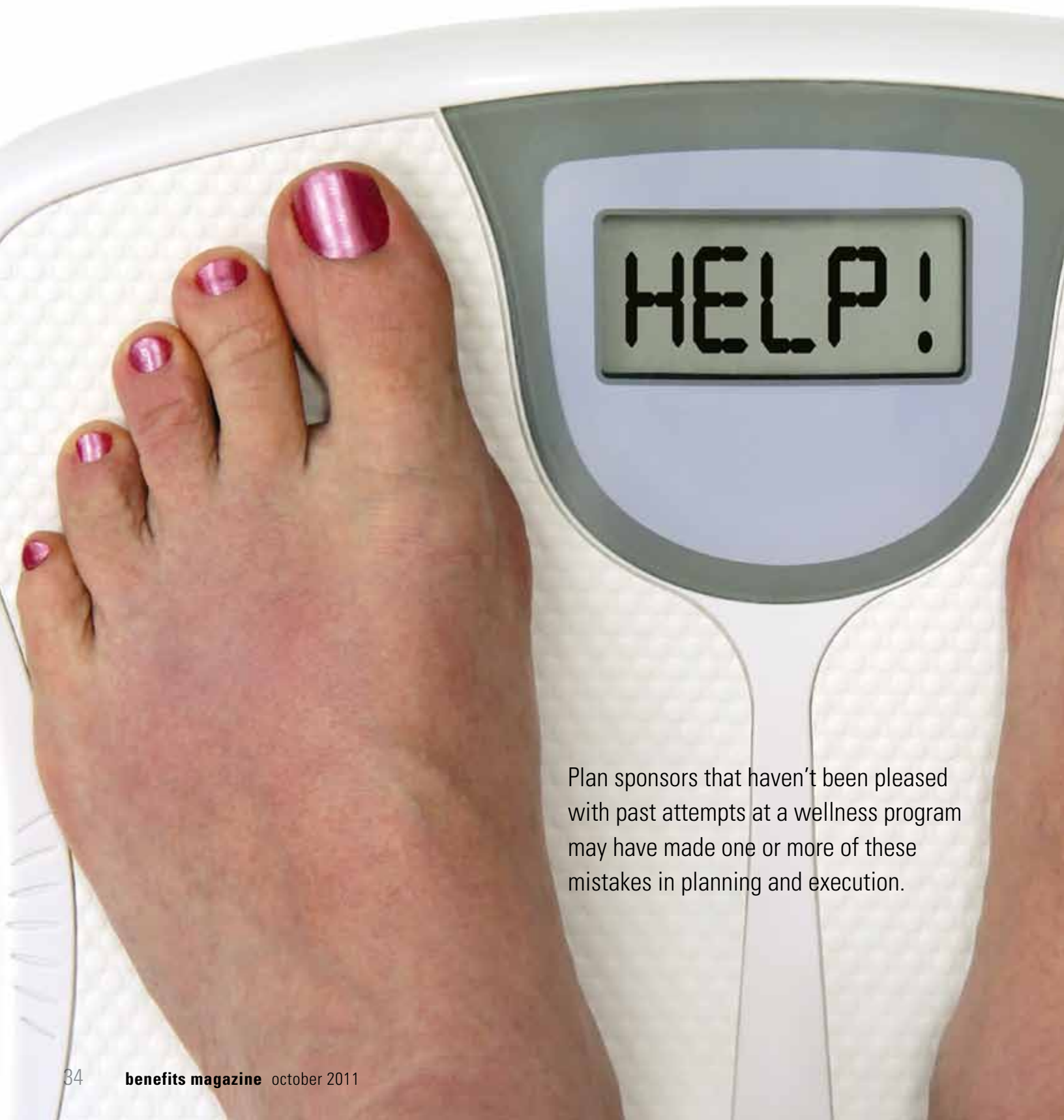


# TOP TEN



Plan sponsors that haven't been pleased with past attempts at a wellness program may have made one or more of these mistakes in planning and execution.

# Wellness Program Mistakes



by | **Debra Wein and Courtney Hernandez**

**G**etting a wellness program off the ground can be a daunting, but worthwhile, task. Many human resources/benefits managers have enough on their to-do lists without having to worry about implementing a wellness program. With the rising costs of health care, however, having an employee wellness program in place is no longer considered a luxury, but a necessity. A well-designed program can help moderate health care costs, decrease absenteeism and send a message to employees that their employer cares about them, thereby increasing retention.

An employer considering a wellness program would be wise to avoid these ten mistakes.

## 1. Failure to Plan

You wouldn't roll out a new benefits package without a strategic plan in place, and worksite wellness programs should not be any different. First and foremost, you need to think about the overall goals you would like to achieve. Certainly, seeing a high return on investment (ROI) is ideal, but it takes years to see any ROI and may not even be a realistic option given the scope of your program. Perhaps you want to set your sights in year one on a certain level of participation (i.e., 25% participate in one program). A goal for year two may be 50% participation in the wellness program. Years

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three and four could focus more on behavior change and cost savings.

On the other hand, your goals may be simply to make employees feel appreciated and, therefore, more excited about coming to work and more likely to stay with the company. Once you have your goals in place, you can begin to think about gathering data and the strategy and programming you are going to need in order to reach these goals.

## 2. Not Gathering Enough Data

To develop a successful wellness program, you need to know two things: (1) What areas of wellness your employees are interested in and (2) what health risks are most prevalent in your employee population. Then you need to find a way to marry these two.

Asking your employees to take a needs and interest survey<sup>1</sup> is a good way to gauge their interest level in various aspects of wellness. *You* may want to build an on-site gym for your employees, but *they* may be more interested in having an on-site workshop on work/life balance. It is important to try to meet employees where they are; otherwise, you will be wasting your resources on a program that will generate little participation. It is also a good idea to determine how your employees would like to learn about wellness—newsletters, webinars, workshops, screenings, etc.

The other piece of the puzzle is asking employees (and, often, offering them incentives) to participate in screenings and take an online personal health as-

essment (PHA). Once you have the aggregate data from the screenings and/or PHA, you can see which health risks your employees have. For example, the screenings may tell you that 60% of your employees who were screened have high blood pressure. The PHA may reveal that your employees' top health concern is dealing with stress. You don't need a Ph.D. degree to figure out that a program dealing with stress might be well-received by the employees and also show some cost avoidance if this program helps employees lower their blood pressure.

## 3. Yoga Is Not Enough

Offering on-site yoga for employees once a week is great, but it is not a wellness program. Too often, employers offer a few wellness options, like on-site yoga, discounted gym memberships and a yearly health fair, and believe they have a wellness program in place. These are really wellness activities and cannot be considered a true comprehensive program.

A program should have goals outlined at the outset, followed by a strat-

### takeaways >>

- Before starting a wellness program, a plan sponsor should know what it hopes to accomplish.
- Employees respond better to a program tailored to their needs.
- Strive for a program that appeals to healthy and high-risk employees alike.
- A wellness program needs a budget.

egy for reaching these goals. That means thinking about wellness communications (How will your employees learn about the wellness program?), thinking about incentives (Will you offer \$25 gift cards or a lower insurance premium for participation?), gauging employee interest and developing a yearly calendar that reflects the programs you are going to offer that you believe best fit your employee needs (based on their PHA and/or screening results) and the programs your employees want (based on the needs and interest survey).

#### 4. Target Only High-Risk Employees

It's easy to go after the "low-hanging fruit" as these employees are the biggest cost drivers on claims. Employees with five or more risk factors (obesity, diabetes, sedentary lifestyle, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, etc.) are the ones who are most likely driving up health insurance claims. While it is very important to try to get these employees involved, you need to run a wellness program that engages ALL of your employees. It is important to keep the healthy people healthy.

Usually, as we age, our health declines. We become more sedentary, we gain weight, our blood pressure increases, etc. So the employees who were low risk at the age of 35 may naturally move to medium risk by the age of 45. However, if you have a comprehensive wellness program in place that targets healthy employees as well as unhealthy employees, you may be able to keep the low-risk employees in the low-risk category. Also, a comprehensive wellness program should help to move people from the medium-risk category to the low-risk category—and, of course, strive to move the high-risk folks to medium or low risk. This means offering a variety of programs that appeal to your entire employee base.

#### 5. One Size Fits All

It never works. We don't all wear the same size T-shirt; we are not all going to be interested in the same types of wellness activities. A discounted gym membership will appeal to the person who enjoys exercising at the gym, but what about the person who prefers to work out at home? A walking program will likely appeal to people who are currently sedentary or

low-active, and they may enjoy the opportunity to begin an exercise program with the tracking capability of a pedometer or accelerometer. But what about the employee who runs marathons but is working an 18-hour day? He or she might benefit from a work/life balance workshop.

Offering a variety of programs is important. It is unlikely that you will ever reach 100% participation in your wellness program, but you are more likely to get good participation by offering activities that appeal to different people. And remember, wellness isn't just about exercise and nutrition. It is also about handling stress, mental and emotional wellness, having a healthy family, getting the appropriate preventive screenings, etc. Don't get stuck in a wellness rut

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**Debra Wein** is president and founder of Wellness Workdays, a provider of corporate wellness programs. She has nearly 20 years of experience working in the health and wellness industry. Wein also teaches undergraduate nutrition and sport nutrition classes at the University of Massachusetts, Boston and graduate nutrition courses at Simmons College in Boston. She holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in nutritional sciences from Cornell and Columbia Universities, and is a registered dietitian, a certified wellness program director and a certified personal trainer.



**Courtney Hernandez** is a senior wellness account manager with Wellness Workdays and is a registered dietitian with a master's degree in nutrition communication from the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition. A certified wellness program coordinator, Hernandez provides strategic consulting on maximizing employee engagement with a focus on ROI as well as seminars and screenings on weight management, sport nutrition, cholesterol and other disease management issues.

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by offering the same walking program every year without any other alternatives or any kind of variety in your other programming.

**6. No Incentives**

It would be nice to think that all employees would participate in your wellness program for their own health and well-being, but that is just not human nature. Some of us do better with incentives. There has been extensive research showing that if you want employees to participate in your program you need to offer the “carrot.”

The incentives can be large—some employers offer substantially lower insurance premiums for employees who participate in a minimum number of wellness program activities. The incentives can be small—a chance to win one of three \$25 gift cards for those who attend a screening and complete a PHA. The incentives can be unique—a paid day off for the winner of the walking challenge. But whatever you choose and whatever fits with your company culture, make sure you build incentives into the budget for your wellness program.

**7. No Budget**

You must have a budget. You can't get something for nothing. You can certainly engage local fitness centers and other health professionals in the area, but remember that these professionals need to get something out of the exchange as well. They may agree to present a “free” seminar with the expectation that they will have a captive audience they can promote their services to.

**8. Lack of C-Level Support**

Management needs to not only buy into the wellness program (i.e., approve your budget!), but to participate as well. The most successful wellness programs are ones where the C-level executives are visible participants and proponents of the wellness programs. It sends a message that this is something that is important for the entire company and not just a passing phase.

**9. No Tracking**

It's hard to measure the success of a program if you aren't tracking any-

thing. At the very least, you should be tracking participation. You want to see how many employees participated in each program (i.e., participation in a walking program) and how many total employees participated in at least one or multiple aspects of the program.

If at all possible, it is best to measure and track verifiable results. This can be done with technology such as scales that upload to an online personal dashboard for a weight management program to track weight loss, and accelerometers that track regular exercise patterns, or through tracking unique participants in a screening program from year to year.

**10. No Future Direction**

A wellness program needs attention. Once you have a successful year one behind you, it can be easy to think that the program will just run itself. Not true! You must continue to evaluate your program, reevaluate your goals, keep a pulse on the employees' needs and interests and offer new and exciting programs.

These are just some of the pitfalls individuals face when trying to initiate a successful wellness program. Consider speaking with experts in the field for guidance—your insurance provider, benefits consultant or an outside consultant. If it's results that you want, then it's strategy you need. It is worth the effort! 🎯

**Endnote**

1. A needs and interest survey is usually a brief questionnaire with approximately ten questions. The PHA is an extensive questionnaire that requires about 20 minutes to complete.