Implementing a Strategic Approach to Employee Wellness—Globally and Locally

by Michael Malouf

Today’s multinational companies understand the need for a healthier workforce. Whether in developed markets such as the United States and the United Kingdom, or in emerging economies such as China and India, health trends pointing to a rising incidence of chronic disease and lifestyle-related health issues are requiring a strategic response from employers. According to the MetLife Study of Global Health and Wellness, one such response, an integrated health and wellness program, can contribute to a reduction in health care claims and employee absenteeism, as well as improvements to employee productivity and engagement.1

Best practices for implementing these holistic wellness programs surfaced in a study MetLife undertook in coordination with the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College. The study involved a detailed examination at four large multinational companies—American Express, CEMEX, Glaxo SmithKline and PPG Industries—to understand how health trends vary by country and the specific programs the organizations implemented to support a healthier workforce. This article highlights some of the best practices the study found for an integrated health and wellness program.
within their organizations, both globally and locally. As employers navigate the ever-changing global health environment and design cost-effective health and wellness programs that address the needs of their employees and their business, they can learn from the successes of the employer practices profiled in the study.

**HEALTH TRENDS IMPACTING TODAY’S GLOBAL EMPLOYERS**

In order to effectively plan for a sustainable workforce, employers with a global reach are increasingly compelled to focus on employee health and wellness. A detailed look at the health profiles by country show an increase in chronic disease in both developed countries and emerging economies. In fact, chronic disease is the leading health issue around the world, accounting for more than 60% of deaths, with the greatest burden of disease and highest growth rate found in developing economies.

The costs of these trends can be alarming, with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development projecting global health care spending of $6.9 trillion by 2015. In the U.S., chronic disease “cost[s] the economy more than $1 trillion [U.S.] annually” and India could lose $237 billion [U.S.] over the next few years due to health-related costs.

While increases in chronic disease are occurring worldwide, the specific diseases differ between geographic regions. In India, diabetes is a top health concern, with projections showing that by 2025, 57.2 million people will have diabetes, many of whom would be adults of working age. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 60% of deaths in India can be attributed to chronic diseases, possibly increasing to 66% over the next ten years.

In Mexico, cardiovascular disease is the number one cause of death in the country, with the population dying younger than their counterparts in wealthier countries. One employer interviewed in the MetLife study commented that his company has “35-40-year-old employees who are experiencing heart attacks.” Also, the rising rate of obesity is a growing problem. In 1989, less than 10% of all Mexican adults were overweight. Today, about 68% of individuals are overweight and rising rates of childhood obesity indicate the problem is still growing.

In China and the Philippines, chronic diseases are an issue, but infectious diseases and infrastructure concerns must also be addressed. Most Chinese citizens are uninsured, with 45% of urban populations and 79% of rural populations paying out of pocket for health insurance. Health reform initiatives are focused on expanding access to public coverage for rural residents. In the Philippines, about half of health care costs fall on the individual. In these growing countries, economic growth is outpacing improvements to the health care system.

In the U.S., chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes are major health concerns with “more than half of all Americans suffering from one or more chronic diseases.” Trends point to the risks associated with unhealthy diets, obesity, tobacco and alcohol use and the neglect of preventive medical care, such as cancer screenings. In the U.K., smoking, stress, obesity and repetitive motion injuries are some of the top health concerns.

The findings from the MetLife study indicate that effective wellness programs must take into account the health trends and demographics relevant for a specific employee population. Instilling a global culture of health is no small feat, but by taking into consideration the needs of the local culture, multinational employers can provide benefits and wellness programs that are relevant to the workplace and local culture of each segment of their workforce.

**THE BUSINESS VALUE OF A HEALTHIER EMPLOYEE POPULATION**

As employers consider the health trends affecting the workforce, they are seeing the benefits of cost-effective health and wellness programs that address the needs of their employees and their business. Examples of practical measures employers are implementing include evaluation of health claims data, health risk assessments, medical exams, biometrical screenings and employee surveys. Employees benefit by becoming aware of their own health; for companies, this information guides program and benefits investment decisions.

Surveys, effective methods to collect employee information (in aggregate), enable employers to create a baseline to assess employee health conditions. An added benefit is that employers can compare the data from their workforce in each country to external data, and measure the effectiveness of health and wellness initiatives that are put in place.

The analysis of claims data is another strategic tactic that companies employ and can help companies design health and wellness initiatives that serve the needs of the employee population in a specific region. One company, examined as part of the MetLife study, observed promising trends around lower instances of high cholesterol and blood pressure with the installation of free preventive generic prescriptions.

In the U.S., the use of incentives to drive employee action is quite common; employers use contests or monetary incentives to increase awareness of and par-
participation in health and wellness programs. Employees in the U.S. respond positively to these incentives. All employers in the MetLife study agreed that, in most cases, penalties for nonparticipation, no matter the country, are not effective. Few penalties are used, except for a surcharge on medical premiums for smokers.

Investments, both small and large, can pay dividends when it comes to helping employees improve their well-being. Many employers find that providing health care information in the form of an employee newsletter is an effective way to send valuable information to their workforce. Employees can learn about health care issues affecting the population in their region and also learn about programs their employer offers to help prevent and control these issues.

While disease management, health surveys and medical exams are all practical ways to help mitigate potential negative health effects on the workforce, there are less quantifiable advantages to wellness initiatives, such as the connection between a healthy workforce and a more engaged and productive one. In fact, research shows that employees who participated in wellness programs were more apt to say that they were loyal to their employer.12

PROMISING PRACTICES: A DIFFERENTIATOR FOR EMPLOYERS

As part of a strategy to recruit top talent, wellness programs can become a differentiator, especially in emerging markets, and can help an employer to stand apart from its competition. In a survey by Watson Wyatt, employers commented that the number one objective of a health strategy was to retain key talent.13 Employers participating in the MetLife study are designing creative and integrated wellness programs that can serve both to improve employee well-being and as a differentiator for attracting key talent in highly competitive labor markets.

One such employer program in India focuses on helping its employees deal with the potential problem of diabetes before it becomes a larger issue. The company offers free comprehensive medical checks for employees. These medical checks are also extended to dependent parents at a discount, in keeping with the country’s tradition of providing medical coverage for dependent parents. An online health risk assessment creates a health plan for the employee or adult dependent. If a health risk—such as diabetes—is identified, the employees are invited to join a 52-week condition management program, which includes personalized counseling and tools that will assist in making important lifestyle changes.

At a site in the Philippines, another employer has a program in place that enables and encourages senior leaders of the organization to work on their own energy management. Leaders are brought together in teams to design specific modes of working and physical environments based on the needs of their particular area of the organization. One redesigned workplace includes a space for physical activity, reflection, renewal and focus, as well as areas for fun. The goal is to create a work environment that supports energy and high performance. Although in its infancy, this program has seen good success so far.

This same company has also created a company survey with questions, not directly focused on an employee’s personal health, but rather examining certain markers of employee well-being in specific countries, such as happiness, satisfaction, engagement and a sense of empowerment—all of which are very important in the context of mental well-being, which can influence productivity.

Another creative program focuses on the issue of employee stress and ways to manage it. Having studied employee stress for over ten years, the company has created a modular seminar that employees can take at their own convenience over a one-year period. The goal is to help employees identify the sources of stress in their life and access tools and recommendations for stress management.

Another company offers a program including guidance on a variety of topics such as nutrition, exercise, health screenings and relaxation. Employers in the MetLife study acknowledge the importance of providing an environment and culture that is supportive of the correct employee behavioral choices when it comes to wellness. While employees have the ultimate respon-

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sibility for their own health, employers see the value of creating a partnership and an interaction around wellness. The results can be talent attraction and retention, employer-of-choice status, health care cost reduction, and a more productive and engaged workforce.

**ACTIONS AND PRACTICAL MEASURES FOR EMPLOYERS**

The following are some best practices and recommendations employers may want to consider when implementing a global health and wellness program:

- **Consider the business drivers.** When launching a global strategy, keep in mind that business drivers are likely to vary depending on the local health profile, demographics and culture. Investments in wellness, whether small or large, can create an impact on employee well-being. Consider developing a wellness program that includes elements such as evaluation of health claims data, health risk assessments, medical exams, biometrical screenings, employee surveys and employee assistance programs to more comprehensively embed health and wellness into the company’s culture.

- **Outline the outcomes the company hopes to achieve.** Work to establish a baseline for the health profile of a given employee population and track program participation from the onset. Measurement tactics, such as company surveys with health questions that examine markers of well-being or solutions for tracking employee retention, customer-service levels, absenteeism and health care claims, can help to establish a baseline to determine future program success.

- **Balance corporate goals with cultural expectations.** Finding a balance between standardized processes and local customizations can be crucial to success. Also, engaging local employees in different regions may encourage greater participation. Be open to tailoring implementation to meet the needs of a location’s culture.

- **Consider partnering with a professional benefits organization or carrier that has experience in implementing programs that address global and local needs.** This can help a company more easily incorporate a culture of health globally, while still addressing local cultures, government mandates and diverse employee needs.

Employers across the globe are growing to understand that there is a business value to a healthy workforce. Understanding how to best focus efforts in this area is key for planning a cost-effective strategy for achieving a healthier, more productive workforce.

**Endnotes**


5. Ibid.


11. Ibid.


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