

# benefits

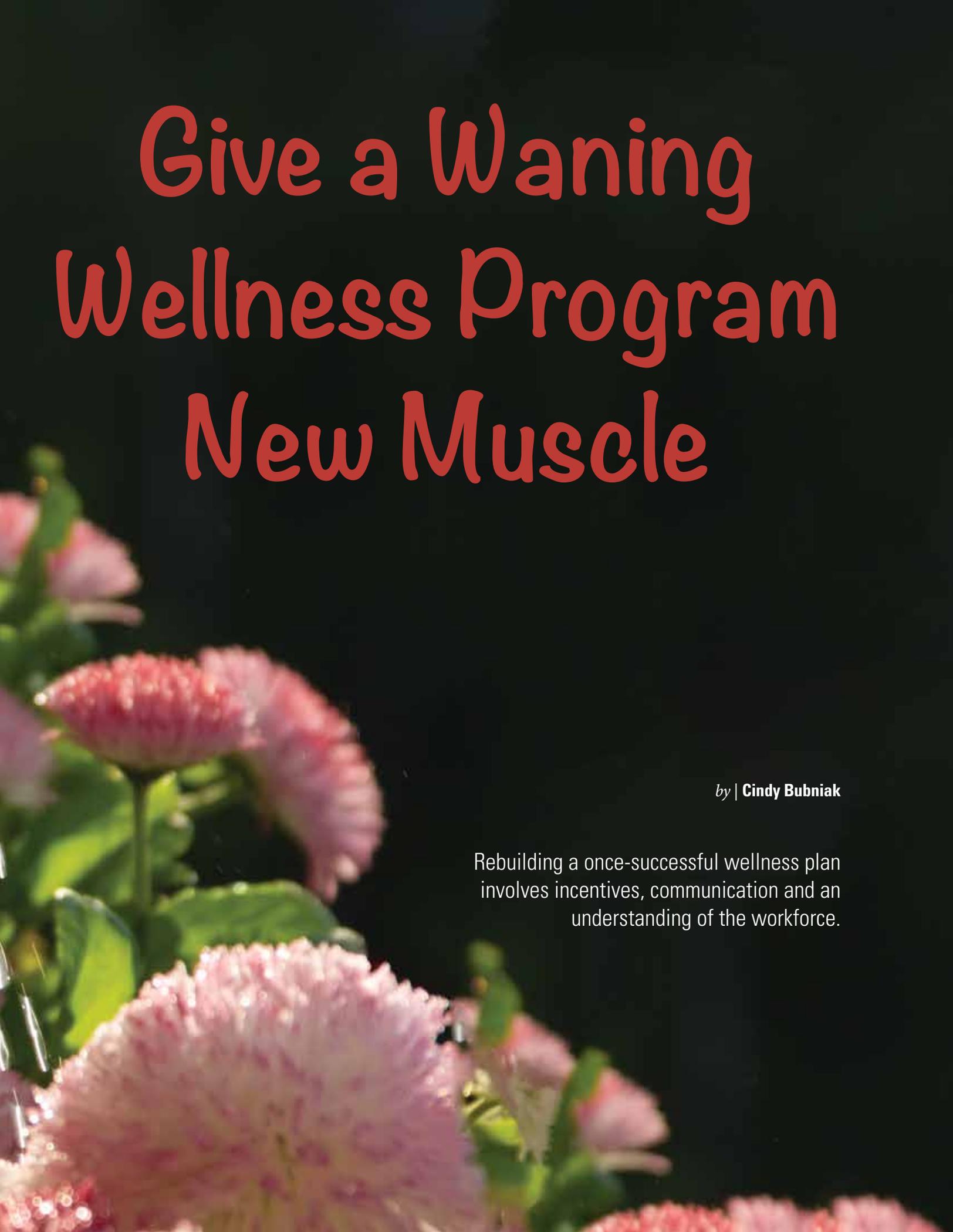
MAGAZINE

Reproduced with permission from *Benefits Magazine*, Volume 53, No. 8, August 2016, pages 46-50, published by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans ([www.ifebp.org](http://www.ifebp.org)), Brookfield, Wis. All rights reserved. Statements or opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the International Foundation, its officers, directors or staff. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted.



pdf/716





# Give a Waning Wellness Program New Muscle

by | **Cindy Bubniak**

Rebuilding a once-successful wellness plan involves incentives, communication and an understanding of the workforce.

## learn more

### Education

**35th Annual ISCEBS Employee Benefits Symposium**  
**September 18-21, Baltimore, Maryland**

Visit [www.ifebp.org/symposium](http://www.ifebp.org/symposium) for more information.

**Certificate of Achievement in Public Plan Policy (CAPPP®)—Health Part I**  
**November 12-13, Orlando, Florida**

Visit [www.ifebp.org/CAPPP](http://www.ifebp.org/CAPPP) for more information.

### From the Bookstore

**Workplace Wellness That Works**

Laura Putnam. Wiley, 2015.

Visit [www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9058](http://www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9058) for more details.

Corporate wellness programs can be a driving force for change in an organization's culture. But what happens when an initiative loses its momentum? A survey from Towers Watson and the National Business Group on Health found that 50% of surveyed employees did not participate in a single wellness activity or program in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

However, there is no need to be discouraged. Organizations that take the appropriate measures are likely to see their wellness programs gain new and improved strength.

Drawing from experience working with companies to make workplaces healthier, Weight Watchers Health Solutions has found three keys to renewing interest in a wellness program: improving incentives, sharpening communications and tailoring a program so that it resonates with the makeup of employees.

Fifty-nine percent of companies with a culture of health view employee wellness as essential to their business strategy, according to Optum's *Sixth Annual Wellness in the Workplace study*.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, revitalizing and maintaining a corporate wellness program is important.

### Keys to Wellness Success

Wellness programs that start strong can become stale. If participation in an initiative is slipping, it's often because the company hasn't generated enough interest among employees in incorporating wellness into their everyday lives.

Incentives, new initiatives and new challenges may revitalize employee interest. One proven incentive involves companies covering half the cost of a wellness program. Even better, there is a correlation between higher employee engagement and a greater subsidy (some companies cover up to 100% of the cost). By fully integrating program-ming incentives with wellness initiatives—such as awarding points toward incentives for exercising or attending a weight-management or meditation session—companies often see renewed engagement.

Indiana University (IU) Health has incorporated a free or discounted weight-management program into its "Healthy Results" wellness initiative. Employees who qualify for the discount are required to attend at least nine out of 12 sessions in a three-month period. After meeting the requirements, they

can submit a request for reimbursement as well as receiving points toward a reduction in their insurance premium. IU Health has found employees to be more engaged and excited about its wellness program year-round.

### Communicating Incentives

Incentives won't work if employees don't know about them. Companies struggling to keep employees engaged may want to look first at their lines of communication. Messaging should be consistent, streamlined and clearly understandable so as to not overwhelm—and potentially scare off—employees. Ultimately, engagement often is tied directly to the amount of clear and creative marketing a company employs, and the best communicators use a combination of tactics to reach employees.

Senior-most leadership must demonstrate a commitment to wellness. In IU Health's case, leadership understood the importance of allowing employees to attend and participate in its wellness program while on the clock.

IU Health's communication strategy also involved sharing employee success stories through its monthly health program communication, *You Matter*, providing updates on wellness sessions companywide, pushing participation when attendance waned and holding open houses.

"We found that offering and promoting open houses was a great opportunity for interested employees to come to a meeting and see what all the buzz was about," said Amy Tatum, program and account coordinator for employee wellness at IU Health. "These open houses routinely resulted in a spike in membership."

Overall, communication tactics dif-

fer from company to company, with some using e-mail, on-line portals, payroll stuffers and/or texting. Because the bulk of family decisions are made at home, many companies find it's important to keep systems like a company's internal on-line portal accessible from home or send direct mail to employees' homes.

Communicating an incentive with new and refreshed messaging is also important, and frequent, targeted communications work better. Companies have found success communicating at high-traffic points like elevators and cafeterias. Some companies cobrand weight-loss events with their cafeteria vendors, focused on healthy choices, or partner with nearby fitness groups to lead organized classes.

If a company has formal new-hire orientations, including a flier with the employee handbook is another way to get the word out about wellness activities. Companies with a wellness champion network in place find it effective to provide local contacts with the information they need to promote incentives and programs. On-site promotion in high-traffic areas may help catch the attention of employees who aren't at a desk all day.

Partnerships with wellness vendors are another way to build buzz and create a central hub with extra benefits: For example, employees might receive rewards or points through a sponsoring vendor for participating. These types of programming additions also provide another opportunity to communicate details of the wellness program to employees.

### Know the Audience and Appoint Gatekeepers

It's important to examine the various components of a wellness program and compare them with the demographics of an employee population. For example, if a company is in the manufacturing industry with mostly blue-collar male employees—historically a more difficult demographic to target for weight management and classes in the workplace such as yoga—including spouses in the program could help to better engage the overall employee population. Also, a blue-collar population may be less likely to use credit or debit cards or may not have the means to pay for wellness programs, in which case it makes sense to revisit the amount a company subsidizes to reduce barriers to entry.

Instead, employers can look to seasonal activities and live events to generate interest and enthusiasm among these demographics. For instance, as warm weather approaches, planning a 5K or a free outdoor fitness class can break a pro-

gram out of the mundane mold and engage employees. These types of programs also help to build teamwork and a greater willingness to participate in a wellness program. When employees are accountable only to themselves, it's easier to procrastinate; when they're working as a team toward a goal, everyone can win.

Understanding the general mind-set of employees can also serve to identify those who might be strong gatekeepers of a wellness program. Gatekeepers, or employees who will champion a plan and engage other employees and vendors, can work to ensure that a company's approach has a clear mission. These program champions are particularly important to help engage hard-to-reach employees who may not be stationed on site.

### The Importance of Reengagement

Why is it important to maintain an engaging wellness program? According to *Healthy Workforce 2010 and Beyond*, by focusing energies on reengaging the workforce and shifting the relative percentage of employees at moderate and high health risk to a lower risk status, a company becomes healthier—and can achieve greater cost savings. Even more important is keeping healthy employees healthy, an approach that slows the migration of individuals to a higher risk level and reduces associated costs.

*Healthy Workforce 2010 and Beyond* recommends companies making risk assessments take two critical steps<sup>3</sup>:

1. Use a health risk appraisal system to establish baseline benchmarks for how risks are distributed within the company.

## takeaways

- Improving incentives and communications can help revitalize a wellness program.
- To encourage participation, organizations may want to cover half or even all of the cost of a wellness program.
- Messaging should be consistent, streamlined and clearly understandable.
- Components of a wellness program should be designed for the specific employee population.
- Program champions may help engage hard-to-reach employees.
- The costs of poor employee health include lower productivity and higher absenteeism as well as higher medical costs.

2. Observe the degree of movement between risk groups. Based on this, a company can address the following questions:

- What is the risk profile (distribution) of our population? For example, what percentage of our population is considered low risk?
- What are the most prevalent health-related risks (e.g., obesity, low physical activity, high cholesterol) within our population?
- What are the relative costs (e.g., medical, pharmacy, sick days, disability) related to each risk level?

The answers to these questions will help an organization develop goals, objectives and investment recommendations that align with this risk assessment.

### The Bottom Line

A wellness program can positively influence the workplace population and make good business sense. The statistics don't lie: Bringing a wellness program back to life, and keeping it there, puts companies on track to positive financial health.<sup>4</sup>

It is common for management to focus on direct medical costs incurred

in the short term, as the impact of these costs on the bottom line is fairly obvious. However, often ignored are the so-called indirect health-related costs, such as sick days, workers' compensation and short- and long-term disability.

According to *Healthy Workforce 2010 and Beyond*, when indirect costs are factored into a company's total cost equation, the financial impact of productivity-related factors contributes up to 75% of that company's total cost burden. The reduction in productivity that comes about when employees suffer from poor health or display lifestyle-related risk factors becomes an important consideration when making the case for wellness programs, especially during the open enrollment season.

The U.S. Surgeon General has also provided guidance on the wellness program platform, backing the prevention benefits that wellness programs promote and stating that such strategies are often cost-effective, reduce health care costs and improve productivity. Consider these statistics provided by the U.S. Surgeon General, which make it clear why the prevention that a wellness program promotes is the best buy in employee—and corporate—health:

- When employee health is poor, the indirect costs to employers—

lower productivity, higher rates of disability, higher rates of injury and more workers' compensation claims—can be two to three times the costs of direct medical expenses.

- A 1% reduction in weight, blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol risk factors would save \$83-\$103 annually in medical costs per person.
- Medical costs are reduced by approximately \$3.27 for every dollar spent on workplace wellness programs, according to a recent study.
- Absenteeism costs are reduced by approximately \$2.73 for every \$1 spent on workplace wellness programs, according to a recent study.<sup>5</sup>

Revitalizing a waning wellness program can put an organization on a path toward a healthier, happier workforce. In the long run, the organization can expect to more than recoup any short-term costs. **■**

### Endnotes

1. Towers Watson, *The Business Value of a Healthy Workforce: Staying@Work Survey Report, 2013/2014*, available at [www.towerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/IC-Types/Survey-Research-Results/2013/12/stayingatwork-survey-report-2013-2014-us](http://www.towerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/IC-Types/Survey-Research-Results/2013/12/stayingatwork-survey-report-2013-2014-us).

2. Optum, *Create a healthy, high-performing workplace: 6th Annual Wellness in the Workplace study*, 2015, available at [https://campaign.optum.com/content/dam/optum/resources/whitePapers/15986.O.WIW.WhitePaper\\_6.pdf](https://campaign.optum.com/content/dam/optum/resources/whitePapers/15986.O.WIW.WhitePaper_6.pdf).

3. *Healthy Workforce 2010 and Beyond*, Partnership for Prevention and Labor, Immigration and Employee Benefits Division of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2009.

4. Leonard Berry, Ann M. Mirabito and William B. Baun, "What's the Hard Return on Employee Wellness Programs?" *Harvard Business Review*. December 2010.

5. *National Prevention Strategy*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 16, 2011, available at [www.surgeongeneral.gov/priorities/prevention/strategy](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/priorities/prevention/strategy).

bio



**Cindy Bubniak** is the head of marketing of Weight Watchers Health Solutions, a division of Weight Watchers International in New York City, New York. She is a board member on the National Business Group on Health's Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being and has more than 20 years of experience in creating marketing and advertising campaigns for health-oriented companies including Johnson & Johnson, Novartis and Campbell's. Bubniak holds a bachelor's degree from The Ohio State University.