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Ways Employer Programs Have Forever

by | Debra Wein



The COVID-19 pandemic forced workplace wellness programs to pivot in order to meet changing worker well-being needs.

Wellness Changed—



benefits
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The last year has brought unprecedented changes to the workforce that have reinforced the importance of employee well-being and forced the world of workplace wellness to pivot almost instantly.

A recent Willis Towers Watson survey of almost 500 employers found that more than two-thirds felt that their well-being programs have not been effective at supporting their own employees.¹ It is obvious that organizations that provided employee wellness programs prior to the pandemic will likely need to reevaluate these offerings to meet the changing needs of their employees. By evolving your current wellness approach—enhancing and modifying your wellness and benefits offerings—you can position your teams and your organization to continue to succeed in the future.

Check out these six ways wellness programs are evolving.

1. Behavioral Health: Resilience Training

The past year has brought on so many challenges—at work and at home—that many people have experienced declines in mental health and outlook. The American Psychological Association reported that more than 78% of people are stressed due to the pandemic and struggle with their mental health.²

While many employers have offered some sort of mental health benefit, the pandemic revealed that employees need more support than these programs have historically provided. Inventive wellness programs have shifted their focus to include more mental health initiatives, with activi-

ties centered on stress reduction, resilience and behavioral health. These programs are now offering virtual health coaching, mindfulness classes, streamed yoga, individual therapy and flexible schedules.

Employers are now focused on training employees on how to use coping mechanisms to avoid burnout and emotional fatigue. To update your approach, consider resources from National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), National Council for Behavioral Health and employee assistance programs (EAPs).

2. Financial Wellness

Nearly three-quarters (70%) of people in the U.S. list the economy and their work as the main sources of stress, according to the American Psychological Association,³ so it is no surprise that financial wellness is at the top of the list for desired wellness topics among employees. For many, their primary source of stress has always been money. With unemployment rates skyrocketing and overtime and bonuses at a standstill, it is no surprise that financial wellness has become—and will continue to be—an even more critical element of targeted well-being programs.

Finances can be a personal and private concern, so offering timely and relevant programs to your workforce can help employees who are struggling but are too concerned or embarrassed to ask for help. Keep in mind that a highly paid employee can have just as many financial concerns and constraints as a lower paid employee, so programming should be made widely available to all workers and cover the breadth

of expectations. Expect new wellness programming to include topics such as budgeting, planning for retirement, saving money, “rainy day” savings, debt repayment and leasing versus buying homes, cars, etc.

Look to resources from your payroll provider, 401(k) plans, EAPs, or large or local banks available to provide learning and training for your employees.

3. Telemedicine and Virtual Wellness

The pandemic has fast-tracked the adoption of telehealth services, where health care appointments can now be conducted at home or at the office through video. The use of telehealth has improved access to health care for many people, including those in historically marginalized communities or those who do not live near cities. Logistically, telehealth has removed the barriers of having to find child care, wasting time sitting in waiting rooms and having to leave the comfort of your own home.

Expanding telemedicine coverage for your employees can increase employee loyalty and morale while also decreasing sick leave and presenteeism. Some employers are addressing this growing need for mental health services through virtual options, also referred to as *telemental health offerings*. With more than 76% of employees reporting higher levels of anxiety and depression throughout the pandemic, nearly 80% of companies are expanding mental health service coverage.⁴ Providing access to virtual mental health support as part of your employee wellness program is a worthwhile investment for organiza-

tions of all sizes. At some point, biometric screenings may reemerge as a way to support employees on their quest for knowledge about their health. But for the immediate future, more video coaching/sessions/appointments will be on the horizon.

4. Individual Coaching

With chronic conditions increasing the risk of severe illness from COVID-19, many people are taking a closer look at their health. Human resources (HR) professionals know, more than anyone, that not everyone is intrinsically motivated to follow a wellness program or engage in healthy behaviors on their own. Research shows that 80% of employees do not possess *intrinsic* (internal or self) motivation to do this on their own and, of those who do, only about 50% will actually maintain those changes.

Coaches can help to awaken or support an individual's intrinsic motivation and can enhance confidence by reframing past failures and supporting self-efficacy. The goal of any successful coaching program is to move people across the stages of the readiness continuum from *precontemplation* (I am not ready or even thinking about this) to *action* (Let's do this!).

Strategic coaching initiatives that involve coaches trained in motivational interviewing and behavior change—along with a systematic way to approach the coaching session and a way to track progress—will demonstrate, on average, a 41% increase in low-risk population (those with one or two risk factors such as inactivity, high cholesterol, obesity, etc.) and a 48% decrease in high-risk population (those with five or more risk factors). In other words, with coaching, people are able to reduce the number of risks they have and move into lower risk categories.⁵

Utilizing health coaching and technology may help sustain participation and engagement in your program, not to mention its potential to improve the health status of employees, especially high-risk individuals. This can be a win-win for your employees and your organization.

5. Video and On-Demand Services

Virtual wellness programming has grown exponentially this year and is an excellent option while employees are working remotely. Virtual programming has expanded to include online exercise classes, group meditation, remote cooking demonstrations and educational webinars on top-

takeaways

- Organizations that provided employee wellness programs prior to the pandemic will likely need to reevaluate these offerings to meet the changing needs of their employees.
- Incentive wellness programs have shifted their focus to include more mental health initiatives, with activities centered around stress reduction, resilience and behavioral health.
- As workers deal with the impact of unemployment and loss of overtime and bonuses, financial wellness will continue to be an even more critical element of targeted well-being programs.
- Expanding telemedicine coverage, including virtual mental health services, for employees can increase employee loyalty and morale while decreasing sick leave and presenteeism.
- Providing individual coaching that focuses on motivation and behavior change can help sustain and improve participation in wellness programs and improve the health status of employees.
- The use of virtual programs, including exercise classes, group meditation and nutrition seminars as well as social gatherings, has grown.

ics like nutrition, resilience and self-care. Employers are also offering more virtual social gatherings such as coffee chats, happy hours, show-and-tell with family members or pets, trivia time and more time together without a focus on work.

Exercise

We know that regular exercise is essential for our health, even under normal circumstances. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per day, five days per week. Exercise makes you healthier and happier, boosts your immune system and improves your sleep. While many employees formerly used company fitness centers, their local gym or fitness studios, the way we stay fit has changed. In efforts to move more at home, people have created their own home gyms or found ways to stay active from their living rooms through YouTube videos, live classes, fitness apps and home equipment. Many of those working from home can take advantage of using their commuting time to exercise. Supporting a 30-minute exercise/personal “health break” during the workday for your employees to be physically active may also be a worthwhile investment for your company.

According to the American Psychological Association Stress in America 2020 survey, nearly one in five adults (19%) say their mental health is worse than it was at this time last year.

Nutrition

Eating properly is key to helping your employees feel physically and mentally well, in and out of work. Not only is it essential to preventing chronic disease, but it is also a necessary component of building and supporting a strong immune system. Employee wellness programs have pivoted to allow employees to consume evidence-based nutrition information virtually through live webinars and online cooking demonstrations where they can participate and ask questions in real time. Because these seminars and cooking demonstrations are offered through virtual platforms, employees can enjoy learning from wherever they are.

6. Targeting High-Risk Populations

The pandemic has taken a toll on individuals who are obese and those with chronic conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure. These health condi-

tions are often avoidable with lifestyle changes, so it's important to target this population with programs that will improve their health, reduce their number of sick days and improve your bottom line. Population health management involves keeping the healthy people healthy, but we also need to help those at higher risk to avoid getting sicker and to manage their conditions.

You can access educational resources from any of several well-regarded organizations, including American Cancer Society, American College of Sports Medicine, American Diabetes Association, American Heart Association, Academy of Nutrition & Dietetics, NAMI, National Cancer Institute and NIH, to name a few.

Bottom Line

Forever is a long time, and one thing we have learned from 2020 is that things can change quickly.

No one could have predicted the impact the pandemic would have on the world and work environment. It has revealed gaps in employee wellness programs and highlighted the importance of accessible financial, mental, emotional and physical wellness offerings.

Offering a program with a solid foundation of traditional topics, such as nutrition and physical activity, is still a priority. However, it's important to assess your current wellness program and determine whether it is meeting the new needs of employees. Most of the changes cited above will be important targets for successful well-being programs for the foreseeable future. These new adoptions will enable a *split workforce* (hybrid, with both on-site and remote workers) to benefit fully from an organization's approaches. By taking the right steps and putting the correct measures in place with more virtual programming, the adoption of telemedicine, and a focus on financial and behavioral health, your organization and, most importantly, your employees, can emerge from this pandemic stronger than they were before. 🎯

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Education

31st Annual Art & Science of Health Promotion Conference
September 27-October 1
Hilton Head Island, South Carolina
Virtual option available.

Visit www.ifebp.org/healthpromotionconference for more details.

30th Annual Health Benefits Conference & Expo (HBCE)
On-Demand Virtual Conference

Visit www.ifebp.org/virtual for more information.

From the Bookstore

Workplace Wellness That Works

Laura Putnam. 2015. Wiley.

Visit www.ifebp.org/books.asp?9058 for more details.

Workplace Wellness Trends: 2019 Survey Report

International Foundation. 2019.

Visit www.ifebp.org/workplacewellness2019 for more information.

Endnotes

1. 2021 *Emerging From the Pandemic Survey*, www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/Insights/2021/02/2021-emerging-from-the-pandemic-survey. Last accessed March 22, 2021.
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bio



Debra Wein, CWPD, LDN, RDN, is the chief executive officer and founder of Wellness Workdays, a company that works to improve engagement and health outcomes for its clients. She has extensive experience working to promote employee health, productivity and a culture of well-being. Wein is a frequent speaker and has presented to the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Navy Seals, the USA Track and Field Olympic coaches, MIT and Harvard Business School. She has authored a blog/newsletter since January 2000 that can be accessed via her website and features many topics around nutrition, wellness and employee well-being. She holds a B.S. degree from Cornell University and an M.S. degree from Columbia University.



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