

Wellness & Work/Life Programs Growing

But Measuring Results Remains Challenging

Employers continue to start wellness and work/life programs. In fact, many of the organizations with programs currently in place are looking to expand them, according to the 2011 Willis Health and Productivity Survey.

Perhaps that should not be considered surprising. Employees are under increasing stress, both at work and personally and financially, and employers are taking action to introduce more benefits to help them cope. But every step requires a learning curve – and employers are still realizing the full potential of their work/life investments.

The results reflect a broader reality on a global level – employers are investing more resources to keep their workforces healthy and happy. Work/life programs are increasing in popularity because employers are starting to believe that keeping workers present and engaged pays off in big ways.

Workplace wellness programs are part of this effort. A growing number of employers recognize that beginning a wellness initiative – such as promotion of a healthy diet and exercise, and/or tobacco cessation, for example – leads to healthier workers, and healthier employees, in turn, drive lower medical claims in an era of skyrocketing health insurance costs.

Risk-Oriented Messages Don't Always Work

Such efforts have been a real boon in many workplaces, and they should definitely NOT be discounted. In fact, such initiatives have been highlighted in previous issues of *Employee Assistance Report (EAR)*.

However, the use of risk-oriented messages to impact exercise, eating habits, and other lifestyle behaviors, do not *always* work either. (Risk-oriented refers to exercising and eating well now ... to avoid health problems later.)

The cover story in this month's issue of *EAR* examines this particular aspect of workplace wellness in greater detail. More specifically, the article discusses *gamification* as a possible solution to wellness efforts that lead to results over the short term, but not the long haul.

Work & Life – A Delicate Balancing Act

Success may result when work/life and mental/physical well being occurs hand in hand in the workplace. Eating healthy and quitting smoking is to be commended. However, an employee can give up cigarettes and run every day on a treadmill in a company gym, but if core concerns related to finances, daycare, etc., remain, even that amount of running may not lead to a healthier employee (because the worker is still highly stressed).

Since we spend most of our waking hours at work, it stands to reason that important life issues find their way into our workdays. As just noted, many employees come to work struggling with such personal issues as finding or affording reliable child care, managing financial strains, dealing with aging parents or grandparents, and navigating the health care system with their own chronic health conditions. *Just coping with life can feel like a full-time job.*

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines work/life balance as: “The amount of time you spend doing your job compared with the amount of time you spend with your family and doing things you enjoy.”

An organization concerned about having healthy and productive employees will do well to consider resources and tools that help employees balance their work and life in a way that will best serve both. True balance between these two worlds may seem impossible, but how one deals with issues in each area fuels one's energy and focus in the other.

Organizations can help employees find the right balance by encouraging management to set a good example and to be clear with employees about the expectations and boundaries for work time. They can also encourage and highlight employees with healthy pursuits that contribute to work/life balance.

Although somewhat subjective and hard to quantify, work/life balance – or the lack thereof – can significantly affect job satisfaction, quality of life, retention, and an employee’s perceived level of stress. According to the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce, employees who report higher levels of work/life balance also tend to have:

- Better overall health;
- Fewer sick days;
- Lower stress; and
- Fewer sleep problems.

The most common work/life balance programs offered are: dependent care flexible spending accounts, **employee assistance programs**, flexible start/end times, and health advocacy (i.e. wellness) programs. The following is a brief look at each:

❖ *Caregiving* – An overwhelming 93% of respondents to the Willis Health and Productivity Survey cited dependent care flexible spending accounts as the leading caregiving benefit offered, followed by: child care consultation and referral services, 30%; elder care consultation and referral services, 29%; onsite child care, 9%; and subsidized child care, 7%.

❖ *Employee assistance programs* – An estimated 85% of respondents had an EAP in place, followed by: employee trainings (stress management, time management, etc.), 50%; flexible work schedules, 47%; financial wellness, 34%.

❖ *Flexible work options* – At 81%, flexible start/end times was the most popular offering in this category, followed by: extended family leave (beyond FMLA), 36%; compressed work week, also 36%; extended vacation time and sabbaticals, 20%; and job sharing, 17%.

❖ *Health/wellness* – At 72%, the presence of an overall health advocacy program was the most common benefit cited in this category, followed by: lactation support, 35%; and an onsite clinic or health care practitioner, 31%.

Top 10 Components of Workplace Wellness Programs

There are many different ways of defining “wellness”. The most common ones in the workforce are as follows:

- Flu shots, 82%;
- **Employee assistance programs**, 82%;
- Posters, flyers, and newsletters that encourage healthy lifestyle behaviors, 63%;
- **Lunch and learn or other educational seminars**, 55%;
- Physical activity programs such as walking challenges, onsite classes, etc., 53%;
- Disease management, 51%;
- Health fairs, 49%;
- Health coaching, whether by phone, online or onsite, 49%;
- Tobacco cessation, 49%; and
- Weight management programs, 45%.

Obstacles Remain

Agreeing on a definition of the sometimes-elusive concept of “wellness” is one of the barriers in starting these types of programs in the workplace. However, the most *common* obstacles cited with adding work/life balance programs are insufficient support from management and lack of a budget. These are similar to the challenges traditional worksite wellness programs have encountered. The principle barriers with adding work/life balance programs appear **in the Handout section on page 4.**

Another challenge lies in applying flexible work policies consistently to *all* segments of the work population. Almost half of all respondents (47%) to the Willis survey disagree with the idea that these policies are applied uniformly in their organizations.

Most organizations promote work/life balance as part of their EAPs through overall benefits information and open enrollment or wellness programs. Since EAPs tend to be underutilized,



and general benefits communication shared during open enrollment can be overlooked, *it is important to recognize that any work/life balance communication needs to be ongoing throughout the year.*

In addition to the importance of communication, additional research and promotion of successful programs in recent years have helped worksite wellness achieve greater acceptance and more buy-in from senior leadership. The same process may need to occur to achieve full support of work/life balance programs.

Expansion

While there are obstacles in implementing wellness and work/life programs, there is also good news: As mentioned earlier, many of the organizations with such programs *currently in place* are looking to expand them. More specifically:

- More than half (58%) plan to expand programs and services;
- The majority (76%) plan to improve employee participation and engagement; and
- Slightly more than half (53%) plan to improve management support and engagement.

Benefits

Many organizations are challenged to quantify the benefits they have realized since offering wellness and work/life programs. Better morale (32%) and employee retention (26%) are the leading benefits reported, followed by decreased absenteeism, decreased stress, and improved productivity.

Smaller employers (fewer than 100 employees) are less likely to indicate that they have not observed any outcomes or received any feedback (40%) compared to 58% of all employers. Moreover, smaller employers report higher levels of recognition of the top three benefits realized: better morale (45%), employee retention (36%) and decreased absenteeism (28%) compared to 18% of all employers.

Measuring Success

What constitutes a successful wellness or work/life program? Is it high levels of participation? A tangible culture of health? Or is it that often-elusive return on investment? Few questions spark more debate among key stakeholders than

addressing the question: *How will we measure the success of our program?*

The leading barrier to measuring success is the difficulty in determining the influence of wellness versus other factors impacting health care costs. Forty-three percent of respondents cite this reason. Insufficient data (41%) and not enough staffing time to dedicate to this effort (40%) remain common barriers as well. (**See also the Handout section on page 4.**)

Visible and effective leadership support has long been recognized as a critical element of a successful worksite wellness or work/life program. In this year's Willis survey, 72% of respondents rated a strong internal leader championing wellness to be either *very influential or essential* to success of the program.

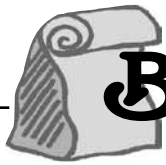
Effective leadership translates into greater promotion for the program and more encouragement for employees to participate. It necessitates leading by example – both in terms of finances and active participation – and expecting, indeed perhaps requiring the same of other senior leaders and middle managers in the organization. It is evidenced by “walking the walk” vs. simply “talking the talk.”

Summary

While these programs are expanding in scope and popularity, implementation and utilization remain big hurdles for many employers. Companies know what the work/life issues are, but they may lack the commitment and time to get started. Employees, meanwhile, don't always feel empowered to take advantage. The challenge is usually part communication, and part leadership.

Leaders who connect with the workforce at an emotional level, perhaps through sharing some of their own lifestyle struggles, help build a culture where health is truly valued and organizational health can grow. ■

Additional source: Workplace Options (www.workplaceoptions.com). To find out more about the Willis Health and Productivity Survey, email willisebsurvey@willis.com or visit www.willis.com/Documents/Publications/Services/Employee_Benefits/Health_Productivity_Survey_2011_Final_v5.pdf.



Making the Leap to Work/Life Success

The biggest challenge facing employers in moving forward is making use of the tools they have in place. Work/life programs make employees more productive – but effective promotion (*an area the EAP can help with*) is critical to success. Key challenges in adding work/life programs include:

- Lack of management support for a work/life program, 47%;
- Lack of a budget for a work/life program, 38%;
- High-stress environment due to workloads, 35%;
- No perceived *need* for program, 28%;
- Unsure how to start a program, 25%;
- Such programs are difficult to manage and track, 23%; and
- Not convinced of the *value* of such programs, 13%.

Barriers to Measuring Success

- Hard to determine influence of wellness vs. other factors that impact health care costs, 43%;
- Insufficient data, 41%;
- Not enough staffing time to dedicate to this, 40%;
- Too early to measure impact, 37%; and
- Not sure how to measure, 18%.

Benefits Organization has Experienced Since Offering a Work/Life Program

- Better morale, 32%;
- Improved employee retention, 26%;
- Decreased absenteeism, 18%;
- Decreased stress, 17%;
- Increased productivity, 17%; and
- Improved acquisition of talent, 10%.

“Employees have stated that the work/life balance is one of the most important benefits of our organization.”

“[Having a work/life program] is one of the main reasons we are able to recruit so well at colleges. When the students come to intern, they love the flexibility we offer and our balance.”

As organizations find themselves competing for top talent in an increasingly complex world, it is expected that more employers will recognize the value and impact of work/life programs.

Summary

True balance between the worlds of work and life may seem impossible – and yet, it is how an employee deals with issues in each area that fuel one’s energy and focus in the other. Many successful organizations understand that employees do not leave their problems at the doorstep when they get to work.

It’s true that work/life balance is somewhat subjective and hard to quantify. But it’s also a fact that a LACK of balance can significantly affect job satisfaction, quality of life, retention, and an employee’s perceived level of success.... And factors like these impact the bottom line, and not just individual workers.

Source: Workplace Options, a multinational integrated employee support service and work/life provider. It has service centers in Raleigh, N.C., London, Toronto, and Dublin. TO learn more, visit www.workplaceoptions.com.