

U.S. Companies Embrace 'Wellness' Programs

- *HealthDay News*, Karen Pallarito
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To arrest rising health-care costs, a growing number of U.S. employers are expanding workplace "wellness" initiatives. Providing workers with tools and incentives to improve their health, the thinking goes, will reduce medical-care costs and boost worker productivity.

Experts say it's a trend that bodes well for employees who are motivated to lose weight, quit smoking, manage a chronic condition or just stay fit.

"Pretty clearly, employers have realized that if they're going to manage benefit costs and manage work loss, they need to get at the underlying health drivers of that -- employee health -- and get at the root causes of health-care utilization and health-care expenditures," said Bruce Kelley, practice leader for data services in the Minneapolis office of Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a human resources consulting firm.

According to Kelley, employers have been investing much more heavily in wellness services in the last few years. "I've been consulting in this area for 20 years," he noted, "and I've never seen as much activity among employers as I've seen just in the last few years."

Wellness is a broad term that describes the panoply of health-management services that companies offer, from onsite fitness centers and smoking-cessation classes to health-risk appraisals and disease-management programs.

Survey data show that more large employers are offering programs to improve employee health and productivity. Seventy-five percent offered a "health promotion" program in 2005 or 2006, up from 56 percent in 2003, according to survey results released last December by Watson Wyatt and the National Business Group on Health.

Nearly three out of four employers (72 percent) are sponsoring health-risk appraisals to measure individual employees' health risks and behaviors. And 40 percent are engaging "personal health coaches," health professionals who can help, say, an employee with diabetes manage their diet, exercise and drug regimens.

At the same time, corporate America and public health leaders are grappling to understand which particular interventions or combinations of programs and incentives yield the greatest return on investment.

"There has not been a tremendous amount of high quality research in this area," said Doug Evans, director of the Center for Health Promotion Research at RTI International, a nonprofit research institute based in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

But there are a number of efforts under way to learn what works. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for one, is sponsoring a series of studies to evaluate worksite efforts to prevent and control obesity.

In one study, published in the September/October 2005 issue of the *American Journal of Health Promotion*, CDC and RTI researchers found that obesity boosts employers' costs, including medical expenditures and absenteeism, by \$460 to \$2,500 per obese employee per year. They estimated that the cost of obesity at a firm with 1,000 employees is about \$285,000 per year.

In March, the National Business Group on Health issued 10 recommendations for promoting prevention in the workplace. Overall, it concluded that without the support of top-level management, companies cannot convey "the importance to employees of caring for themselves."

Some employers are using incentives to get workers on the wellness bandwagon. You might qualify for a lower health insurance premium, say, if you stop smoking, or you could earn a \$25 gift certificate for completing a health-risk appraisal.

The use of incentives will continue, Evans predicted. However, he believes employers must do a better job of promoting the benefits of health, much like anti-tobacco advocates did by portraying a non-smoking lifestyle as cool, hip and fun.

"Maybe that kind of technique can be effective in obesity," he offered. "Can you make it cool to be healthy weight and not to be fat?"