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12151932
GARTH JANSEN
PRES
EMPLOYEE WELLNESS SOLUTIONS NETWORK
502 OLD WONDERLAND RD
LONDON ON N6K 1L6

XX71(Y)
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Wellness Strategy

A COMPREHENSIVE WELLNESS PROGRAM STARTS WITH A HEALTH RISK ASSESSMENT. BY GARTH JANSEN

When it comes to wellness, Canadian companies are getting it—in part. Most benefits plan sponsors understand the importance of investing in ways to keep their employees healthy. Not only do wellness initiatives make a difference in the lives of the people who represent an organization's most valuable asset, but they also offer benefits to the bottom line: lowered health claims, improved energy and morale, decreased sick days and improved productivity.

But while plan sponsors are increasingly willing to make investments in wellness, the programs they are choosing may not necessarily be the most effective for their particular situation. Commonly, organizations will implement an employee assistance program, offer fitness subsidies and invite speakers to conduct occasional lunch-and-learn seminars on health topics. These are certainly good starting points for wellness. But an effective, comprehensive program needs to start with a strategic plan to determine an organization's health needs and objectives. Without this, plan sponsors aren't really getting the biggest bang for their buck.

This strategic plan should begin with the completion of a health risk assessment (HRA), which outlines workplace demographics, the prevalence of employee health risks and employee interests. The results of an HRA provide plan sponsors with an idea of which wellness initiatives their employee population would respond to, as well as a benchmark against which the success of implemented wellness initiatives can be measured. An organization should also outline its objectives for its wellness investments and establish a wellness committee to oversee and lead wellness initiatives. Strategically aligning the wellness program design to address the results of the HRA, support employee interests and ensure employee and management objectives are met all contribute to a healthy return on investment (ROI).

Wellness Strategy Improves ROI

A successful, results-based corporate wellness plan offers a variety of programs with the underlying

objective of true behaviour change. In order for a wellness message to resonate, messages should be presented in various ways, since individual employees are in different stages of healthy living—some think about it, some practice it, and some are pros at it. A one-off lunch and learn will effectively target a small percentage of an employee population, and a smaller percentage of employees will actually change their behaviour as a result of attending. But by combining an invited speaker who talks about healthy eating with ongoing assistance to help employees design individual nutrition plans, a healthy eating challenge for those competitive types and a recipe campaign to target healthy eating at home, the program can reach a higher percentage of people and boost the potential for real behavioural change. It's more beneficial to a plan sponsor's bottom line if a large number of members make smaller changes than if a small number make big changes.

Of course, this all costs more. A typical plan sponsor working with a wellness contractor to design a comprehensive program may pay between \$7 and \$15 per month, per employee. But consider that the average number of sick days per employee in Canada is 7.8 per year. A reduction in absenteeism of just one day per employee, per year is a savings of \$17 per month, per employee. And a 5% reduction in average annual per-employee medical claim costs of \$1,500 leads to an additional per-employee savings of \$6.25 per month. Taken together, these two factors alone would result in a savings for plan sponsors of \$23, well in excess of the per-employee cost of delivering the wellness plan.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to effecting behavioural change, and a lunch and learn or similar one-off initiative will not have the same results to a plan sponsor's ROI as a comprehensive wellness approach that equally speaks to both individual and group approaches to awareness.

Employee wellness continues to grow as companies realize the benefit in offering more programs, focused at both group and individual audiences, to encourage lasting behavioural change. Employees who focus on healthy living cost less. Period. **BC**

Garth Jansen is founder and president of Employee Wellness Solutions Network. garth@ewsnetwork.com