



HEALTHIEST EMPLOYERS[®] TOOLBOX

Employee Engagement: New Perspectives From The Front Lines

DISENGAGING FROM ENGAGEMENT?

During its thirty-five year history, the mission of employee wellness has evolved from cost reduction to social responsibility to productivity improvement.

Engagement is top of mind for employers who believe that keeping workers healthy and happy improves their competitive position, customer retention and long-term success. They'll continue to place a high priority on providing carefully chosen health, wellness and insurance options to their workforce. These are most frequently the businesses that depend upon knowledge capital: tech companies, professional services firms and academia come quickly to mind.

Employers in industries with a relatively unskilled, low-paid and high-turnover workforce are likeliest to quickly step away from their traditional role as a healthcare intermediary as the Affordable Care Act's most significant provisions take effect. Examples here include retail, hospitality and many service businesses.

WHY ENGAGEMENT IS OFTEN THE WRONG QUESTION

Employee wellness initiatives are most successful when employers find the intersection of “need” versus “want”—the sweet spot between the behaviors they feel employees should change to improve wellness and productivity—and the changes that employees themselves see as important in their lives.

Employers constantly ask for advice on how to increase employee engagement. But that's often the wrong question. Instead, ask “How do we find the intersection between what **needs** to change and what my employees **want** to change?”. That intersection means you're offering initiatives that match your employees' priorities. Lack of engagement is just a symptom of a poor strategic approach to addressing employee needs.

Successful wellness initiatives are employee-centric, not program-centric. It's the difference between thinking we should offer a new program or incentive to keep people engaged versus listening to what employees want to change.

Put another way: Listen closely to your employees. They'll do a lot of the work for you.

Finding this sweet spot requires a shared vocabulary between wellness professionals and employees and sufficient health literacy to communicate meaningfully. For example, employees consistently identify weight loss as a more important health need than high blood pressure. If you sponsor blood pressure screenings, make the connection for employees between weight, exercise and hypertension.

And if you have a bimodal workforce, with a small high-risk group of older, sicker managers and supervisors and a much larger, lower-risk group of younger individual contributors, recognize that these groups have unique health priorities, communication preferences and rewards and motivators.

MOTIVATED, BUT FOR HOW LONG?

Motivation compels an individual toward a desired goal. Sounds good, right? Well, maybe.

Many employers have adopted incentives to drive better employee health and improve their bottom line. Seemingly overnight, the wellness industry responded and we've seen a surge in companies who have sprung into existence simply to help the employer manage the creation, collection and distribution of these incentives.

However, these programs have delivered mixed results. We've seen short-term results from incentives, but the jury is out on how long these results will last. The bigger-picture problem, as Healthiest Employers sees it, is that employers are now training their workforce to act only when paid to do so.

A better path forward is to create a sustainable culture of health that elicits individual intrinsic motivation. Otherwise, plan on budgeting for incentives for many years to come.

WHY SEATBELTS PROBABLY DON'T MATTER

Managing a healthy workplace requires the right data, at the right time, for the right reasons. Appropriately chosen quantitative and qualitative data lets you make timely and confident decisions.

For example, analysis of claims data tells employers what workers “need” to change to lower health costs. Biometric assessments tell employers what workers “need” to change to improve their current health status. But these tools shed no light on what's important to your employees—what they “want” to change, and why, and how best to help them do that. Tools like motivational interviewing and readiness-to-change assessments answer those questions. Combine that information with claims, screening and productivity data, and you can make smart, informed decisions that actually move the needle on employee health *and* business results.

It's important to gather data that is actionable by employers to make changes in what they control and can influence, like facility and workplace practices. Asking about safety belt usage probably isn't relevant, unless you employ fleet drivers. But if your Silicon Valley business employs lots of bike commuters, surveying bike safety issues might lead you to offer rainy-day shuttles to nearby transit stations for these workers.

THE MYTH OF LOW-HANGING FRUIT

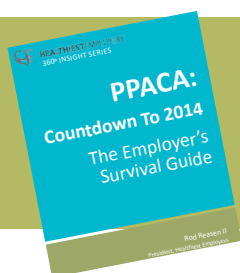
There's no such thing as low-hanging fruit. If you can gaze around your workplace and spot an obvious and substantial target for an immediate wellness intervention, you can also be certain that it's a behavior or environmental condition that is going to be very tough to change quickly and sustainably. Yes, smokers are “low-hanging fruit”—except that most of them have tried and failed multiple times to stop. Yes, your heaviest workers might benefit from health interventions—but figuring out what's really contributing to their high-risk health status and looming disability will take time, effort, experience, and know-how.

That's why every wellness leader knows that when you're shaping and influencing the professional and personal lives and wellbeing of thousands of employees, progress is measured in inches, not miles. It's rare that you see a dramatic u-turn in employer or individual behavior within a single 12-month measurement period.

Change is incremental—one small step at a time. The drops of water accumulate faster and faster, until a shower becomes a downpour.

STRATEGIC CHOICES, STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES

Employers today face truly strategic and vitally important decisions in response to healthcare reform. How can they most effectively deliver the benefits of a healthy workplace and a healthy employee population to their shareholders? Savvy employers understand the undeniable link between a healthy worker and their affect on the bottom line. No matter their choice on the payment of care, employers will always have an incentive to keep their workforce healthy and productive. As we move toward a new healthcare frontier, the time has come for wellness to take center stage.



PPACA: Countdown to 2014 The Employer's Survival Guide

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