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SERVING SOUTHWEST MISSOURI

Wellness programs foster competition, recognition

Health promotion programs are designed to cut risk factors associated with preventable illnesses by encouraging and rewarding healthy lifestyle choices and discouraging behaviors and attitudes that are detrimental to good health.

Because lifestyle behaviors are deeply engrained, making changes is very difficult and requires discipline and dedication.

Educating employees about the benefits of positive lifestyles and the detriments of unhealthy behavior is an important first step. It will take stronger motivational forces, however, to get most employees to take action.

External incentives can play an important role in motivating employees to action. The best incentive programs are easy to administer, cost-effective and move the largest number of employees to take action and sustain positive changes over time.

In wellness programs, completion of health-risk assessments is often rewarded because the information they provide is invaluable to wellness program design and evaluation, and because the more individual participation, the more likely the data will be useful and accurate.

Participation in program activities, such as nutrition and smoking cessation classes, and achievement of specific lifestyle changes or biometric accomplishments, such as attaining particular cholesterol, body mass index or blood pressure levels, are often rewarded to encourage continued participation in related wellness programs.

Upbeat incentives

Most health promotion programs give something positive to their employees to encourage healthy behavior. Incentive rewards can be tangible, such as cash, prizes, vacation days or reduced

Guest Column



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insurance premiums, or intangible, such as management recognition, camaraderie and personal fulfillment.

Whether tangible or intangible rewards are used, incentives work best when they are closely tied to the healthy behaviors that they are intended to reinforce. Some sample incentives are:

- **Wellness dollars.**

Award wellness dollars for employee participation in various wellness activities. Allow employees to use them toward fitness-related equipment, such as bikes, treadmills, workout clothing or gift certificates to health-related stores.

- **Monetary rewards.** Contribute cash to health savings accounts or flexible spending accounts offered as part of your benefits program, or waive deductibles for preventive health care services such as mammograms or well-baby visits. Offer term life insurance to those employees who complete health risk assessments.

- **Contests.** Use competition to motivate change, whether it's better physical fitness, weight loss or smoking cessation. In addition to tangible rewards given to winners, participants would receive recognition and benefit from teamwork. Create competitions such as a walking challenge where those who complete the challenge are entered into a drawing for health club memberships.

- **Achievement awards.** Verbal praise and a pat on the back are motivational to some, but a token of recognition of achievement may offer more. A colorful certificate to congratulate an employee for achieving a health-related goal is one example.

- **Time off.** Offering additional days off may be the next best incentive to cash. This type of incentive makes good business sense if the number of absences

drops significantly and attendance is used as an evaluation criterion for wellness programs.

Not just for employee health

Deciding who to reward in wellness programs is just as important as deciding how to reward them. Employees often account for less than half of an employer's total health plan, so improving the health behaviors of employees' spouses and children also can result in significant health care cost savings for the employer.

Family members will provide each other with encouragement, motivation and support while participating in wellness activities. To reach all members of your health plan, develop educational materials, programs and incentive rewards directed toward the entire family, and invite family members into the workplace to participate in wellness activities.

The cost factor

While intangible incentives have a relatively low cost to employers, tangible incentives will require a source of funds. For employers to experience a return on investment, the cost of incentives must be less than the expected savings the program will produce. Employers are likely to see real savings in the form of reduced health claims, absenteeism and disability and workers' compensation claims, along with improved productivity and employee morale, but most programs take several years to develop a positive return on investment.

To achieve success, it is essential that your workplace health promotion program contain effective incentives that motivate lifestyle changes and improve the health of your employees and their families.

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