

Wellness Program RESET:

What Employers Should Expect from Vendors

Written By Laura Carabello



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ps and downs with wellness vendors over the past few years may have left employers and plan sponsors pondering what their expectations should be in 2024 and beyond.

One thing is for certain: employers increasingly see wellbeing as crucial to their workforce health, productivity, and benefits strategy. Despite any downturn in the current economic environment, it doesn't appear that they will be reducing their investment in support of programs and services with more growth surrounding incentives.

In fact, according to the 14th Annual Employer-Sponsored Health & Wellbeing Survey of 184 employers fielded by Fidelity Investments and Business Group on Health, 9 in 10 employers felt that a sagging

MORE OPTIONS FOR
ACHIEVING EMPLOYEE HEALTH
AND WELLNESS



Jakki Lynch

Jakki Lynch RN, CCM, CMAS
CCFA, Director Cost Containment,
Sequoia Reinsurance Services,
shares a recent report published
by McKinsey which estimates
that poor health costs the US
economy about \$3.2 trillion
annually from premature deaths
and the lost productive potential
associated with diseases.

“Diabetes has topped the charts for one of the largest disease states for economic impact,” she reports. “Compared to other countries, the U.S. has a higher disease burden among the younger and working age population and the situation is expected to become worse. Over the next 20 years, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington forecasts that the overall U.S. disease burden will increase by about 20% percent as age and lifestyle related conditions, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and neurological disorders rise.”

Lynch advises that by deploying approaches to improve health and prevent and treat diseases, the U.S. can reduce its disease burden by as much as one-third by 2040.

“Plan sponsors can be instrumental in these prevention efforts by ensuring access to effective wellness programs for their employees with interventions that are preventive in nature, such as weight management -- the key to reversing metabolic syndrome.” she continues.

Rieger-Green states, “[Configurable and results-driven employee wellness programs](#) with best-in-class reporting and measurable ROI result in amplified employee engagement and productivity. At the heart of a well-functioning organization lies an engaged and motivated workforce. Robust well-being initiatives, encompassing everything from fitness regimes to stress management workshops, fuel employees’ motivation and resilience. This translates into higher job satisfaction, diminished absenteeism and a significant boost in overall productivity.”



PRACTICAL STEPS ON THE ROAD TO WELLNESS



Sally-Ann Polson

“Navigating our healthcare system is challenging enough for healthy individuals and for those diagnosed with an acute or chronic health condition, even more so,” says Sally-Ann Polson, noting that MedWatch provides Concierge Services for complex health plans and RBP, clinical resources to achieve and maintain optimal health with a serious illness to a chronic disease, a maternity program and an EAP. “Wellness attributes and psychological assessment exist in all of these, and having access to quality care management services is an important part of an effective wellness program.”

She advises that providing access for employees to receive education, resources, and support can positively impact their overall wellness, which in turn can provide both immediate and long-term savings related to healthcare for the member and the benefit plan.

“With the dramatic uptick in behavioral health issues, well-structured programs in behavioral health are more important than ever,” says Polson. “They should include a comprehensive behavioral health support component that provides assistance to members who are dealing with situations stemming from work/family life stresses to more complex mental health and substance dependency challenges, and should encompass mental, physical, emotional, and economic factors. When left unaddressed, these issues quickly compound in severity and overall cost.”

Metabolic disease is one of the most problematic and potentially costly challenges that can be addressed through effective wellness programs. The National Institutes of Health defines metabolic syndrome as “a group of conditions that together raise your risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and other serious health problems.” Metabolic syndrome is also called insulin resistance syndrome.

“More than 30% of adults in the United States meet the diagnostic criteria for metabolic syndrome,” says Jakki Lynch. “High blood pressure, elevated blood sugar, increased body fat and abnormal cholesterol are select conditions of Metabolic Syndrome. These conditions lead to diseases such as Type II Diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and stroke.”

The NIH reports that making a commitment to choose the right foods to eat and adopting an intermittent fasting program can prevent metabolic syndrome or may improve the patient’s condition if already diagnosed.

“Intermittent fasting is one of the best ways to impact your health,” Lynch advises. “There is an ease and flexibility to this discipline that is unlike any other lifestyle change and is easier than counting calories. The benefits of intermittent fasting can help people lose weight, lower their blood glucose levels, reduce inflammation and improve their overall health through a process called autophagy-cellular recycling.”

She explains that the main premise of the method is to only eat during a reduced number of hours during the day, adding, “This includes not eating late at night or during the earlier morning hours. The most common method is to eat for an 8-hour period during the day (e.g., 11am to 7pm). This period could be reduced to 6 or even 4 hours.”

According to a recent study published in Cell Metabolism, 137 firefighters who worked 24-hour shifts showed that reducing the window of time for eating improved multiple markers of health in just 12 weeks. The study concluded that time restricted eating/intermittent fasting may serve as a novel intervention to treat and potentially prevent cardiometabolic disease.

Lynch cites another recent study from the University of Illinois Chicago, which has studied intermittent fasting for the past two decades. Researchers found that intermittent fasting can help people lose weight and keep it off over the course of a year, with effects similar to tracking calories. The results of the clinical trial results of the clinical trial were published in the Annals of Internal Medicine.

Lastly, in the Dec. 26, 2022 issue of The New England Journal of Medicine, neuroscientist Dr. Mark Mattson – who has studied intermittent fasting for 25 years – stated evidence which supports that it can be a “part of a healthy lifestyle.”

Lynch concludes, “The study found that participants had a decreased resting heart rate, lower blood pressure, and reduced blood lipid levels after intermittent fasting. The top US academic medical centers along with the American Hospital Association recognize the potential benefits and they provide cost effective programs for intermittent fasting.”

These programs are a great example for payers and providers to expand existing collaboration to innovate care delivery through targeted wellness programs. The prevention strategies are simple and novel and the positive impacts on patient health and clinical outcomes warrant a strategic approach for plan sponsors to consider wellness benefits.

WELLNESS: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL INITIATIVE

William F. Ziebell, CEO, Gallagher’s Benefits & HR Consulting Division, advises that today’s workforces consist of multiple generations and people from a variety

