

5 ways to help your employees get active and increase overall wellness

By: Christopher D. Clark

Workplace wellness has never been more prevalent than it is today. It's top-of-mind for varying organizations, and there are plenty of ways to take action. As a healthcare organization, this is a front on which our organizations should take the lead, setting examples and best practices for others across the country to follow.

The value of wellness programs is firmly established. Nonprofit research firm RAND's 2013 Workplace Wellness Programs Study notes the value such programs can have in combating what are termed "lifestyle diseases"—heart disease, diabetes, and chronic pulmonary conditions—by drawing focus to them and fighting their causes, such as poor nutrition and inactivity. The firm finds that "workplace wellness takes advantage of employers' access to employees at an age when interventions can still change their long-term health trajectory."

Indeed, workplace wellness as a preventer of chronic disease is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—and it has the potential to extend far beyond the workplace. "The workplace, as a microcosm of society, has the potential to improve health substantially in the United States by building a culture of health that facilitates healthy lifestyles for employees," writes the CDC in a 2013 study on leveraging workplace wellness plans through the Affordable Care Act.

Designing and developing a successful wellness program can be a challenge, requiring careful design, constant communication, and follow-through, and the ever-important buy-in from the entire staff. OhioHealth MedCentral recently implemented a wellness program that supplemented the nonprofit healthcare organization's existing complimentary initiatives, including annual biometric screenings, healthy eating initiatives, access to its fitness center, and a Weight Watchers membership program. The team at MedCentral developed its program to directly target what it identified as its greatest risk factors among staff: diabetes, inactivity, and high BMI. The organization followed these five best practices to encourage employees to become healthier and happier:

1. Build awareness. Wellness starts at the awareness level. Increased awareness of employee activity levels—particularly if such levels are low—is the first step in taking corrective action. Recent research on workplace wellness performed by Gallup shows that a lack of awareness is one of the most common reasons workplace wellness programs fail to live up to expectation. To help employees gain awareness of their activity levels, MedCentral leveraged the expertise of DHS Group, a Houston-based company that provides organizations with strategies for tackling wellness initiatives. Through the program, employees received a Movband, a bracelet activity tracker that provided real-time awareness of activity levels and connects to an online dashboard where employees can track their progress and participate in challenges.

2. Create buy-in. A workplace wellness program can't be successful without employee buy-in. An air of excitement and employee incentives work hand in hand to encourage participation. In addition to targeting its prime risk factors, MedCentral launched its program with the idea that it would be fun and engaging for each of its employees, regardless of fitness level.

MedCentral leveraged DHS Group's group activity programs to help increase employee participation. With a bevy of tools—including templates, program management software tools, and marketing materials that helped spread the word of the wellness program across the hospital—MedCentral's wellness team was able to create buy-in among its staff. Goals and incentives were established as well. Gift cards were given to employees as they met new challenges and the organization offered drawings for larger prizes.

3. Include the community. Another way to boost engagement through workplace wellness programs is to encourage the participation of employees' spouses and families. The 2012 Scorecard report released by the nonprofit Health Enhancement Research Organization (HERO) indicates that wellness programs inclusive of employees' family members often contribute to long-term program success. The report notes that spouses often act as "key influencers," and such support has been linked to higher quit rates for tobacco users.

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At MedCentral, many employees purchased Movbands for family members. Including family members created a vested interest in the wellness program for employees. Beyond families, the healthcare organization also used Movbands in several patient outreach programs, including cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation, and diabetes prevention.

4. Track activity and goals. Each Movband given to an employee came with access to a personalized activity dashboard that allowed MedCentral employees to track totals, averages, and set personal goals. Through easily accessible metrics, employees were able to set timelines and goals to reach healthy physical activity levels.

The company's most recent initiative, Summer Get Moving Challenge, ran from mid-June to mid-July as a team challenge. Employees signed up in teams of five to hit 10,000 moves per day. Employees could track their goals through the Activity Dashboard, where they could see progress on an individual and group level. The dashboard also provided daily, weekly, and monthly moves, steps, and miles. With 25 total teams participating, more than 58 percent of employees met the goal.

By keeping track of employee activity through goal setting, MedCentral was able to easily track progress toward its organizational goals for the program as a whole.

5. Analyze results. MedCentral's wellness program far exceeded the team's initial expectations. In the early stages, organizers expected that around 200 of its 2,500 employees would participate. Today, more than 1,200 employees have elected to participate and are regularly utilizing the Movbands to track their progress and participate in company challenges.

Using DHS Group's group activity program, MedCentral was able to offer employees a highly engaging and accessible way to get more active as a team and a community.

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