

Employee Benefit Consultants

The Administrator

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Important news and updates from your benefits professional

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Feature Story

Create A Competitive Advantage

Calculating the return on investment (ROI) in new capital equipment is standard operating procedure. Have you ever stopped to realize that your competitors may be calculating their ROI on their most valuable asset - their employees? In today's increasingly global economy, the answer is probably more often than you think.

An increasing number of companies are looking at preventive care and wellness programs not as expenses, but as a good investment - a performance driver. Investing in the health and well-being of employees not only lowers overall healthcare spending but can boost productivity on the job. Encouraging healthier living doesn't require that every CEO enter a triathlon. But it is important to set an example for others to follow. Here are a few ideas.

Health Risk Assessments

Statistics show that people who participate in health risk assessments on a regular basis have lower healthcare costs. Participating in on-site screenings will demonstrate your commitment to proactive wellness and send a message that your company views all employees as valuable.

Healthy Lunches and Snacks

If your company has a cafeteria or employee lounge, why not replace traditional calorie-heavy soft drinks or chips with water, juices and healthier snacks. We recently read of a technology firm offering lunches consisting of grilled (rather than fried) foods, fruits

and vegetables for free while continuing to charge for their traditional menu.

Fitness Facilities

Recent remodeling by a mechanical contracting firm has included the addition of in-house fitness equipment. To help people get in step, a personal trainer is brought on-site twice a week.

Incentives Can Help

Encouraging employees to participate in screenings, eat healthier and exercise isn't easy, but incentives can get the ball rolling. Gift cards at retail stores, typically ranging from \$10 to \$100, can be used to introduce and strengthen a proactive program.

At the end of the day, a company is really only as strong as the people who work there. Making employees healthy really can give your company a competitive advantage that can lead to more business and a healthier bottom line.

At EBC, we can provide the tools and resources to start your customized wellness plan today. Our EBC *Healthier You* product offers a comprehensive wellness program along with a host of decision support tools to help your employees make sound consumer decisions regarding their healthcare. **For more information on starting your wellness plan, contact your EBC marketing representative or marketing@ebctpa.com.**

Q&A

Bringing you answers to tough questions

How are Consumer Directed Health Plans Stacking Up In The Marketplace?

More employers are now offering Consumer Directed Health Plans (CDHPs) to workers and evidence shows CDHPs are helping to lower companies' healthcare costs, according to research unveiled by the National Business Group on Health.

Thirty-eight percent of large firms offered CDHPs this year, an increase from 33 percent last year. Five years ago, only a handful of companies offered such plans. A survey of 573 large companies showed that 40 percent of employers now offer or plan to offer a Health Savings Account (HSA), while 26 percent provide or plan to provide a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA).

CDHPs also appear to be helping with medical inflation. During the last two years, one-fourth of firms that have incorporated CDHPs experienced median healthcare cost increases of 2.5 percent. Employers with 10 percent or more of their covered population in a CDHP are holding health inflation to 6.5 percent, on average.

Companies who are successfully implementing CDHPs offer hope for continued cost-saving results.

Industry Approaches

How's Your Corporate Health Culture?



Talk to your banker, your broker or your supplier and you hear the same message - people make the difference. In an economy that tries so hard to turn everything we need and want into a commodity - how can this be? A recent meeting with a large general contractor provided some valuable insight.

As we spoke about their health benefit plan and the new consumer directed strategies they have recently incorporated, it became obvious that the plan was really just a part of the bigger picture. This company is highly successful because they go well beyond designing and managing a self-funded health plan - they are really shaping a culture of health within their organization.

It's all about open communication and taking responsibility. Ownership goes to great lengths to let every employee know how the company generates revenue and how that revenue works its way to the bottom line. Orientation programs stress the importance of safety and health and occasional special events like "Friday night at the movies" help families feel like a part of the team.

A tour of the company makes it obvious that the business is about much more than construction. In a marketplace that continues to demand more of employees, wellness, healthy living and teamwork have become an integral part of their organization.



TRENDS *Latest Happenings In Today's World*

Dads Seek Work-Life Balance

Working fathers who are relied upon more at home to help with family matters are struggling to find a healthy work-life balance. The good news for employers is that most work-life policies will work for men. Reaching out to fathers is important for employers. More time to spend at home creates healthier domestic environments for children, which will create a stronger, more diverse workforce for the future.



Opting Out Of Coverage

A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that workers are less likely to sign up for health insurance from their employer when they must pay a large share of its cost. As their health insurance premium increases, fewer employees enroll. What is surprising though, is that 11 percent of workers refuse coverage even when there is no contribution required on their part.

Firms offering health insurance benefits fell from 69 percent in 2000 to 61 percent in 2006. During that time worker cost-sharing also increased in many firms, which can add stress to family budgets. For some, a high contribution requirement may be more than they are willing to pay. For others, it may make other options, such as coverage offered through a spouse's employer, more attractive.



BENEFIT BEAT

Keeping An Eye on What's Happening

Small Business Burdens

Small businesses are under pressure trying to provide health benefits to workers. Small business owners testified before the U.S. House Committee on Small Business saying they struggle more than large employers to secure health benefits for employees. There is a disadvantage because they cannot easily band together to form large pools of insured individuals similar to large companies. They pay more for health benefits than larger companies because of a lack of competition, lack of bargaining power, lack of administrative efficiencies and expensive mandates. Many small business owners and policy experts believe Congress could help by promoting tax relief and customized plans. According to Todd Stottlemyer, President of the National Federation of Independent Business, a comprehensive approach that includes pooling, tax-based incentives and cost-containment measures would help small businesses purchase affordable, efficient coverage.

States Focus On Top 10 Policy List

Although healthcare costs continue to strain state budgets, the issue is number four on the top ten items turning up the heat for state legislatures. The National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) predicts state legislatures will be focusing on expanding coverage to the roughly 47 million Americans without health insurance. Last year Massachusetts and Vermont approved plans to ensure all state residents have health insurance. Other states may be examining those plans, along with continuing to look for ways to reduce costs, such as seeking lower prices for medicine and healthcare procedures.



Number ten on the policy list is obesity. Trans fat, which can raise levels of bad cholesterol and increase the risk for heart attack and stroke, is being called "the new tobacco." In March, New York City began a process that will eventually require all restaurants to ban the use of trans fat. Chicago also has a proposed ban, while Boston has implemented a voluntary program. At least 16 states have considered requiring restaurants to disclose nutrition information for standard menu items, including trans fats, since 2003. The NCSL expects several more states to debate trans fat legislation this year, as well as consider other nutrition and physical activity issues in order to address obesity concerns, particularly for the young.

Health Wise

Using Ergonomics to Prevent Injury



Ergonomics may help prevent musculoskeletal injuries, such as back strain and carpal tunnel syndrome, by reducing physical and mental stress caused by the workstation setup.

Working for long periods of time without taking breaks can greatly increase the risk of musculoskeletal injuries. Taking regular breaks and doing stretching exercises may reduce the risk of motion injuries.

Evaluate your work process, including job organization, task variety and demands for speed and quality. By focusing on the setup of your workstation and the tools being used, the chances of injury can be reduced. A few ways to improve your workstation include:

- *Arrange work so you can sit or stand comfortably without putting stress on any area of your body.*
- *Workstation tools should be placed within reach without having to lean, bend or twist at the waist.*
- *If possible, vary your postures throughout the day.*
- *Take 10 to 15 second breaks during the task-at-hand to look away from your computer, stand up or stretch your arms.*
- *Maintain good health with regular exercise, proper nutrition, and not smoking.*

Questioning Doctors Orders

A significant number of Americans have not followed their physician's advice or filled prescriptions because they believed the proposed treatment was unnecessary or too aggressive. A recent Wall Street Journal poll revealed 44 percent of patients said they or a family member have second-guessed their physician in some way, while 20 percent sought a second opinion.

Among those who ignored a doctor's recommendations, an overwhelming majority of 89 percent said they experienced no negative results and only 11 percent reported health conditions worsened or that they lost time from work. Employers can only speculate whether or not this non-compliance is worrisome or a positive example of healthcare consumerism.



Beat Exercise Boredom

If you find yourself bored with your exercise routine, try one-minute balance challenges to strengthen your core muscles. If you walk on a treadmill, try jogging for one minute every 10 minutes. Decrease the intervals by one minute each week, jogging after nine minutes during week two, etc. If you run, do the same challenge with one-minute sprints. Or try incorporating free weights to strengthen muscles.



DID YOU KNOW? *New Ideas for Healthy Consumers*

Employees May Be Short-Changing Their Benefits

American workers may be short-changing benefits decisions and making hasty choices. Employees spent a mere 1.4 hours examining their benefits options during open enrollment last year. Surprisingly, they spent 4.9 hours on holiday shopping, 2.8 hours working on their taxes and 2.7 hours preparing for Thanksgiving, according to a study by the Guardian Life Insurance Co.

Some employees might argue that benefits selection is a no-brainer, and that's why it may not be a top priority. About 71 percent of workers admitted it was "easy" to select workplace benefits. However, when asked about the basics of group, individual and disability coverage, the majority of them were in the dark.

Employees turn to several sources for help with benefits choices. Fifty percent read the benefits brochures, while 42 percent speak with HR representatives and 36 percent meet with a benefit advisor. With personal responsibility for financial decisions increasing, employees really need to do their homework when reviewing their health benefits.

Slim In The City

In a new study from the Mailman School of Public Health, New York City dwellers residing in pedestrian-friendly areas have lower body mass index (BMI) levels compared to other New Yorkers. Researchers discovered that three characteristics of the city environment - living in areas with mixed residential and commercial uses, living near bus and subway stops and living in population dense areas were inversely related to BMI levels.

For example, those living in areas evenly balanced between residential and commercial use had significantly lower BMIs compared to those who lived in mostly residential or commercial areas. Placing shops, restaurants and public transit near residences promotes walking and independence from automobiles. Facilities needed for everyday living can be found right around the corner.



Insurance Tips for Spanish-Speakers

The National Association of Insurance Commissioners (NAIC) launched a new Spanish-language website for employers and workers to help educate Spanish-speaking consumers on various types of insurance. The website, www.InsureUonline.org, is organized according to life stage so consumers can get insurance information and understand their evolving needs. Visitors can find tips on saving money, how to select coverage for young singles, young families, established families and senior citizens, as well as a quiz for each life stage to test their knowledge on topics.

Insurance is a complex subject and many consumers need help understanding their options. This website is intended to make the Spanish-speaking population well-versed on basic information about health, life, auto and homeowners/renters insurance.

Please Contact Us: This newsletter is not intended as a substitute for personal medical or employee benefits advice. Please consult your physician before making decisions which may impact your personal health. Talk to your benefits administrator before implementing strategies which may impact your organization's employee benefit objectives.

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