

Engaging Employees in Health and Productivity? A Challenge for Communication

March 2008



HEALTHWAYS

By Heath Shackelford
Senior Director, Marketing

Research by the Business Roundtable, which includes data from more than 15,000 employees at 50 large organizations, suggests that effective communication is the greatest behavior influencer for employee benefit decisions. When coupled with other levers, such as smartly designed incentives and plan structure changes, effective communication can yield even greater results.

Watson Wyatt researchers discovered that effectively communicating the value of health benefits can do more to retain top-performing employees than the richness of those benefits alone. Employers that offer rich benefits but have poor communication practices reported an average turnover rate for top-performing employees of 17%. Those that offer less costly benefits but communicate them successfully reported an average key-person turnover of 12%.

Consider the following key tips for using communication as a lever for health promotion in your organization.

Commit and Be Consistent

Corporations that are serious about driving organization-wide health improvement must commit to it in all facets. From the beginning, messages from senior management, internal communications and human resources must be aligned. Improved health should be an ongoing theme in your communications throughout the year. A “big bang” launch followed by silence or 12 competing “key initiatives” undermine the potential success of your program.

Avoid mixing themes or spawning mini-campaigns. The fact that it's breast cancer awareness month doesn't mean you need to address that in your health promotion campaign. If you try to include every worthy cause in your communications, employees will lose sight of your primary focus.

Establish a Two-Way Street

According to a report from Edelman Change and Employee Engagement, a global communications consulting group, companies must avoid “selling” people on key workplace initiatives and instead involve and engage them in two-way communication. In the case of a health promotion initiative, this includes establishing wellness ambassadors, creating opportunities for early buy-in to drive word-of-mouth and conducting research, such as

focus groups, that allows employees to weigh in on what they want or need to help them get healthier. In other words, approach the initiative with an education mindset rather than simply promotion.

Develop Targeted Messaging

As you would with any new communications campaign, consider the different vehicles and methods that are historically most effective in delivering new information to your employees. Find ways to augment mass communication with personalized information based on a specific tool (health coaching versus gym memberships), a specific segment of your workforce (line employees versus corporate) or at the individual level (self-directed information sources). There are numerous ways to segment your population and target messages, including specific communication to encourage program sign-up or motivational pieces for those who have enrolled but are inactive.

Consider the Culture

Many industry professionals will tell you that culture and employee communication are inextricably linked. They fuel each other, and neither can be successful without its counterpart.

According to Joe Luetzinger, president of the Academy for Health and Productivity Management, “If you have health programs in place but no support from the overall culture, it's similar to a house of cards. The program won't be effective or sustainable.”

Consider how the overall culture of your organization will positively or negatively affect how you communicate to employees about health improvement opportunities. Best practices that link culture and communication include:

- Educating senior leadership, frontline managers and other local staff who will be responsible for communicating to employees in face-to-face meetings.
- Establishing a “walk the talk” atmosphere, in which company leaders themselves are actively participating in healthy initiatives and talking about their experiences.
- Making sure employees hear directly from the CEO that the program is an important, organization-wide priority.

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State the Facts

Employees are much more open to new corporate initiatives if they understand the business case and how they link to it. In the case of health promotion, be sure to explain both the benefits for the individual as well as for the company as a whole. Your organization needs to lower costs. You need to increase the productivity of your workforce. You need to be more competitive. You want to be seen as an employer of choice. You sincerely want to provide as much support for your employees as possible.

Your workforce will be much less skeptical about new health improvement resources if you are transparent about the purpose.

Keep it Simple

With the competing demands of the general work environment and the fact that most employees feel ill-equipped to make appropriate health care decisions, no initiative can get off the ground if it is difficult for employees to understand. If participation seems complicated or confusing, employees will either disengage immediately or collect initial incentives and then become inactive.

The process of getting employees engaged in a health improvement program must be as streamlined and straightforward as possible, including clear and succinct messages and marketing campaigns.

Always Solicit Feedback

Building in mechanisms for capturing feedback at all stages of the process is critical. You need insight into how the initiative is unfolding, how employees are responding, what potential roadblocks exist and what can be done to improve participation. You also need success stories that you can use in future communications to motivate others who are considering adopting a healthier lifestyle.

Implementing a successful health promotion program that drives reduced costs and improved productivity is no small task. While effective communication is only one piece of a much broader puzzle, it is a critical component to driving optimal engagement.

This article was printed in the February edition of Employee Benefit News.

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