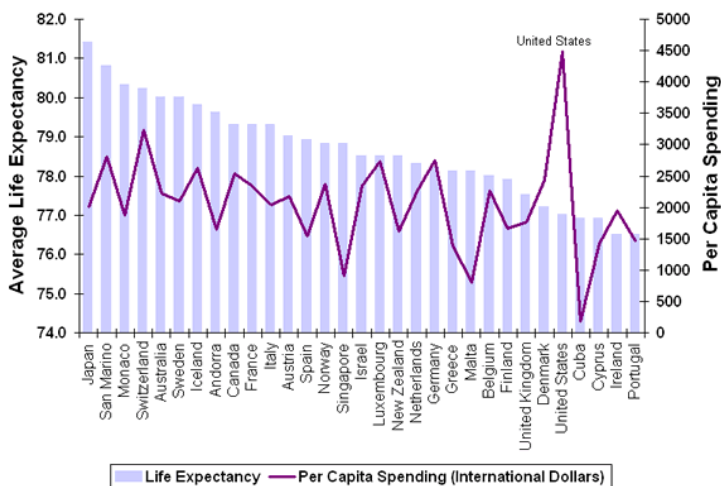


Building Cost Effective Worksite Wellness Programs

Let's face it - healthcare in America is a mess. We spend more per capita on healthcare than any other industrialized nation yet Americans are suffering from more chronic diseases than our counterparts and life expectancy is actually dropping! Physicians are pressured to order tests or offer procedures that may not be necessary out of fear of being sued and insurance companies are denying these services as "unnecessary" to contain costs. As these market forces continue to collide, healthcare spending in the US topped \$2.3 trillion last year – increasing 6.7% from the previous year¹. But are we healthier for it? Americans have come to expect the quick fixes to eliminate our high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes. Take a pill! It's easy! We live in the land of instant gratification: dining out, fast foods, computers, TVs – TIVO's, airplanes, escalators! We can now eat and go on demand and even get well on demand.

The Cost of a Long Life



As healthcare premiums continue to climb, why then would employers even think of spending more on employee health to start worksite wellness programs for their employees? The answer is relatively simple... it's just hard to accept because we as Americans have become accustomed to **treating** illness rather than **preventing** it. 50 to 70% of all chronic diseases (heart disease, cancer, diabetes, etc.) can be linked to unhealthy lifestyle choices. Said another way, chronic diseases can be **prevented** through a lifestyle of regular exercise, a heart healthy diet and not using tobacco products. Since we spend more time with our co-workers than we do with our families, would it not make sense to take advantage of the opportunity to promote health and wellness to your employees? If you as an employer can influence your employees to

¹ National Coalition on Healthcare

adopt healthy lifestyles, then fewer employees will get sick creating fewer healthcare claims which would ultimately result in premiums which would not increase as quickly (I would love to say they would not increase at all, but we all know that's not going to happen in any realistic scenario). If fewer employees are getting sick due to illness or disability, then they are spending more time at work – thereby increasing productivity and your bottom line!

Worksite Wellness programs - especially those targeting the specific health issues of your employees, can save anywhere from \$2.00 to 6.00 for every dollar spent on the program. The best programs are those that are designed for two target groups: the employees that are already sick (to make them better) as well as those employees that are well (to keep them well and **prevent** illness down the road). Focusing on smoking cessation and weight reduction are two areas that typically reap the highest return on investment for wellness programs. Since it takes several years of unhealthy living to develop high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes, you want to start your employees on a road to fitness and healthy eating today. Heart disease, for example can be prevented, stopped and even reversed if the proper corrective steps are followed. It's never too late to start.

Whether your programs are sophisticated involving screenings, assessments, health coaching, smoking cessation, weight loss, fitness, etc. or quite simple with educational lunch and learns, there are always benefits to the effort. Ideally, you want to determine what areas of health your employees are most at risk and develop programs to specifically address those health issues. This is done through biometric screenings (blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose checks) and health risk appraisals (a survey that asks health and lifestyle questions). Companies offering these services will provide you with group aggregate reports that will help you quickly determine the areas of greatest health concerns of your employees so you can develop a targeted campaign to specifically combat those health issues. The level of sophistication will largely depend upon your budget. For those of you interested in starting a worksite wellness program in your organization, here are a few simple low cost and important tips to get you started:

1. **Join Welcoa** – The Wellness Council of America is probably the best resource for developing a wellness program. They have a wealth of information from “how to” guides to assessment tools to educational literature for your employees. Membership costs \$365 per year and you can join online at www.welcoa.org.
2. **Senior Level Support** – for any campaign to be successful, you must have CEO and Senior Management support. Without their support, your initiative doesn't stand a chance. They need to buy in to the fact that employees must be allowed time out to participate in the program.
3. **Develop a Wellness Team** – appointed by the CEO and put this responsibility into their job description. By giving this authority, they are then given immediate respect at all levels and have a greater capacity to infuse wellness into the corporate culture. Their job is to create a supportive environment where wellness becomes the norm through policy and procedure changes as well as corporate culture.

4. **Plan a Budget** – whether small or significant, put some money behind this effort to further legitimize its purpose. If possible, plan to set aside money to offer incentives to increase employee participation.
5. **Develop an Action Plan** – charge your wellness team with developing an action plan that includes a mission and vision statement. Consider a kick off event with biometric screenings and Health Risk Assessments (HRAs) if you can afford them. Collect as much baseline data as possible so you can determine improvements in absenteeism rates, turnover rates, productivity rates, etc. down the road.
6. **Evaluate and Modify** – strive for continuous quality improvement through constant evaluation and modification of the Action Plan. Perform an annual SWOT analysis of your Action Plan and think “out of the box” for creative fun ways to target interventions (Biggest Loser competitions, form corporate teams for local 5K runs, etc.)

For those on limited budgets, seek local resources that would be willing to offer free programs and services. Non-profits are a good source for free educational programs and hospitals often offer free biometric screenings. If your budget allows, solicit the assistance of organizations that will help you craft your own customized wellness programs. Wellness providers are all different - some will offer full blown programs where they provide everything from soup to nuts for one price while others provide services a la carte.

If you think of your employees as your most valuable resource, then an employee wellness program should be a top priority to your organization. In addition to moving your employees toward a lifetime of good health and increased corporate productivity, these programs show employees that you care about them. They increase morale while also fostering loyalty to the organization. Compare your employee turnover rates before the program was started to after. If there's a drop in employee turnover, you can extrapolate how much that saves your organization in legal fees, hiring costs, training costs, etc.

For a Resource Directory of other worksite wellness articles and web sites or for information about the programs and services provided by Florida Heart Research Institute, email me at tori@floridaheart.org.

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