Worksite wellness initiatives have surged in recent years. In spite of the recession, from 2009 to 2010 the number of employers sponsoring a wellness program jumped from 58% to 74%, according to a 2012 report from the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services. The report also noted that employers remain committed to investing in wellness, citing one survey in which 68% of large employers with wellness programs said they intended to expand financial resources devoted to their health and productivity management initiatives.

The reason for this is not a big mystery. With healthcare costs continuing to grow faster than the overall economy, providing healthcare benefits is a top employer challenge today. Employers have little to no control over many factors that contribute to these spiraling costs (such as an ever-expanding inventory of expensive pharmaceuticals and technologies, along with an aging population). But research indicates that most healthcare claim costs are due to lifestyle factors, where employers hope to exert quite a bit of control: Enter worksite wellness programs.

These programs, however, will not be successful without a plan sponsor’s ongoing commitment. This article examines keys to creating a valuable program, with an emphasis on effective communications to ensure employee engagement and participation.

**Why wellness and why in the workplace?**

The United States comprises an increasingly unhealthy group. We eat too much and move too little. As a result, obesity has become pandemic in adults and children. According to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, one in three adults and nearly one in five youths are now obese. The repercussion from a business perspective is the host of related chronic medical conditions—high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, type 2 diabetes—leading to high healthcare expenditures.

The indirect costs of poor employee health through lost productivity cannot be ignored. In particular, absenteeism and presenteeism (being on the job but not functioning at full capacity) are estimated to cost companies hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

The good news: Creating a work environment that’s conducive to healthier behaviors can pay off in savings for everyone. And because people spend so many of their waking hours on the job, the worksite is an optimal place to practice wellness.

**Defining a wellness program**

One universally accepted definition of a wellness program has yet to emerge. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) offers this simple description: a program offered by an employer that is designed to promote health or prevent disease.

The list of potential features to include is broad. Cornerstones of many programs include health risk assessments, biometric screenings (blood pressure, cholesterol, etc.), and lifestyle intervention programs for weight control, tobacco cessation, or exercise. Other common components historically folded under healthcare plans such as chronic condition management programs and employee assistance programs (EAPs) are now often interwoven with wellness initiatives. Changes in the work environment, gym membership discounts, and cafeteria subsidies also promote healthy behavior. Incentives for participation are on the rise.

Health-based wellness programs must comply with a number of federal and state requirements, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). The HIPAA wellness rules are part of the existing HIPAA nondiscrimination rules, which prohibit a group health plan from discriminating based on an individual’s health status, with two...
exceptions—benign discrimination or meeting certain HIPAA wellness criteria. These rules are complex and changing under the ACA, especially where incentives are involved. Although the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Treasury have now published a final rule on incentives for nondiscriminatory wellness programs in group health plans, employers are waiting for further guidance from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Thus, employers sponsoring or intending to sponsor wellness programs should include legal counsel in any plan design discussions.

Components of success
Research shows that investing in employee wellness programs makes good financial sense, if they are done right. Comprehensive, strategically integrated, and well implemented programs have been shown to yield impressive returns on investment—as high as 6:1 in one study. Depending on the objectives and program design, savings can be attributed to reduced medical care costs, improved productivity, or lower turnover.

Building an effective employee wellness program does not happen overnight; it requires a strong commitment from an employer and appropriate coordination of many components. Some keys to success include:

- Visible, consistent support from all levels of leadership;
- A strategic vision with clear, measurable goals;
- A culture and environment of wellness aligned with company policy and priorities;
- Diverse services targeted to preferences and learning styles of various groups (genders, ages, conditions, stages of change, jobs, etc.);
- Incentives that are meaningful and motivate employees to be personally accountable for their own choices;
- Challenging goals and social connections to inspire ownership; and
- Engaging communications.

Elements of effective communication
The most important ingredient of a program’s success is participation. It doesn’t matter how many best practices are in place if employees aren’t moved to participate. One essential key to employee engagement is communication. Just like other employee benefits, company wellness programs will be appreciated and used only if properly communicated.

Here are nine key strategies to help you meet this goal.

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE
The goal of health promotion is behavior change, and reversing unhealthy habits that may have been built over many years is not easy. An effective change strategy calls for knowing your audience—what motivates them, potential obstacles, and tools they need for support.

Surveys and focus groups are a useful way to uncover what is most relevant for your employees and their families. (Involving family members is critical—dependent healthcare costs are a sizable factor.) Once the top areas of need and interest are clear, as well as potential barriers to participation, you can target strategies to address them.

Asking for opinions and input serves another important purpose—nurturing a sense of pride and ownership in the program. The most engaging communication is interactive, with ideas and information flowing both ways.

Be sure to clearly state survey/focus group objectives from the outset, letting employees know how the research will be used. You don’t want to imply sweeping changes unless that’s your intent. Acknowledge the value of their input and be serious about acting on the results—or risk having disgruntled employees.

2. CREATE AND PROMOTE A BRAND THAT IS UNIQUELY YOURS
The best brands inspire recognition, enthusiasm, and loyalty. Once you have a positive, action-oriented campaign, branding it will help the program capture—and keep—people’s attention.

Your wellness program name and graphic look should align with and reflect the organization’s identity and values. You want to infuse the program with a sense of excitement so that people want to be a part of it. Engage employees and invite participation from the start by having a contest, with healthy prizes, to name the program.

A strong brand also conveys commitment, sending a message that the program is here to stay and worth attention as well as involvement.

3. FULLY INTEGRATE WELLNESS WITH OTHER COMPANY EFFORTS
An employee wellness program that is woven into the fabric of the company will have more reach and influence than one that stands alone. Flu shots and gym discounts are not enough! For depth and breadth, integrate wellness efforts across multiple dimensions—the company vision and strategy, business policies, benefits programs, performance goals and objectives, communication strategies, worksite environments, and even the vending machines. A ubiquitous presence will increase visibility, build employee trust, and sanction participation.
One practical example in an office setting is to take ergonomics seriously—develop a program and make it an integral part of your policy, environment, and culture. Recent research on inactivity is showing that extended sitting is unhealthy, slowing the body’s metabolism in ways that lead to risk factors for heart disease and type 2 diabetes. What’s more surprising, these deleterious effects appear to happen even in those who are otherwise active. If much of your staff sits at desks, explore ways to counteract extended inactivity: Allow standing desks, encourage walking meetings, put a treadmill or stair climbing machine in the break room, host daily stretch sessions. Make movement and proper mechanics a priority.

4. **TAKE A HOLISTIC APPROACH**
Defining your strategy holistically will also contribute to a broader wellness platform. Defining wellness in a broader context is important because people are not merely one-dimensional, nor is the path to wellness. Take stress, for example. Factors as diverse as diet, exercise, mental health treatment, social support, and spirituality have been shown to increase stress resilience—which can exert positive effects on the body’s immune, cardiovascular, hormonal, and nervous systems as well as improve emotional well-being.

5. **GIVE WELLNESS A HOME**
Create an online repository to keep resources accessible to employees and family members from work and home. The easier information is to access, the more it will be used.

Whether a wellness portal is part of a company intranet or on an external website, make it the central place for announcements, print materials, calendars of upcoming events, and web links to health and wellness providers. If it offers the capability for social networking, all the better. A culture of wellness thrives in an atmosphere where tips and stories are shared.

You may have various health promotion materials and tools already available through benefit vendors and suppliers, but are they scattered and therefore not highly promoted or used? If this sounds familiar, an audit of existing materials is worthwhile. Once you have an organized inventory, you can post and promote existing materials and resources on the web portal.

6. **USE A VARIETY OF MEDIA TO APPEAL TO ALL GROUPS**
Because we all absorb information differently, providing diverse learning opportunities is important. The best communication approaches appeal to all types of learners through the use of a broad spectrum of media—print, electronic, video, audio, and face-to-face interaction.

Whether through email or social and business networking service websites, all demographics are surfing the web. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 80% of Internet users look online for health information and 52% of smartphone owners have used their phone to look up health or medical information. In another survey, health-related applications were found to be employees’ third most popular phone app. These wellness-related apps covered monitoring exercise, logging and tracking food and caloric intake and biometric data (such as blood pressure, weight, glucose levels), and meal planning.

Print may seem old-school, but in certain situations, mailing communications or providing hard-copy information (such as brochures or tips) makes better strategic sense. For example, when a communication requires action, mailing to employees’ homes can be the best way to ensure that family members also receive key messages.

Face-to-face interaction gets results, too. Whether via an onsite yoga class or phone calls with a wellness coach, personalized, one-on-one interaction helps boost participation.

7. **HELP PEOPLE PROGRESS THROUGH THE STAGES OF CHANGE**
A good wellness communication strategy helps people progress through the various stages of behavior change. Employees move toward wellness through a cycle that considers their readiness for change.

For example, someone who has not yet even thought about changing her behavior must become aware of her unhealthy risk factors and the positive benefits changes can bring before she can move forward. Someone in a later stage of preparing for change is ready to learn and practice skills to gain confidence. These individuals will benefit more from communications targeted to their stage of change.

8. **KEEP IT SIMPLE, CLEAR, AND CONSISTENT**
As attention spans shrink, communication is more relevant when short and sweet. Use these simple guidelines to reach today’s skimmers and scanners:

- Write short sentences and use familiar rather than clinical terms.
- Use bullets for lists rather than paragraphs with clauses.
- Break up text with headings and subheadings.
- Insert tables, charts, or graphs to show numbers visually.
- Replace words with an image or photo when possible.

Inconsistent communication can be confusing and hard to follow; for greater impact, have a standard messaging, formatting, and graphic look across all media. A style guide can help ensure consistency, especially if you have a variety of staff working on different communication pieces.
9. USE THE POWER OF THE PERSONAL

Human beings are social animals. We respond to personal stories. That’s why testimonials are so powerful. When someone shares how he lost 50 pounds, we feel empowered to reach our healthy weight. Wellness champions also play a vital part, serving as role models who inspire others to healthy behavior. A message becomes particularly powerful when leadership is willing to prominently tell their stories; that kind of visibility has tremendous influence on building a true culture of wellness.

Highlight success stories in newsletters and at company meetings. Try to include voices from each stage of change to capture the widest audience.

Personal stories help cultivate community—they’re the power behind social networking sites’ popularity. Social support helps people stick with healthier behaviors, whether avoiding sweets or walking at lunchtime.

Wellness for the future

Many Americans are realizing they could and should do more to improve their health. And with the health reform law providing a green light to wellness programs, now is a good time to plan for a new or expanded program at the workplace. With key regulations in place to move forward on some types of wellness incentives, employers contemplating a program have a golden opportunity to reap the benefits of healthier employees.

Sharon Stocker is an employee communication consultant in Milliman’s Seattle office. Contact her at sharon.stocker@milliman.com.

This article was peer reviewed by Denise Foster, employee communication practice leader in the Seattle office.