



# Talking about health

## How to encourage healthier behavior in your employees

Employees are a company's greatest assets — but their health issues can dramatically affect the workplace. Employees who aren't healthy have lower productivity and higher health costs. The cost of health care has a major impact on a company's bottom line, says Carla M. Flamm, account manager III at HealthLink.

According to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (CDC):

- Four of the 10 most expensive health conditions for U.S. employers — high blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes and chest pain — are related to heart disease and stroke.
- Work-related stress is the leading workplace health problem and a major occupational health risk, ranking above physical inactivity and obesity.
- Productivity losses linked to employees who miss work cost employers \$225.8 billion, or \$1,685 per employee, each year.
- Full-time workers who are overweight or obese and have other chronic health problems miss about 450 million more days of work each year than healthy workers.
- A 1 percent reduction in excess weight and high blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol levels has been shown to save \$83 to \$103 annually in medical costs per person.

### How does encouraging healthy behaviors specifically benefit employees?

Employers have a responsibility and unique opportunity to promote individual health and foster a healthy work environment.

There are many reasons why people don't take an active approach to their health. They may not know how or may lack the necessary tools. Providing relevant information and resources encourages employees to take personal responsibility for their health.

## How does this benefit the employer?

As a result of your efforts, you can reduce health care costs. Plus, healthier employees equal greater productivity, higher morale and less absenteeism.

As employers of all sizes recognize these benefits, they are offering more wellness programs to their employees. According to the CDC, in 2014, 73 percent of companies with three-199 employees and 98 percent companies with 200 or more employees offered at least one wellness program as part of their health benefits.

## When it comes to encouraging healthy behaviors, what are some best practices?

Senior leadership must drive the program. Some of the most common offerings include smoking cessation, discounts on gym memberships and distribution of monthly/quarterly reminders on relevant health related topics (i.e. healthy eating, stress management, self-care).

Many employers think about individual actions like quitting smoking, but you should also consider strategies designed to influence the overall work environment, not just one employee.

## Does it matter how you communicate, and how can you ensure this is actually effective?

You'll want to use the appropriate communication channels that fit your employee audience. Some examples include Intranet, posters, payroll stuffers and lunch-and-learns.

In order to ensure your communication doesn't come across as lecturing or become one more piece of information that nobody looks at, you should create a wellness committee/team. This team from all levels of management can encourage feedback and help create a supportive work environment.

## Why should you measure your effectiveness?

Measuring the effectiveness of your communication is just as important as delivering. Change rarely happens overnight. You'll want to set realistic objectives and goals, and then determine if those goals were met and develop next steps.

In order to achieve engagement, employees must receive regular and effective communications, which are timely and relevant. It is critical that the employer determines how well the program has been received — listen to your staff and change your program activities if your employees are not engaged.

