Five Reasons Your Workplace Wellness Program Might Be Failing
And How to Get It Back on Track

More and more employers are implementing wellness initiatives with lofty goals in mind. They set out to create healthier, happier populations and increase workforce productivity — all while lowering per-employee healthcare costs and saving gobs of money. And while a workplace wellness program can start out with the best of intentions, it can sometimes end with lackluster results — budgets wasted on excessive incentives, little to no engagement after the first few months, and zero positive impact on employee morale, culture, productivity and everything else we desire to gain from our wellness efforts.

So, is workplace wellness hopeless? Not at all. But here are five reasons a wellness program might fail — and some tips on how to avoid becoming a workplace wellness casualty.

The Games Aren’t Really Games
“Gamification” is so 2010. Lots of organizations tried to gamify wellness, said their “oohs” and “ahhs,” and then quit innovating. But the “games” aren’t really games — they’re typically just simple challenges, usually with a “get more XXX and you win” approach. There’s no strategy, no loss-aversion, no true gaming mechanics. One-dimensional, steps-based contests may promote short-term participation for a subset of the population, but no one wants to do the same contest over and over again, nor does one contest suit everyone. If I’m a marathon runner, I don’t care about a “walking challenge.” If I haven’t worked up a sweat in 15 years, I’m not going to join a running or steps-based contest. Contests or games have to be relevant and personalized, and you have to mix it up.

Solution: Make the games more interesting and social. Implement an easy-to-use platform that includes a multitude of games and other interactive, engagement-driven wellness tools — building social contagion through competition, cooperation, camaraderie and friendly rivalry. The focus should remain on actual long-term habit improvement instead of short-term activity completion, promoting continued participation in future contests and challenges. That does not mean longer contests. In fact, any challenge that lasts longer than four weeks is likely to lose engagement.

Programs Are Too Focused on Incentives
A common complaint in the wellness industry is that employees dive in, do what it takes to get their goodies, and then they’re out. That’s not improving long-term health habits. If your goal as an employer is to truly achieve health habit improvement (and the cost savings that come with it), it’s imperative to rethink the emphasis that your program places on incentives — especially if it’s focusing too heavily on cash incentives (and/or coercive punishments, such as premium penalties or dropped coverage).

Solution: Fix the root of the problem by improving the actual wellness program. Make it more inclusive, more engaging and more encouraging of actual health-habit improvement, so that people are engaging for reasons other than the incentives. Make it socially interactive and fun to participate in so that rewards become an ancillary “bonus” instead of a necessity to force utilization and conformity. Improving long-term health habits will lead to the health improvements (and medical cost savings) organizations so desperately seek.

Solution #2: Be creative. If and when rewards are used, give your people some credit — not everyone’s driven solely by monetary inducements. And you better believe that those who “earn” a cash prize for completing a one-time activity (like a health assessment or biometric screening) will expect an even larger cash prize the next time you ask them to complete the same task. This cycle is not sustainable. Focus instead on recognition-based rewards (trophies, certificates), experiential rewards (vouchers for kayaking, theme park tickets, rock climbing lessons) and rewards tied to philanthropic efforts that contribute to a greater good (donations made on behalf of winners, running a 5K that supports a cause, picking up litter on the roadside). And, with this approach, punishments for
non-conformity become pointless — saving already overburdened wellness administrators from having to put on that dreaded bad-guy hat.

**Over-Rewarding the Already Healthy**

Lots of programs claim to be customizable and personalized, but not many truly are. And, since most contests are based on the same old things (steps!), and most incentive plans are based on healthy outcomes (BMI<25), the already healthy tend to rise to the top and win every competition (and “earn” most incentives without making any real effort). This often discourages the average Joe and Jane, for whom the program is exponentially more important, from playing along in future contests.

**Solution:** Think outside the steps-based box. Your goal should be to involve as many employees as possible — regardless of their baseline skills or abilities. Offer contests and challenges that cover a wide variety of metrics and leverage an assortment of tools and gaming mechanisms, allowing the competition to be relevant and inviting for all employees and all engagement preferences.

**Doing the Bare Minimum**

Too many organizations are still using an annual biometric screening or health assessment as a wellness program in and of itself … and expecting this bare minimum approach to drive results. Biometric screenings, health assessments and wellness coaching can be great tools for setting baselines and tracking health measurements over time, but these initiatives carry extreme limitations when implemented improperly. For starters, education on its own does not lead to action (for most of us, at least). In an effort to revive their flailing clinical initiatives, many employers are introducing annual steps campaigns but, as described in the previous section, this is not an all-encompassing or progress-driven wellbeing program.

**Solution:** Make biometrics and health assessments a small component of a more comprehensive, socially charged system. Sure, use screenings and assessments to measure your employees’ baseline stats and uncover the major/chronic issues, but don’t over-test and don’t stop when the testing’s done. Get people involved in sustainable health habit improvement through personalized, socially engaging activities. Place greater emphasis on progress than outcomes, and applaud reoccurring healthy behaviors over one-time accomplishments. Recognize achievements and use experiential or trophy-value rewards instead of boring (and ineffective) cash incentives, and watch as your program drives continuous competition and sustained self-improvement. Leverage the power of positive peer rivalries and varied competitions to get all kinds of different employee demographics involved.

After a year or so, reissue your screening or health assessment to track participants’ progress — employees who actively participated should notice improvements (in both measurable stats and in how they feel!), thus proving the program’s value and decreasing healthcare costs over time … which is the whole point, right? Bonus: you’re likely to boost employee morale and productivity in the process.

**“Doing Wellness” for the Wrong Reasons**

Over-stressing of outcomes data and ROI overshadows precious progress. While data is useful and necessary in a number of ways (giving employees a baseline with which to track improvement, tracking overall performance of the program, justifying the cost of employee wellness programming), you can’t expect drastic health outcomes in the first couple of years of a wellness program. That’s especially true when most programs start with an assessment, screening and risk-based coaching. And particularly when overall claims analysis is subject to so many external contributing factors besides just the quality of the wellness program. It takes time and lots of strategic planning to establish an effective program. Rushing and focusing on the wrong things makes for a recipe for failure.

**Solution:** Strive for more than “just” healthcare cost savings. Focus instead on engaging employees in social health habit improvement and expanding your definition of wellness success. Focus on Value on Investment (VOI) instead of pure ROI — look at reductions in sick time, happier people, more productive people, better sense of culture and job satisfaction, boosted retention (and recruiting abilities), improved overall morale, better focus and “presentness” at work and an improved work/life balance.

Keep these five issues (and more importantly, the solutions) in mind, and your workplace wellness program has a real shot at thriving — resulting in the productive, cost-saving workforce you’ve desired from the get-go.

*This article was authored by Danna Korn and originally appeared on TLNT.com. It was reprinted here with permission.*