

Do Wellness Programs Lower Obesity Costs?

Are the employer-sponsored wellness programs sprouting up in corporate America to get employees healthier and drive down the cost of health benefits succeeding, especially with obesity?

A study presented during “Obesity Week” has found that wellness programs are commonly setting weight goals for employees, but most often they are paired with employer health plans denying coverage for evidence-based obesity treatment.

The first-of-its-kind study, “Employer Wellness Programs, Weight Outcome Hurdles and Obesity Treatment Access,” was conducted by Ted Kyle, RPh, MBA, of ConscienHealth, and Joe Nadglowski of the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC). They examined the structure and controls of employee wellness programs when it comes to addressing America’s costly obesity epidemic.

The study surveyed more than 5,000 employees who are required

to participate in wellness programs to qualify for full health benefits. The investigators found that most employer-sponsored health benefit plans (59%) do not cover obesity treatment, even though these same employers commonly set weight, diet, and exercise goals for employees.

According to Kyle, lead author of the study, “Unfortunately, it seems that a growing number of employers figured out that carefully crafted weight or body mass index (BMI) requirements can also be an effective way of making it harder for people with obesity to enjoy the full benefits of health care coverage, saving short-term costs while hurting employees.

“Our study shows how some programs can amount to a subterfuge for discrimination,” Kyle added. “All too often, a wellness plan that sets weight goals for employees is paired with a health plan that denies coverage for evidence-based obesity treatments.

By doing this, an employer risks alienating more than one-third of its employees.”

The study reported that 67% of employees who must participate in an employer’s wellness plan to get full health coverage are required to meet weight-related wellness goals. And yet 59% say their employers do not offer any coverage for fitness training, registered dietitian counseling, obesity drugs, or bariatric surgery to help achieve a BMI under 25, which is considered healthy.

“Employers should avoid BMI targets as the basis for any financial penalty or incentive, and instead reward employees for engaging in specific behaviors,” stated Dr. Adam Tsai. “Corporations need to encourage employees to maintain healthy eating habits, increase exercise and participate in weight management programs.” ■

Additional source: HR.BLR.com.

Quick Ideas

Avoiding Critical Mistakes

The following are some critical mistakes made by supervisors when dealing with employees in trouble at work:

❖ *Critical mistake #1* – Failing to set clear expectations or to regularly enforce them;

❖ *Critical mistake #2* – Letting problems you’re aware of fester before addressing them;

❖ *Critical mistake #3* – Taking the matter personally;

❖ *Critical mistake #4* – Waiting too long for professional help, such as from an EAP;

❖ *Critical mistake #5* – Failing

to recognize the importance of due process; and

❖ *Critical mistake #6* – Unwillingness to see a problem through to resolution. ■

Sources: Bob Gilson, a retired government labor and employee relations director; and FedSmith (www.fedsmith.com).

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

17 years of service!

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supporting EAP professionals

Bridging the Generation Gap Third in a series on technology & EAPs

By John C. Pompe, Psy.D., SPHR and Dave Sharar, Ph.D.

Two members of a workgroup – a 55-year-old sales manager and a 27-year-old account executive – carry identical mobile phones. They are equally adept at using the Internet and social media for their daily business functions. Gone, apparently, is the “digital divide” that existed in the workplace.

But a closer look reveals some fundamental generational differences in how each uses the technology. The 55 year old has adapted these tools to improve his work, while the younger employee has been relying on these tools for years. There’s a big difference between adapting a new tool and embedding it in one’s life.

Millennials are Different

This fundamental difference is borne out by studies of “Millennials,” the 18-35 year olds who currently comprise 36% of the workforce and will make up 75% of employees by 2025. One of the defining characteristics of this generation is their affinity for sharing personal experiences via social media.

Millennials are also smart consumers. They are very discerning about the information put in front of them. This makes engaging this group a real challenge. More than ever, communication in the work-

“Employee assistance programs are steeped in history. This is both our strength and a potential risk. While Millennials are slowly ‘taking over’ the workforce, roughly 70% of EA professionals are older than 50.”

thinkers have the potential to be game-changers in the perceived value of EAP. High-tech EAPs are often more accessible and appear more relevant to a younger generation that has generally resisted traditional EA programs and services.

The New Meaning of Connection

Increasingly flexible modern workplaces are seeing the impact

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of digital lifestyles. We are at the same time connected and detached as never before. Employees send daylong streams of emails and instant messages to their co-workers in adjacent cubes. Employers are noticing social detachment while enjoying the fruits of employees' 24/7 connectivity.

The jury is still out on the socio-cultural impact of this trend. Yet we are starting to see workplace behaviors that lead to performance problems, as many Millennials struggle in workplaces where interpersonal skills are required and valued. This cultural gap can leave older supervisors and younger employees at odds over how to communicate and best engage with peers and customers.

Younger employees want to be connected to everyone, all the time. Just don't call them on the phone; don't expect face-to-face meetings. Phone calls are the new handwritten letter. Receiving unanticipated calls is an intrusion from a bygone era. Even email is now viewed as inefficient and used mostly for mass communications and sending attachments.

Since EAP is fundamentally a service rooted in social connectivity, we must recognize the changing definition of social connections. Instagram logs 8,500 "likes" per second. The average teen exchanges about 3,500 texts per month, but rarely makes phone calls.

The point is, a *good* business strategy understands customers' needs. A *successful* business will go beyond understanding and will adapt to meet customers where they are.

What This Means for EAPs

Employee assistance programs are steeped in history. This is both our strength and a potential risk.

While Millennials are slowly "taking over" the workforce,

roughly 70% of EA professionals are older than 50. This age disparity does not inherently result in a disconnection between providers and consumers ...but the discrepancy should make us think. Our field certainly has made significant adjustments as the definition of EAP has changed. In spite of these developments, many EAPs' marketing materials look an awful lot like they did decades ago.

How effectively do today's EAPs align with the needs and behaviors of younger employees? This generation is used to unlimited on-demand knowledge and immediate access to others via social media.

When these employees are experiencing personal, sometimes life-threatening struggles, we *hope* they saw the message about EAP on the bulletin board. We *hope* they will choose to pick up the phone and disclose their problem to a stranger. We *hope* they will be willing to wait three days for a 50-minute face-to-face appointment.

We *hope* they show up. We *hope* they like the counselor and engage in the help that is offered. We *hope* they come back for another appointment. We *hope* we are helping. We *hope* EAP "works." We *hope* purchasers see value in what we are doing. That's a lot of workplace impact hinged on our hopes!

Meanwhile, the young person has already typed in "depression" or "stress" to find that Google auto fills with results containing statistics, symptoms, medications, counseling and self-help information. Instantaneously Google provides thousands of pages of information not requiring any knowledge of EAP, or placing a phone call.

EAP is a high-touch, poorly recognized benefit that relies heavily on voluntary user engagement.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE REPORT

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Our methods of access, inefficient service delivery and reliance on interpersonal intervention leave us unprepared for the next generation of workers. Our industry's aging demographic and reluctance to change present challenges.

Don't be Left Behind

EAPs of all shapes and sizes will face obstacles to embracing new processes and technologies. With budget

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Millennial-friendly Wellness – Part I

A lot has been written about the impact of Millennials – those born between 1980 and 1995 – on America's workforce. Companies seeking to engage them often focus on their tech savvy, their teamwork bias, and their desire for work/life balance.

An Aon Hewitt study reveals another way to create a Millennial-friendly culture – help them manage their health. Dr. Carmella Sebastian, also known as "Dr. Carm," says smart companies will heed this advice in light of the coming workplace demographic shift.

Millennials are very comfortable with the idea of employers being involved in their health," says Dr. Carm, a WELCOA (Wellness Council of America)-certified expert in workplace wellness. She shares components to include as either your company or a corporate client develops a workplace wellness program:

❖ **Designate a wellness champion.** As human beings, we learn by watching others and patterning our behavior after theirs. That's why Dr. Carm recommends designating a "wellness champion," someone visible and well-known throughout the organization willing to implement wellness initiatives. Be sure to choose a person who has the authority to make decisions for the program and who can obtain the necessary funding to turn ideas into reality.

"In most cases this will be your CEO or chief medical officer, but not always," Dr. Carm says. "If

your CEO is not game for becoming a wellness champion, have them appoint someone who is."

❖ **Form a wellness committee.** Your wellness champion can't be everywhere all the time, so find others who share the same vision and who are also willing to carry the wellness torch forward. Make sure to include all age ranges – Millennials included – in this group.

"Don't choose a group solely composed of 'health nuts' who are running marathons," advises Dr. Carm. "Be sure to also pick some people who have struggled with wellness behaviors. They will be easier for most people to relate to."

❖ **Know your population.** Health care and its associated costs differ dramatically from industry to industry and from organization to organization. Before you get the wellness ball rolling, you need to know what you're up against. Are your employees mostly sedentary? Are there a lot of smokers? Does your company provide a gym where the majority of employees exercise on a daily basis? All of these things will affect health care costs.

Consider holding a health fair (blood pressure, cholesterol level, height and weight, etc.) that will reveal what the wellness program should focus on. Since Millennials place a high value on quantifiable data, you'll probably have an especially enthusiastic response from them.

❖ **Assess your company's culture.** The assessment should answer questions such as: Are the stairs available and easily accessed for use? Is every celebration accompanied by a cake... or a veggie tray? What kind of snacks are in the vending machine? Ask what your employees would like to do and how interested they are in improving their health. Make the survey anonymous, and you'll get honest answers. ■

NEXT MONTH: More components are presented.

Additional source: HR and Employment Law News.

Resources

📖 *Shutting Up*, by Eric Wagner, www.shuttingup.com. This resource is a quick-start guide that rapidly and accessibly covers the essential skills that good managers need to lead their teams effectively.

📖 The *Kaiser Family Foundation* recently released its 2013 employer health benefits survey, a comprehensive report that includes specifics on wellness programs, including EAP. Visit: <http://kff.org/private-insurance/report/2013-employer-health-benefits/>. ■

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About the Concussion Coach

The Concussion Coach is a mobile application (app) created by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense for people who have experienced a concussion or mild to moderate traumatic brain injury (TBI). The app is designed to support treatment with a health care professional by providing patients with portable, convenient tools to learn about their injury and cope with its symptoms.

TBI has been common in recent military conflicts. Every patient is

different: TBI can come with emotional challenges (e.g., getting angry more easily), physical problems (e.g., headaches), and cognitive issues (e.g., trouble concentrating).

Concussion Coach features include:

- ❖ Tools and relaxation exercises for managing problems associated with TBI;

- ❖ A self-assessment for measuring symptoms, with feedback and graph;

- ❖ Education about TBI and options for professional treatment; and

- ❖ Immediate access to crisis resources, personal contacts, and professional health care.

Concussion Coach is available now for iOS, and will be available for Android in late 2014. ■

Editor's note: Story ideas for this column should be directed to mike.jacquart@impacttrainingcenter.net.

On the Job

What You Need to Know about Social Media Etiquette

By Margaret Page

Before there was LinkedIn, you wouldn't have dreamt of asking a new acquaintance to buy something from you just minutes after you met. Just like offline networking, building relationships online follows the same basic etiquette rules.

- ❖ **Be professional.** On Twitter, don't be the egg; post a professional photo of yourself on your profile. This holds true on all social media sites. A business colleague should recognize you from your online picture. Include information about yourself. Your social media profiles are the equivalent of your business card, so be sure you keep it updated as your professional information changes.

Always keep your basic contact information updated and link to your other professional profiles.

- ❖ **Introduce yourself.** Want people to get a sense for who you are? Post interesting, value-added content on your social media accounts to showcase your professional expertise. This is especially true with LinkedIn; when you update your status with useful information, you're building trust among your network – opening doors for introductions to new connections.

- ❖ **Be authentic.** One of the biggest mistakes people make when connecting on LinkedIn or Facebook is not personalizing the message in the invitation. Swap out the default message with something like, "George. I really enjoy your blog at xblog.com. The leadership content you share is so valuable. I'd like to add you to my

professional network and get to know more about your business." This will let the recipient know how you found them and why you want to connect. In turn, they will know that you aren't connecting for the sake of just adding to your numbers.

- ❖ **Listen.** If you're not taking time to listen and engage with influential people (the ones you are hoping to connect with), you're missing an opportunity. Choose a handful of key people you want to build a business relationship with, read what they are posting, and where there is an opportunity for you to add value – jump in! ■

Margaret Page is a recognized etiquette expert, speaker and coach, who helps people and organizations be more professional. Visit her website at <http://etiquettepage.com/>

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constraints and minimal profit margins, vendors may struggle to invest in new technologies.

It often isn't easy to attach a dollar value to innovation. However, if creativity escapes us or we remain entrenched in historical practices, EAPs will lose their value of early prevention and intervention. Even if we make the best pizza in town, people may still pass us by for the one they can order from via their smart phones. ■

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Editor's note: A version of this article appeared in the 3rd quarter 2014 issue of the "Journal of Employee Assistance."



Editor's Notebook

This month marks the third, and last in a series on technology and EAPs.

In this newsletter, John Pompe and Dave Sharar discuss the importance of bridging the generation gap between older workers and the younger "Millennials" who are slowly making up more and more of the workforce. One statement that particularly jumped out at me read, "There's a big difference between adapting a new tool and embedding it in one's life."

Indeed. I've learned how to use a certain amount of technology because I've needed to as part of my job. But outside of maybe Facebook, I can't say I've really "embedded" any of it into my everyday life. Because I'm in my 50s and know what it's like to *not* have this stuff (and got by just fine

without it!) I don't have any trouble not owning a tablet, iPhone, etc. This is a stark contrast to someone in, say their 20s or early 30s who *doesn't* know what it's like to NOT have these devices and can't imagine their lives without them!

And therein lies the rub for EA professionals, going about their practices the way they always have, versus forward-thinkers that are embracing technology and thus learning how to appear more relevant to a younger generation that has generally resisted traditional EAP.

Fortunately, John and Dave offer useful insights to help "bridge this gap." Until next time.

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Getting Creative

It's time to break from the mold and get creative; to rethink how we can best deliver EAP to a new generation. Here are some steps that will help the EA field and marketplace bridge the gap.

- ❖ **EAP promotions:** Hard copy promotional materials may still have a place, but print media is declining in its usefulness and social acceptance. Email promotions are a start, but have many limitations. EAPs should consider tweets, texts, instant messages and memes. Why not have an EAP presence *specific to the given corporate client* on Facebook,

Instagram or Twitter? Even basic technology allows you to quickly build short, customized educational or promotional videos that can immediately be delivered via social media at no cost. Technology can actually be cheaper, more customized and more engaging than traditional EAP promotions.

Today's consumers are accustomed to being in the driver's seat. They are more selective in what they read, and so timing and relevance is key. Young consumers are more likely to read an electronic communication if they've requested it, it's delivered on a consistent basis, and it's from a welcome and trusted source.

Communications also need to be less formal and more meaningful. Our messages need to be personalized and made relevant in real time, focusing on the fleeting interests of a specific audience.

Social media addresses these variables. EAPs could instantaneously link the client to more robust services, such as web-pages, social media sources and mobile apps that facilitate access to clinical intervention.

- ❖ **EAP access:** Whether it's ordering pizza or seeking help, young people are less likely to

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Unwanted ‘Attitude Brands’ at Work – Part II

By Jude Bijou

When someone brings up a topic at work, such as a new task, proposal, or solution, different workers respond according to their predominant attitude. If you work in an office, everyone already knows what to expect from you, for better or for worse.

The good news is that unwanted attitude brands are easy to help people change – once you as an EA professional understand where they’re coming from. The following are four common attitude brands and how to transform them. The remaining tips were presented in part one of this two-part article.

❖ **The “Run-with-It” person.** This is an impulsive person who is ready to change directions on a dime – but not necessarily ready to think it through.

Solution: These types of workers need to recognize that knee-jerk reaction is based on fear or anxiety, and being impulsive has consequences. Sometimes we run with an idea because it feels better to be in control. This person needs to slow down and consider and evaluate ideas before jumping in a new direction. They should pick it apart, on their own time, so they can see and understand the implications. If it’s worthwhile, then they can then present the idea with calmness, and confidence.

❖ **The Evangelist.** This is the person who thinks their ideas cannot possibly be questioned.

Solution: This attitude brand has its roots in anger and an out-of-control ego. Being opinionated to the point of leveling everyone around them is a sign they have pent-up anger they haven’t dealt with. They need to recognize they are alienating their co-workers. If they want others to listen to their ideas, they must listen more and recognize that other people have important ideas worth considering.

❖ **The Rebel.** This is the person who digs his heels in and refuses to conform or cooperate when they don’t like what’s going on.

Solution: Chronic nonconformity is a combination of a desire to control and frustration at not getting one’s way. This person needs to look to appreciate the contributions of others and find value in building a better plan together. Rebels need to accept that, “People and things are the

way they are, not the way they think they should be,” and realize they will feel more connected to others if they learn to be a team player.

❖ **The Pot-Stirrer.** These folks use rumors or innuendo to pit co-workers or work teams against each other for their own entertainment.

Solution: In order to enjoy their working experience and have co-workers who consider them a friend, pot-stirrers must put their energy into helping out and making relationships better. They must resist the impulse to get their jolies at the expense of others, and praise accomplishments. ■

Jude Bijou, MA, MFT, is a respected psychotherapist, professional educator, and consultant. She is the author of the multi-award-winning book, “Attitude Reconstruction: A Blueprint for Building a Better Life.” Learn more at www.attitudereconstruction.com.

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Getting Creative cont’d from Page 3

use the phone. Mobile apps, on-demand chat, FaceTime, texting and instant messages are more effective ways to engage younger employees, particularly those related to sensitive personal issues.

❖ **Methods of intervention:** We can’t discount the evidence-based value of the interpersonal, corrective emotional experience delivered by face-to-face counseling. But a 6-session EAP model is meaningless to a 22-year-old demanding immediate answers and on-demand access to his therapist via text. Telephones and in-person services may prove to be barriers to younger employees’ seeking help.

Tele-health is increasingly commonplace in the world of

EAP. But in order for EAPs to remain preventative or primary care in nature, EA professionals need to alter their practice. Short answers to questions via text, IM chat sessions and emails are efficient and inexpensive ways to address basic needs. Webinars, podcasts, web forums and social media groups may all be ways to deliver clinical interventions that are effective at addressing problems and better at reaching younger clients.

❖ **E-tools:** There are numerous web and mobile app-based tools related to EAP on the horizon. But to date most electronic tools in health, wellness and EAP realms have not demonstrated value beyond their novelty.

Work-life websites often lack functionality and see low utilization. Current health gaming has thus far failed to connect with unmotivated and chronic patients, populations who are the most targeted groups.

Digital and mobile technology must first be functionally *relevant* and *enhance access* to EAP services. They must also deliver consistently novel and meaningful content with elements of social interaction. The good news is that developers *are* in fact busy creating such tools. (In the meantime, opportunities already exist in the form of social media outlets that already capture the attention of millions of people every day.) ■

– John Pompe and Dave Sharar

Workplace Survey

Managing Meetings more Effectively

Remember your last hour-long meeting? Chances are 15 minutes of it went to waste, suggests a new Robert Half Management Resources survey. Professionals interviewed believe 25% of the time they spend in meetings is unproductive. Respondents feel the most common mistakes meeting leaders make are not sticking to an agenda and lacking a clear purpose for the gathering.

Robert Half Management Resources (www.roberthalf.com) offers the following five tips for leading effective meetings:

❖ **Review the invite list.** Limit attendees to those participants who

have a stake in the outcome of items on the agenda. Indicating “required” versus “optional” attendance lets employees know when their participation and input is necessary and can help them prioritize their time.

❖ **Keep on track.** Good leaders ensure the agenda and any supporting materials are accessible and publicized in advance, and that the discussion remains focused. Be prepared to cut off or table an unrelated conversation until a later time.

❖ **Plan accordingly.** If it’s an in-person meeting, make sure there are enough seats in the room for

everyone. Leave time for setup and pre-meeting technology challenges that may arise.

❖ **Monitor time.** Keep it short and sweet. If a standing meeting is booked for an hour each week, but it usually lasts just 30 minutes, consider rethinking the time allotted. If there’s not much to discuss, consider using email or a memo as an alternative to a meeting.

❖ **Finish strong.** If anyone leaves the meeting wondering what the next steps are, you haven’t done your job as meeting host. Allow time for people to ask questions, and determine who has responsibility for each follow-up item. ■