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Most companies offer some sort of wellness plan, but not everyone takes advantage of them. I talked with a leading wellness consulting and management company to tell us how we can do better.



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Many times, 70 percent isn't a great number. If our kids came home with a 70 on a test or homework, they might get the X-box taken away. No personal trainer ever screamed, "Push it! Push it! Gimme 70 percent!"

But in terms of company-sponsored wellness plans, 70 percent is actually a pretty good number. According to a recent *Forbes* article, "70 percent of U.S. employers currently offer a general wellness program, up from 58 percent in 2008, when the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) first surveyed companies on preventive health and wellness benefits." According to SHRM, that number should go up to almost 80 percent by the end of 2016.

80 percent...still not in the personal trainer mantra zone, but hey if our kid came home

with an 80, he might just get the X-box back.

Wellness programming has become a big part of the human resources picture in recent years. Why? Because of the rather huge return on investment (ROI). Numerous industry studies have shown that for every \$1.00 invested in wellness, it yields an ROI of \$1.50. That's a 150 percent return. When the wellness program in question targets chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity, the ROI increases to \$3.80, for a 380 percent return. Not bad.

In recent years, however, there are concerns that wellness program participation has been perpetuating the "carrot" and "stick" attitude surrounding employer health care insurance. As a way to curb the skyrocketing costs of insurance, many employees are being instructed to undergo health screenings and enroll in wellness programs. If they enroll in the wellness program and maintain an optimum health designation, often referred to as a "tier 1" designation, then they often

enjoy the "carrot" of lower premiums. If they don't enroll or even if they do and have conditions such as being overweight, have high cholesterol or are a smoker, then they get beat with the "stick" of higher premiums.

Wellness programs are as unique as the companies that use them. Many organizations turn to wellness program consultants in order to implement the most beneficial plan for their situation. "Cooper Wellness Strategies partners with businesses and other organizations who believe if people are their greatest asset, then healthier people are invaluable," said to Melanie Algermissen, Vice President, Operations for Cooper Wellness Strategies, which is based in Dallas. "Our mission at Cooper is to improve the quality and quantity of life of as many people as possible worldwide, so our focus with businesses is on employing the proper strategies to drive healthy change."

One of the ways that Cooper Wellness Strategies helps organizations improve the health of

their workers is to first identify what is holding them back from participating in their current wellness plans. "Most often, employees don't take advantage of their company's wellness benefits because the structure, programs, or incentives provided aren't of intrinsic value to them," said Algermissen. "We focus a great deal on individuals' readiness to change behaviors because, more often than not, it is very difficult to motivate a person to engage in programs if they're not ready and willing to make healthier changes. It is most critical that an individual is willing to make that change in their lifestyle. Most people think 'What is in it for me?'"

What's your one thing?

Perhaps the most interesting point that Algermissen made about the success or failure of a wellness program is that it comes down to one thing. "Fitness facilities and behavioral education are important benefits that we help employers to provide. Additionally, employers are very interested in incentive design and overall management of their program. Ultimately, we help individuals to identify their "one thing," the most important behavior or risk factor they can change to improve their health. Research has shown that when people try to change a single behavior at a time, the likelihood that they will retain that



habit for a year or more is better than 80 percent. When they try to tackle two behaviors at once, their chances of success are less than 35 percent. When they try for three behaviors or more, their success rate plummets to less than 5 percent," Algermissen said.

But that "one thing" doesn't stop with the employee; it also needs to be in place at the organizational level as well. "The most significant thing a company can do to improve their employees' health through wellness benefits is to create a supportive culture that lives and breathes healthy habits," said Algermissen. "People are so influenced by peers and their social settings, and the workplace is a primary social setting for much of a person's life. With a commitment to wellbeing, engaged leaders, healthy conversations, and healthy behaviors available, employees are much more likely to demonstrate healthy behaviors."

Fatherly advice

Regardless of whether we get more serious about our health and wellness through our jobs or on our own, being healthier will make us perform better and be more engaged at work. "Since the early 80s, Cooper Aerobics has been working with corporations around the world taking principles and knowledge to improve the quantity and quality of life," said Tyler Cooper, MD, MPH, CEO and President of Cooper Aerobics. "We take the philosophy of my father, Dr. Kenneth Cooper, 'It is easier and less expensive to maintain good health than it is to regain it once it is lost,' into corporate America. We provide strategic consulting to improve the health of both top executives and their employees, helping companies achieve maximum benefit with minimum impact to the bottom line. It's not what we think, but what we know based on almost 50 years of science and research here at Cooper Aerobics."