

Coaches help get employees into the health, fitness game

Online assistance adds convenience, boosts effectiveness

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With the cost of health care in the United States continuing to rise, more employers are choosing to supplement or overhaul benefit plans with options that allow employees to assume more control of their health care expenses. High-deductible plans, health savings accounts and wellness programs are some of the tactics being used by companies to control increasing health care costs.

But a recent study by Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a leading human capital and financial management consulting firm, concluded that a combination of these tactics is required for plan participants to think more critically about health care spending habits.

While high-deductible plans and health savings accounts are financial-based incentives, wellness programs promote behavioral changes that lead to a healthier lifestyle. This reduces the likelihood that employees will need expensive medical treatment in the future. In addition, near-term benefits of improved employee health include increased productivity and morale.

But the fact is that for most people, achieving and maintaining positive behavioral changes leading to improved health can be very challenging without some form of personalized assistance, or health coaching.

HEALTH COACHING WORKS

Various studies have proven that decreases in employee health risks are significantly related to participation in behavioral health coaching. According to research published in the

Archives of Internal Medicine in 2003, coaching was demonstrated as a highly effective and superior means of reducing total cholesterol and high blood pressure compared to simply prescribing medication to treat these conditions. This is because coaching programs give individuals the opportunity to interact with life coaches and develop personalized, goal-oriented action plans.

In many cases, goals range from losing weight, getting in shape or quitting smoking to improving stress management, enhancing parenting skills or building better personal relationships. Not only do the coach and individual work together to set realistic and achievable goals but the coach provides support throughout the process in the form of reference and education materials, as well as accountability and effective tracking of progress.

TAKING IT ONLINE

Whether face-to-face, telephonic or online, the fundamentals of life coaching are the same - dedicated professional coaches helping individuals improve the quality of their life. However, in today's world of hectic scheduling, consumers have come to value the convenience of receiving information and assistance on demand.

Using e-mail and real-time chat technology, online coaching can be more direct in helping individuals acquire information, set goals, develop action plans and gain the support needed to make and maintain lifestyle changes. In addition to one-on-one coaching, individuals also have access to information selected by their coach specifically for them, including streaming videos, Web links and news articles.

Online coaching offers individuals the opportunity to access help whenever they want it and wherever they choose versus having to schedule an appointment at a specific time and location. Often individuals will begin to experience a sense of relief by sending an e-mail to their coach with the question, request or update

— even before the coach has an opportunity to respond.

In addition to convenience, online coaching makes more efficient use of time for both the coach and the client.

WIN-WIN ALTERNATIVE

Study after study has shown that unhealthy personal behaviors, such as smoking, poor nutrition and lack of exercise contribute to a significant portion of today's health care costs. Most of us, if asked whether we recognize the value of long-term value of achieving a healthier lifestyle, would reply with a resounding "yes!" However, just as many of us would follow up with a statement to the effect of "but I just don't know where I'd find the time to make it happen."

Coaching is an effective tactic in helping individuals achieve and maintain positive behavioral changes and enhanced quality of life. As a result, many companies are working with large health insurers to offer coaching services, and specifically online coaching, to their employees as part of comprehensive health care plans.

In doing so, employers hope to achieve reductions in health care costs, turnover and use of disability and sick leave. Those programs that are tailored to meet the individual employee's needs and their willingness to change are the programs that will achieve the highest level of effectiveness and return on investment for the employer.

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