

The Case for Expanding Wellness Beyond the Physical

Client's wellness programs that only focus on physical fitness may need to rethink their approach.

By expanding wellness offerings to include programs that support workers' mental and financial wellness, employer clients can increase the overall wellbeing of their workforce. Newly released data from Optum and the National Business Group on Health shows that employees who are offered programs that address most or all of the five aspects of wellbeing — physical, mental, financial, social and community — are significantly more likely to say their job performance is excellent, have a positive impression of their employer, and recommend their company as a place to work.

Over the last decade, workplace wellness initiatives have evolved beyond health risk assessments, physical fitness and nutrition programs. Many programs now include resources to address mental health, financial wellness and substance abuse.

“[Employers] must commit to looking beyond clinical health outcomes,” says Chuck Gillespie, CEO of the National Wellness Institute, speaking at a webcast from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans. “You want employees to be fulfilled both personally and professionally.”

Even though some clients address financial, social and community health, most still focus on physical and mental health.

However, there are benefit trends that address wellness beyond physical fitness. The emergence of financial wellness benefits — such as early pay access, student loan assistance and retirement saving plans — may help

employees feel less stressed and more financially secure, which has shown to improve overall health.

But having a good wellness program in place isn't enough — employers also have to make sure that the offerings are inclusive and personalized, and that the programs have successful participation and engagement rates.

“These programs need to be adapted to who you are,” Gillespie says. “Customization has to be a key factor of what you're looking at, because everybody is not going to fit inside your box.”

Effective wellness programs use both health and wellness data points and best practices, while keeping an eye on developing trends. Multi-dimensional wellness — looking at aspects such as social and community — can help companies understand the needs of their employees better.

“Employers need to better recognize personal choices, and if the employees are in an environment where they are functioning optimally,” Gillespie says. “Smokers hang out with smokers; the cultural foods that you eat with family may not be nutritious; is there social isolation; do you contribute to your community. [Most benefits] are work-oriented, but for most people, their life is their home life. It's important to look at the degrees of which you feel positive and enthusiastic about your work and life.”

By Evelina Nedlund