

For Younger Professionals, Wellness Programs Are a Must

America's workers are in high demand.

Unemployment is hovering near its lowest rate in nearly 50 years. There are 1 million more job openings than job seekers. Workers are quitting at the fastest pace in 14 years—a sure sign of confidence in their ability to quickly find better opportunities.

This tight labor market is good for employees. But it creates challenges for employers who want to prevent their workers from leaving for greener pastures. Millennials now make up the largest share of the workforce — and they're particularly likely to job hop.

In past decades, companies could keep workers happy by offering high salaries and generous benefits. Competitive compensation packages are still important, of course, but alone, they aren't sufficient. Millennials now expect more from their employers. Nearly 90 percent say they'd take a pay cut to work at a company that shares their values, compared to just 9

percent of Baby Boomers. More than 70 percent want their coworkers to be like a second family.

Companies can recruit and retain these younger employees by creating holistic wellness programs that appeal to workers' interests and values.

Millennials particularly care about maintaining healthy lifestyles. They work out far more than Baby Boomers or Gen Xers. They also know that healthy living goes beyond diet and exercise — it encompasses stress reduction, sleep management, mindfulness, and even financial well-being. At WebMD Health Services, we find that employees under age 30 are the most likely to engage in employer-sponsored well-being programs.

It's important that employers do not rely on a one-size-fits-all approach to well-being programs. Millennials value personalization—from flexible work schedules that reflect the reality of a digitized, around-the-clock work life, to well-being programs with tools they can tailor to their specific lifestyle.

By reframing expectations around well-being — both in and out of the workplace — millennials have driven employers to offer creative well-being solutions. And they view these programs as essential. When properly

designed, these programs can boost employee performance, productivity, and morale.

Most employers have responded accordingly. More than 80 percent of large employers, and half of smaller employers, already sponsor at least one wellness initiative.

Companies need not install huge fitness centers to please workers. Smaller, creative initiatives work just as well, and many tap into other ways to be healthy besides burning calories.

A major online shoe retailer encourages employees to compete in financial, mental, and physical fitness challenges for quarterly prizes. A global online travel company provides workers in its U.K. office with a “wellness allowance” to spend on everything from new fitness gear to gym memberships. A multinational consultancy gives employees support systems to mitigate stress, anxiety, and depression.

Some critics argue that wellness programs aren't worth the cost to employers because they don't yield immediate savings in the form of lower insurance premiums.

These critics miss the point.

Employers frequently shell out thousands of dollars for company retreats, happy hours, and charitable causes. No one expects these initiatives to save companies money right away. Executives rightly view these initiatives as necessary expenses that help build positive workplace cultures and boost morale — thereby helping attract and retain talented workers.

Similarly, most companies view well-being programs as a valuable benefit rather than a direct cost-saver. Only 23 percent of executives say their wellness programs were designed to decrease insurance costs, according to Deloitte's 2018 Global Human Capital Trends report.

By promoting workers' well-being, employers show they value their employees, thus incentivizing them to stick around longer. The more wellness initiatives a company offers, the more likely employees will recommend it as a great place to work, according to a survey of 1,200 employees by health care firm Optum. Sixty percent of executives surveyed by Deloitte say their wellness programs improve retention.

In today's tight labor market, employees can more easily jump ship to a competitor. One in three workers considered quitting their job in the last three months.

Workplace well-being programs help limit turnover by showing employees that management cares, and by helping employees enhance their health, manage their stress, and feel more positively towards their employer.

Supporting workers' healthy lifestyles may or may not reduce health insurance costs, but it certainly helps keep those employees more present, productive, and engaged.

By Andrea Herron