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## Workplace wellness programs focus on coaching, networking

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Despite the budget-breaking economy, some companies say it pays to invest in employees' health and wellness.

Congress is considering tax breaks for firms that offer wellness programs as part of the health care reform effort — a move that could make such programs more attractive and change the wellness industry's dynamics.

While some companies are cutting back on their wellness programs as budgets get tighter, many are holding fast to their health program goals, says John Harris, chief wellness officer and senior vice president for Franklin-based Healthways Inc. (Nasdaq:HWAY), which specializes in wellness programs.

"It seems that the larger employers that have are committed to wellness have stayed committed to it," Harris says.

More than 80 percent of businesses with at least 50 employees offer some form of health promotion program, according to the Wellness Council of America.

Industry experts say wellness programs are effective and can save employers' money. Companies with effective health programs had 75 percent higher three-year total returns to shareholders and more than 20 percent higher revenue per employee, according to Watson Wyatt's "2007/2008 Staying@Work" report.

Harris notes that employers are now choosing programs with a little more scrutiny of their effectiveness.

"They're not doing the programs where it was nice to have, but they are doing more verifiable ones," he says.

That can mean fewer resources toward general employee education on healthy habits. Instead, employers might opt for individual or group coaching, which is more effective, says Phil Hadden, senior vice president of Franklin-based Gordian Health Solutions, which designs and executes wellness programs for employers.

Also, there's already an increasing emphasis on extending the definition of wellness to include an employee's mental health.

"If a person is in the middle of a divorce or taking care of an elderly parent, the last thing they care about is their cholesterol level or exercising regularly," Hadden says. "There's a recognition that, 'You're a complicated individual, there are many aspects of your life, and we have to address those.'"

Wellness programs also are looking more to social networking tools to allow program participants to interact in a relaxed way. The online networking elements are less formal than other types of coaching, but complement activities like team programs for weight loss.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than a third of Americans are overweight or obese, which contributes to a variety of health problems like diabetes and costs tens of billions of dollars annually.

Problems like obesity have a better track record with treatments through behavioral modification than medication or traditional approaches, Hadden says. The key to getting people engaged, he adds, is understanding how they interact with their health issues.

Brentwood-based CareHere LLC promotes wellness programs, such as weight-loss competitions and smoking cessation, but specializes in bringing the clinic to the worker, says President Ernest Clevenger.

Businesses offer their employees CareHere's on-site clinics to encourage check-ups and cause fewer disruptions for employees during the work week.

Rutherford County has been using CareHere for more than four years and has expanded its number of clinics.

"We feel like it's amounted to a difference in overall claim costs being mitigated, productiveness increased and people getting in and out quicker," Clevenger says.

CareHere also sends its staff into the workplace for education programs. One recent example is a health coach's visit to employees at the Rutherford County Sheriff's office.

Sonya Stephenson, Rutherford County's human resources director, says the programs benefit both the employees and the county's bottom line.

Rutherford's insurance department is working with CareHere and the county's insurance provider, Cigna, to create parameters and metrics for analyzing the overall benefit to the county, including employee turnover from health issues or costs from treating medical issues at more advanced stages, Stephenson says.

But even without specific numbers, “it's a definite benefit,” she says, noting that the clinics have caught issues like heart disease and prostate cancer at early stages when treatment is easier and more cost effective.

There also was a significant drop in absenteeism when the clinics began in 2006, a fact which Stephenson attributes in part to the efficiency with which patients are seen.

“When you have an appointment at 8:15, you are being seen at 8:15,” she says.