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Forget Me Not

How do you engage remote workers in your company's wellness program? The solution lies in getting creative.

By Carol Patton

Wednesday, May 7, 2014



Back in 2008, Sipiwe Baleka gained 15 pounds during his first two months as a long-haul truck driver for Prime Inc., in Springfield, Mo.

"I realized that if I didn't take responsibility for my health and wellness while on the road, I was going to become one of those statistics -- an obese truck driver," he says.

For the next several years, Baleka -- who's also an amateur athlete -- field-tested a wide variety of exercise and nutrition programs that truck drivers could observe while on the road. By June 2012, he developed a 13-week wellness program that helps drivers keep the pounds off and their energy up while enhancing their overall fitness.

The company's executives were so impressed that Baleka was hired in June 2012 as Prime's health-and-fitness coach for drivers. He -- not HR -- would oversee the program.

Now Baleka has an even bigger task ahead of him: Of Prime's 6,200 drivers -- roughly 25 percent are company drivers - 57 percent are obese, he says. Although less than 10 percent have completed the wellness program up to now, he suspects the program has helped boost Prime's bottom line.

Involving remote workers in wellness programs is a constant struggle for employers. Nearly 13.4 million employees (equal to 9.4 percent of the U.S. workforce) worked at least one day per week at home in 2010, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Many wellness initiatives and resources such as health fairs or corporate fitness centers are simply too expensive or time-consuming to duplicate in remote offices. But wellness programs produce a huge variety of benefits, too big to ignore.

"[Working remotely] is an inevitable pattern of work in America," says Michael Wood, senior consultant in health management at Towers Watson in Seattle. Companies need to find creative and effective ways to engage these workers in wellness initiatives.

Wood suggests using blended technologies and tools -- such as telephonic coaching, video-conferencing and even telemedicine -- to ensure remote workers can easily avail themselves of their company's wellness resources.

Some companies are pushing wellness by recruiting local employees as wellness champions, simplifying current activities so everyone can participate, or creating separate programs for remote workers. While there's no universal approach, the key is broadening communication efforts so that employees in every corner of the country realize that their health matters.

Keep On Truckin'

Wellness initiatives existed at Prime long before Baleka joined the company. However, its fitness perks -- which included a fitness gym and spa, personal trainers and massage therapists -- mostly benefitted employees at its main office.

A nontraditional program was needed, managed by someone truckers could relate to and engage with.

"Richard Simmons or Suzanne Somers are not going to motivate these drivers," he says. "Neither is a third-party health official from some clinic who has no truck-driving experience, saying, 'You need to eat fish and grilled asparagus.'"

Of the 160 truckers who enrolled in Prime's 13-week program, 104 have completed it. Participants pay \$300 up-front for a wellness kit that includes a metabolic output monitor, a watch that measures their heartbeat, program manuals and two DVDs. Drivers must also attend a one-day program orientation on their day off and can receive coaching from Baleka throughout the program.

"The philosophy was, 'In order for this company to back you, it needs to know that you're committed and that you're serious,'" he explains. "When they complete the program, their money is refunded and they get to keep all the materials and equipment."

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To help market the program, he says, truckers are invited to share their success stories at weekly safety meetings. The company's founder and president, Robert Low, also addresses his commitment to driver health at the same meetings, which are broadcast to the company's 12 terminals nationwide and recorded on CDs that are distributed to the entire fleet. Baleka also writes a fitness blog and routinely sends text messages to truckers promoting the program.

Baleka credits the program for denting the company's rising healthcare claims, which dropped by roughly 11 percent between 2011 and 2012. Likewise, absenteeism decreased by 24 percent, 90 drivers quit smoking, and another 500 drivers who didn't enroll reported that their peers who did participate inspired them to lose an average of 10 pounds.

"Delivering to remote workers the same program you have for in-house people is just not really possible," he says, explaining that his focus is not to increase participation rates, but to create healthier drivers, who, in turn, are more productive and will attract others to the program. "Therefore, you want to do whatever you can to give your employees -- whether home-based or remote -- every opportunity, every incentive to be healthy and productive."

Easy Does It

Celadon Trucking in Indianapolis was also having a hard time engaging its 2,700 company drivers in wellness activities. Recently, it revised its wellness program, making it outcomes-based, relying on body mass indexes, says Derek Doddridge, the company's HR director.

In the past, he says, all employees earned wellness points by completing health assessments, observing healthy practices each month or participating in quarterly fitness challenges. Truckers were also handed pedometers and encouraged to walk a certain number of steps each day. Depending upon their level of participation, employees received annual cash bonuses ranging from \$50 to \$750.

But the program worked on the honor system, requiring employees to sign vouchers acknowledging their participation in various health challenges. That's when the problem began.

"With 4,000 employees spread across the United States, you're asking them to drop off [vouchers] at terminals or fax them to HR," he says. "It got to the point where it was too intensive to try to track and [it became] unmanageable."

Under the new program, employees can weigh in at an on-site clinic, at their doctor's office, or at 18 different terminals nationwide. Terminal managers are trained to calculate BMI and complete driver forms that are tracked by HR, says Doddridge. Employees earn \$700 each year by maintaining a healthy BMI throughout the year or, if theirs is too high, dropping their BMI by 10 percent by year's end.

The lesson learned, he says, is that wellness programs for remote workers can't be too complicated. HR's new approach is to educate truckers on nutrition, offer realistic exercises they can do on the road and provide access to a wellness coach. The rest is up to them.

Of Celadon's 2,700 truckers, Doddridge says, almost half -- 49.7 percent -- are either overweight or obese. Worse yet, more than 34 percent are at risk for serious conditions such as heart disease or diabetes.

Meanwhile, he says, the company's 12-member wellness committee meets weekly to develop communications for remote workers.

Health information, for example, is now available at every terminal, at dispatch windows and in driver lounges, and on a website portal on the company's intranet. In the future, he says, social media will also be a delivery tool.

"We try our best across the country to include terminals in everything we do in Indianapolis, so everybody has an opportunity to feel a part of it," says Doddridge. "We're hoping participation will end up in the 35- to 40-percent range."

Constant Contact

With 36,000 employees working various shifts at more than 90 different airports, it can be hard for Southwest Airlines to drum up excitement among its workers for wellness initiatives.

<p>Newsletter Sign-Up:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Benefits</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> HR Technology</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Talent Management</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> HR Leadership</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Inside HR Tech</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> HRENow</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Special Offers</p> <p>Email Address</p> <p><input type="text"/></p> <p><input type="submit" value="Submit"/></p> <p>Privacy Policy</p>	<p>The company announced a new wellness-rewards program for 2014, which asks employees to complete a biometric screening and participate in wellness challenges in exchange for a \$150 credit applied to either their healthcare contribution or health savings account, says Kembre Roberts, Southwest's health and wellness program manager.</p> <p>Currently, remote workers such as flight attendants and pilots receive wellness-related information via several ways: closed-circuit broadcast in airport lounges, postings on Southwest's intranet and published in its in-house magazines, emails and brochures mailed to their homes.</p> <p>Other ideas were tried but didn't pan out, says Roberts. Diabetes-prevention programs were held at small, remote locations. But only a handful of employees participated, so a 16-week program is now being offered online.</p> <p>The key, she says, is finding on-site leaders to champion wellness initiatives. "When we have local leader support for our programs, they really take off very well," she says.</p> <p>So does offering wellness information in new-hire orientations. The airline offers a healthy eating course for new flight attendants. She believes there's a correlation between the amount of communication employees receive about wellness programs and how much value they're perceived as having.</p>
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HR is aiming for a 30-percent participation rate among all employees this year, she says.

"I don't think you should expect less participation from remote workers," says Roberts. "What employers might struggle with is making options flexible enough to meet the schedules of remote workers with limited visibility or communication."

Connect On Every Level

With an estimated 15,000 employees spread out among 10 states, communication is also the No. 1 challenge at Ensign

Services. The company delivers accounting, legal, HR and other support services to a variety of healthcare facilities.

Although new announcements about wellness initiatives are online, information is still sent directly to employees' homes, says Jennifer Weinstein, benefits, compensation and HRIS director at the Mission Viejo, Calif.-based company.

"We're trying to start collecting private email addresses to communicate with more of our employees," she says, adding that the three-year-old program has earned awards, ranging from being the most fit-friendly workplace to reducing risk factors among their population, from wellness and EAP vendors and the American Heart Association. HR plans to email information about the program's benefits such as vendor discounts. She says employees earn points for completing biometric screenings and health challenges that can be redeemed for gift cards or merchandise.

"Remote workers have a feeling sometimes of, 'Don't forget about me,'" Weinstein says, adding that they can complete biometric screenings at any location, request a home screening do-it-yourself kit, or be tested by their physician or a local LabCorp at no charge. "We make sure we're communicating with them even more than the employees housed at our [main] facility."

While HR actively solicits wellness champions, it's also testing a few communication tools such as Twitter and a QR code on the back cover of its wellness guide that employees can scan with their smartphones to view a mobile version of its wellness website. Still, the company believes it can do better, says Weinstein. It's forming focus groups to gather ideas and may survey remote workers with specific job titles about the program. Next year, it's considering contacting remote workers individually at specific locations to boost engagement.

"I don't think we have communication nailed down at all," she says. "I want the wellness website to be a place that employees visit once a week, not a place where they're hurrying to [redeem their health-challenge points]."

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