The New Rules of Wellness
Keeping Your Whole Organization Healthy in the New Year

Pam Mortenson
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When you think “wellness,” the first thing that typically comes to mind is diet and exercise. While these are important components of wellness, it’s important to expand this focus more broadly. Wellness has come a long way in recent years, evolving to encompass a variety of health and well-being initiatives. Including a wider array of components in your wellness program can help your employees improve their health while positively impacting your organization’s costs. In the New Year, consider retiring the old rules and introducing one or more of the new rules of wellness into your program.

Old rules: Siloed, fragmented approach
Wellness is one of a variety of benefits you provide your employees. However, if these benefits are not connected, there’s no easy way to use data from one benefit to help your other benefits be more effective. Additionally, your employees may be frustrated because they need to use a separate phone number and set of website credentials to access all of their benefits. Because your employees find these logins tough to keep track of, they may not be as engaged in the programs as you would like.

New rules: Integrated approach
Providing your employees with a service tying all of your benefits together will help the employee better understand all that you offering them and demonstrate that you care about their health and overall well-being. By integrating your benefits, they connect to one another by state-of-the-art technology with a team of experts trained to dig deeper and ask the hidden question. This allows your employees to access a holistic wellness program that focuses on their total well-being and gives them the help they need to truly improve their health.

Old rules: Diet and exercise
As mentioned, there’s so much more to wellness than just eating right and exercising regularly. But programs that are not moving beyond that do so at the risk of their employees’ well-being.

New rules: Comprehensive, holistic program
Many available programs are not moving beyond the traditional definition of wellness, meaning employees’ full range of physical/clinical, mental/emotional, financial, and work/life balance needs are not met. That’s why providing services to address the whole person in an integrated way is what most employers want to move toward. Addressing the needs of an employer’s entire population is key in driving better health and ultimately reducing health claims costs.

Old rules: One size fits all
In the past, wellness programs were often designed simply, with the same activities for the whole employee population.
New rules: Unique, customized approach
The best wellness programs available meet people where they are. Employees have different goals and starting points when it comes to eating right, being fit, losing weight, and more. They will benefit greatly from a wellness program that includes a wide variety of activities and ways to get help. For example, your wellness program could include interactive challenges, workshops, flyers and tip sheets, a robust blog filled with helpful articles, a healthy meal planner and recipe guide, health and fitness trackers, and more. It could also include online resources employees can access at anytime through a secure portal, along with telephonic and email help from experts like wellness coaches to ensure that they get the personalized guidance they need; and the opportunity to get their questions answered by a real, live person.

Old rules: The stick
Unfortunately, some incentive programs tied to wellness activities unintentionally discourage participants, penalizing employees who do not complete activities by imposing higher health premiums on them, or some other undesirable consequence.

New rules: The carrot
Rewarding employees by providing incentives for participation or meeting goals is more effective. It can be hard for even the most enthusiastic employees to find time to make healthy changes during their busy lives. Offering a meaningful reward has the potential to increase employee engagement, morale, and satisfaction. Offering to deposit money in employees' HSA, reduce their health premiums, or give cash or gift cards are rewards employees respond to positively.

Old rules: Fitness on their own time
Many wellness initiatives focused on encouraging employees to exercise on their own time outside of work; but employees with busy lives outside the workplace may find it challenging to fit in fitness during their few free hours each week.

New rules: Fitness anytime, even at work
With working hours being more flexible now than ever—due to an “always on” culture where many employees can and do, literally work from anywhere, often putting in extra time—it's unfeasible to expect that employees only exercise outside of work. Instead, give them opportunities to increase their physical activity level at work. For example, select a program that incorporates online health trackers that can sync to popular apps and devices, helping employees monitor how many steps they're walking each day. Boost participation by introducing competitions or challenges to motivate participation. If possible, offer access and/or subsidies to on-site fitness classes, a nearby fitness center or walking trails, and encourage employees to take advantage of them during lunchtime and breaks.

Old rules: Wellness apart from biometrics
Many companies are smart enough to know that both wellness and biometrics are important when it comes to lowering costs and improving health outcomes. However, to maximize both programs and opportunities to improve employees’ health, it's important that they talk to each other.

New rules: Wellness and biometrics working hand-in-hand
The best wellness programs don't work in a silo—they work hand-in-hand with a biometrics program. Biometric screenings are often the first step toward better health, and wellness programs can provide employees with the personalized guidance they need to keep improving. When an employee discovers a health issue during a screening, getting prompt treatment can lead to improved outcomes and reduced costs. Plus, when paired with a wellness coach, employees have the tools they need to make lifestyle changes to improve their health.

Old rules: Coaching or online resources
Some wellness programs offer coaching. Some offer only online resources. Neither approach meets the needs of all of your employees.
New rules: Coaching and online resources
Consider a high-touch, high-tech approach. Offering a wide range of resources and tools, and ways to access them, is the best way to meet employees where they are. Your wellness program could include live telephonic coaching, email support from coaches, text messages, and automated voice reminders, along with interactive features like challenges and workshops; and information that's accessible anytime like workshops, videos and blog articles. The best wellness programs allow employees to access the online program features anytime, anywhere through apps and mobile-optimized websites.

Old rules: Just using flyers and emails to communicate
They might be your benefits department's favorite way to communicate wellness program details and benefits to your employees. But surveys show that your employees feel differently…

New rules: A wide variety of communications channels
Having a wellness program equipped with a multitude of communications channels is an easy way to ensure that every employee's preferences are met and they are receiving important information about the program, making them more likely to participate. Making it possible to address health and wellness needs over the phone with a live person, through a comprehensive online wellness portal, or through text or email notifications helps meet employees where they are in their wellness journey, leading to lasting healthy behavior and lifestyle changes.

Throwing the old playbook out the window and playing by these new rules of wellness in 2017 can lead to improved engagement in your programs, positively impacting both health outcomes and costs.

About the Author
Pam Mortenson is the Executive Vice President for Wellness Solutions at Health Advocate [www.HealthAdvocate.com]. She brings extensive experience in solving healthcare consumer engagement and communication challenges to West/Health Advocate clients. Her expertise and insights center on balancing best-in-class consumer engagement technologies with lifestyle coaching and support to drive healthier outcomes.