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Beyond benefits: Companies turn to apps, coaches, engagement to keep workers healthy and loyal



Discussion participants from top left: Melanie Dickinson, Kelly Terry, David Wagner, John Miller, Ismaray Borrego and Cindy Lawrence

What role does a healthy workplace play in a successful organization? One need only look back over the past three years to get a glimpse of the roles of health, benefits and culture in creating a healthy and attractive workplace.

Some may think the current struggles employers face with finding qualified talent was a consequence of the pandemic. But consider the end of 2019, when unemployment was at a near-historic low of 3.6%. Finding top talent was a real struggle.

By the next quarter, the pandemic sent millions home to work - or forced layoffs as business performance slid. Whether the great resignation, great retirement, or the unforeseen consequences of billions of dollars in stimulus money sent to idled workers, companies struggled to retain existing employees or find new ones.

Underlying this transformation was an already growing desire among employees to work at “employers of choice” - organizations with a reputation for paying well, nurturing a culture employees could embrace, and providing benefits that drove health, wellness and peace of mind.

The best in the marketplace found success in creating healthy and engaging corporate cultures.

In this Healthiest Employers panel discussion hosted by Florida Blue, the state’s Blue Cross Blue Shield plan, and South Florida Business Journal, human resources professionals from some of the area’s “healthiest employers” discussed their challenges and successes in using health and benefits in recruiting and keeping top talent.

Moderated by David Wagner, Market President for Florida Blue, they explored how companies’ focus on benefits is driving recruitment, retention and that “healthiest employer” status.

While the pandemic has presented unique challenges to all employers, AIMCO had an advantage over many other companies at the outset of the pandemic, said Kelly Terry, VP of Administration at the apartment investment and management company. First, they were only out of the office for six weeks. More important, their mission puts their employees as their “number one asset,” she said. AIMCO offers competitive market benefits, wellness programs.

Not resting on their laurels, the company this year overhauled its benefits, and today pays 95% of employee premiums, with most deductibles maxed at \$25, she said. As a result, turnover is down and engagement rates are 4.42 out of five.

“There’s a lot of choices for people out there and what used to be competitive isn’t competitive anymore,” Terry said. “Our team members wanted better benefits. Hopefully what we’ve done has been worth it.”

Aligning the ideal combination of benefits can be a challenge, said John Muller, Director of HR with employee benefits company Gehring Group|Bentek. During the pandemic, the company stayed the course with its rich wellness and benefits, which includes 100% of premiums and deductibles funded through a company sponsored HSA.

As a result, turnover is less than 5%. What they’re seeing, however, is job candidates asking less about benefits than pay and flexibility, he said.

The company offers onsite breast cancer screenings and dermatology, with hopes to add dental cleanings in the future. Having solid benefits in place provides strong footing to address employees’ and candidates’ other expectations.

“It’s helped us with retention. I shudder to think what it might be if we did decrease our benefit offerings,” he said. The right balance drives the company culture. “That’s why we are working the hardest without changing the culture of who we are.”

Some used the pandemic to grow initiatives that live on today. At airline and fare marketing technology provider EveryMundo, the small wellness initiative grew beyond free weekly yoga classes to include half Fridays and wellness coaching, as well as other offerings, said Ismaray Borrego, the company’s People Operations Manager.

Engagement grew. From fewer than a dozen attending webinars and other events, upward of 20 will participate. Employees are surveyed quarterly to see what they'd like the company to offer next.

Importance of mental health

What many already addressed before the pandemic yet grew in importance during the remote work and isolation was mental health. A topic many didn't talk about openly until the pandemic, anxiety, depression and other concerns borne by adults and children are being addressed, Wagner said.

What had "been in the shadows" needed to be directly addressed, Terry said. The HR department and supervisors were encouraged to be a welcoming environment for people to discuss issues they may be facing. When one employee spoke of challenges she was facing, the company offered her a year of paid leave "to get where she needed to be," Terry said. Ultimately, the employee didn't return. But the message was clear to management.

"We look at it in HR as a beautiful gift we were able to give this person to figure out what she needed," she said. "Ultimately the business impact was small for us, but the mental health impact for her was incredible."

In Pompano Beach, the employee resource programs, especially those focused on mental health, were open to employees and their families, especially for those with children at home, Lawrence said. Muller agreed, calling EAPs the "minimum standard," Gehring has bolstered its mental health offerings with mental health experts, practitioners and access to a crisis hotline. Their employees have taken a lead role, even volunteering to help others in their community.

EveryMundo offers access to a mental health hotline, a meditation coach, even public speakers. Apps also are helping employees cope. Like other companies, Gehring uses Teledoc and online platforms for health care advocacy and claims assistance.

EveryMundo reaches out regularly to remind its people to use their health insurance carrier's apps, which feature wellness challenges, coaching sessions and rewards programs. The MyFloridaBlue app ties in similar features and has proven an effective way to engage younger employees, Wagner said.

While some apps will connect patients with medical practitioners nationwide, Wagner suggested users search apps for providers in their local market. This helps when seeking to build a relationship with that doctor beyond the virtual connection, he said.

In fact, going beyond the virtual connection was mentioned several times. Lawrence's team trains city employees to use urgent care facilities, while turning to the Florida Blue app to work with their personal health care representative to get specialist referrals. She called these "options to make them healthier in the long run."

Wagner agreed. Since health insurance benefits often include personal representatives, engage them to train teams, answer questions or address concerns. Typically, customers only hear from insurance companies at renewal time. Turn the table, he said.

"You're spending a lot of money annually. Make sure they're earning it," he said. "Get the most out of those people. Being proactive on health is key."

Planning for the future

Wagner asked what these HR and benefits managers were doing to improve their teams' engagement in health and wellness for the future. Borrego with EveryMundo is promoting their monthly wellness initiatives, creating wellness "champions" who can help encourage others' involvement, and creating a "bill of rights" making managers accountable for their reports' wellbeing.

Lawrence said the city's launch of wellness coaching before the pandemic has only ramped up since. Their wellness app engages city workers "physically, emotionally and holistically," with various personal and competitive challenges.

At AIMCO, workers can choose programs and benefits meaningful to them, Terry said. What's important to a single 25-year-old might not be for a 45-year-old with children. "If we don't have something," she said, "we're willing to be flexible to take their feedback."

Gehring has focused on prevention, Muller said. It keeps people healthy and engaged, and helps keep costs down. "It's beneficial to the organization in keeping the costs down," he said. "We run challenges off it, create camaraderie, and do different things to engage the team."

Ultimately, healthy workplaces have leadership who ask questions then listen to the answers, he said.

"We learned through Covid and back to work that you can't assume anything," he said. "Things that might have been appreciated back then might not be now."

Good health might be a perennial goal. But keeping employees healthy when costs are rising and attracting skilled talent is equally challenging can boil down to the health, wellness and cultural programs employers put in place. With the right combination of leadership, technology and camaraderie, organizations will enjoy both the financial and reputational benefits of being a healthiest place to work.

Lightning round

On Dec. 31, 2022, what strides do you hope to have made in the past year?

Cindy Lawrence, Director of Risk, City of Pompano Beach Engagement.

You want to see more employees participating. Not only the numbers, but the employees we have on here, but are they engaging in what we have to offer? I just want to see employees fully engaged in wellness experiences.

Kelly Terry, VP of Administration, HR, AIMCO. I'm most hopeful to hear from our team that they feel valued and safe to express whatever is going on in their lives and ask for whatever they need if we don't yet offer it - for them to tell us how we can keep getting better.

John Muller, Director of HR, director of growth, Gehring Group | Bentek.

We're really making strides in stress, blood pressure and BMI, but in 2021 with everyone being struck at home, I'm anxious to see improvements in our aggregate reporting.

Ismaray Borrego, People Operations Manager, EveryMundo. I'd love to see more people championing wellness, to see people talking in meetings to naturally talking about the things they are doing, and encouraging others when it comes to wellness.