

Uniting Disability Management and Wellness for a Healthier, More Productive Workforce

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Dec 7, 2011



Employee absences, such as short- and long-term disability absences, leaves of absence (LOAs) and incidental absences, can be very costly to organizations. Many employers believe a quick fix for these issues — and the bottom line — is implementing wellness programs to improve employee health and productivity. While wellness programs are indeed a critical piece of the total benefit cost puzzle, as a standalone initiative they often lack the ability to reduce or prevent the primary causes of unexpected absences such as chronic physical or mental health conditions.

By adopting a proactive and preventative mind-set, employers can avoid or reduce the cost and impact of these employee absences with an integrated absence and disability management program focused on improving employee health and workplace productivity.

Several key benefits make up the essence of an effective and successful absence/disability management program, including job accommodations, employee assistance programs (EAPs) and health advocacy solutions. These key ingredients can work in tandem with a company's wellness efforts to create a finely tuned and holistic approach that can help employers save thousands in lost production and absence or disability-related costs, as well as help retain and motivate talent.

Preventing Absences with Workplace Accommodations

Many employers are programmed to believe that once an employee has a physical injury or a mental health problem, the only option for the individual is to take a disability absence or LOA. But being absent from the workplace is not always necessary.

Something as simple and cost-effective as an ergonomic solution or a job modification can likely prevent or reduce the duration of a disability absence or LOA. It can also help prevent further injury.

Among absence and disability providers that offer this benefit, the most effective model is one that will provide an onsite ergonomics consultant to assess the workplace. This professional will help the employer identify opportunities where an ergonomics solution or job modification can be used.

Take, for example, an employee with severe anxiety who has taken a disability absence or LOA. The consultant can work with the employer and the employee's therapist or physician to determine the best course of action in getting the employee back to work as soon as possible. This could be as simple as reducing the employee's hours to part time. A flexible schedule allows for proper recovery, and gradually getting back to full-time hours puts less stress on the individual. It helps ensure a long-term stay at work.

Chronic physical conditions such as back pain or carpal tunnel syndrome are also some common causes of disability absences. The onsite consultant may help prevent an employee from taking a disability absence or LOA by removing barriers to productivity. Depending on the physical issue, this could be a more supportive chair or an ergonomic computer mouse. A solution, big or small, can alleviate some of the pain and discomfort associated with an injury, and also prevent further trauma.

Accommodations can enable employees to remain on the job safely and allow an individual to better work at his or her full potential. Not only do employers save significantly on costs by avoiding or reducing the duration of a disability absence/LOA, the employee will feel like a valuable asset to the organization.

Reinforcing the Value of Employee Assistance Programs

EAPs are effective and positive resources to help individuals with a variety of concerns. Unfortunately, they remain a much underutilized benefit.

Mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, are contributing to an increasing number of short-term disability claims — even outpacing illnesses such as cancer. These conditions fuel absenteeism and presenteeism, which can be very burdensome and expensive problems due to their impact on productivity.

The need to utilize EAPs has never been greater for these reasons. Employers should take advantage of a disability management provider that facilitates and increases employees' usage of, and benefits from, an EAP.

Having an EAP in place demonstrates to employees that their company cares and can likely lead to a boost in employee morale, less absence and increased productivity.

Combating Presenteeism with Health Advocacy

Presenteeism is known as the production loss from employees with a medical or mental condition. Presenteeism can materialize in employees coming to work sick or significantly distracted by outside concerns. The difficulty is that

presenteeism comes in many forms, making it extremely challenging for employers to curb this problem in the workplace.

Take, for example, an employee who needs to find a new doctor or specialist for his or her sick child. The individual, thinking it would take only a lunch break to research and identify an appropriate physician, greatly miscalculates the amount of effort necessary to find a doctor and ends up using valuable work time to get it resolved. This lost time is in addition to the added stress and burden on the employee that may affect his or her productivity the remainder of the day.

The healthcare system can be a very complex environment — from figuring out the elaborate details of a bill to understanding a medical condition. It can be a time-consuming and confusing process without the right help.

That's why many employers are quickly learning the advantages of health advocacy solutions as part of an integrated absence and disability management program to help reduce this form of presenteeism.

Health advocates, typically registered nurses, help individuals navigate the intricacies of the healthcare system. These professionals understand the health care system better than an employer or employee because they deal with it daily. Plus, these professionals are closest to and have connections in the industry, which allows them quicker access to information, resources and people.

Many times health advocacy covers not only the employee, but also the employee's spouse, dependent children, parents and parents-in-law. Therefore, the employee not only receives the help he or she needs, but also can be relieved of the burden of finding care or resolving an issue for his or her loved one.

With health advocacy assistance, issues tend to be resolved faster, removing much stress and burden from the employee's plate.

Putting the Pieces Together

A key to any successful integration is finding the right partner. Too many absence and disability management providers focus on a reactive approach to disability absences or LOAs. A provider that centers its message on keeping employees at work whenever possible, or getting them back to work faster, is one that will improve workplace productivity.

Additionally, employers can look for other qualities and traits in a provider that will ensure a long-term, valuable partner, including:

- A strategic direction and goal-setting
- Integration with the employer's health management programs (e.g., wellness, disease management, etc.)
- A partnership approach with key stakeholders
- Thoughtful and ongoing implementation (no "how-to guides" or "do-it-yourself" programs)
- Robust tracking and metrics capabilities

Employers can join together wellness and disability management to ensure a stronger, healthier and more productive workforce that will result in a very rewarding experience for the organization, as well as current and future employees.

About the Author

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About the Workplace Possibilities Program

The Workplace Possibilities Program is a unique, proactive approach to helping employers prevent and manage disability in the workplace. A Workplace Possibilities consultant helps identify opportunities to keep employees who may be at risk of a disability on the job and get those who go out on disability back to work sooner, the program helps employers realize rapid and measurable reductions in disability-related costs. For more information on tips and tools HR professionals can use to help re-imagine the way they manage disability, visit www.workplacepossibilities.com.

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