



Benefit Insights

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Help Your Employees Maintain Better Overall Health by Offering Them Dental Care Benefits

An employee's oral health goes far beyond the niceties of fresh breath, sparking white teeth, and a vibrant smile. In fact, there are countless studies showing how closely an individual's oral health is linked to their overall well-being and health.

Believe it or not, dentists were characterized by a Delta Dental information sheet as disease detectives. While this may seem like a bit of a leap, many professionals feel that this is a very appropriate and accurate characterization considering regular dental exams can play a role in detecting an array of medical conditions.

In fact, Delta Dental, which is one of the nation's largest dental benefits carriers, says that a dental exam can reveal over 120 different signs and symptoms of disease. For example, a dental exam may reveal a patient has a dry mouth and fruity, sharp smelling breath, signs of possible diabetes; mouth sores, a sign the patient's immune system could be compromised; possibly cancerous lumps or sores on the tongue, jaw, neck, or mouth; or certain mouth appearances and inflammatory processes, which could be a sign of anemia. A routine dental X-ray could reveal bone loss, a sign of osteoporosis. When such is noted by a dentist, he/she will alert the patient and encourage them to follow-up with their primary care physician.

Aside from being a diagnostic tool for non-dental related diseases, the presence of poor oral health can actually lead to a number of medical problems itself. For example, gum disease has been directly linked to some underweight babies, premature births, hyperglycemia, and pancreatic cancer. A gum that's not healthy can also allow the bacteria that's naturally present in the human mouth to invade the blood stream and travel to other areas of the body that would consider it foreign, a happening that could lead to clogged arteries, stroke, bacterial endocarditis, or heart disease.

As if the above isn't reason enough to offer employees access to dental benefits, there's always the actual dental-related and cosmetic impacts from maintaining good dental health. After all, an employee suffering the pain, discomfort, and embarrassment of a broken tooth, cavity, or gum disease isn't very likely to concentrate as well or be as productive as they could without such ailments.

By offering employees access to a dental insurance plan, employers can help enable and encourage them to seek regular dental care to prevent such problems or, at the very least, get treatment for existing problems. Preventive care is often 100% covered under dental plans, especially when the employee uses an in-network dentist, but there's usually coinsurance or a co-payment associated with non-preventive visits.

In such economic times, it may be hard for some employers to fit the addition of dental insurance into their budget. However, the coverage can always be offered on a voluntary basis where the employee would be responsible for most, if not all, of the benefit's cost. The employer wouldn't be shouldering the expense, but the employee would still have access to dental coverage, be able to get a group discount, and conveniently have the premiums deducted from their payroll check. The voluntary insurance market offers several plan structures, including indemnity plans, PPOs, HMOs, and discount plans.

Employees that are able to maintain their oral health will be happier, healthier, and ultimately more productive and focused while they're working. Employers that are unsure what dental benefits option would best fit both the needs of their company and employees should contact their insurance agent.

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New Guidelines from the IRS on W-2 Reporting of Health Care Costs

On March 29, 2011, the IRS issued Notice 2011-28 to employers regarding the information reporting requirements on each employee's annual Form W-2 of health insurance coverage. This new reporting to employees is for informational purposes only. It is to inform employees of the cost of their health care coverage. Furthermore, the IRS has stressed that employer-provided health care coverage continues to be excludable from an employee's income, and is therefore not taxable.

The PPACA (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act), which was enacted in March of 2010, ensures that employers must report the cost of health care coverage on the Form W-2.

Helpful to Small Employers

With the new guidelines, the IRS provided additional relief for small businesses (filing less than 250 W-2 forms)

Employer Workplace Wellness Programs For Employees: A Win-Win Situation

According to the fourth-quarter 2010 Principal Financial Well-Being Index, 43 percent of American workers cite the achievement of better overall health as the number one reason they would or do participate in a wellness benefit program. In second place, with 33%, was the reduction of personal health care costs. In third place, with 31%, was the increased chance of living a healthier and extended life.

The Principal Financial Well-Being Index is released by the financial services provider, Principal Financial Group. This is a quarterly survey of American workers from American businesses with between 10 and 1,000 employees. The findings of the fourth-quarter 2010 survey involved data from 528 retirees and 1,159 employees.

Some key points from the survey included:

- When offered by an employer, blood sugar screenings had an 84% utilization rate. This was an 18 point increase from 2009 statistics.
- When offered by an employer, weight management programs were utilized by 53% of employees. This was a 25 point increase from 2009 statistics.
- When offered by an employer, personalized action plans for conditions considered high-risk were utilized by 68% of employees. This was a 21 point increase from 2009 statistics.

Some credit rising health care costs and more public awareness about diseases like heart disease and diabetes with American workers being more ready to take action toward

by making the requirement voluntary for them at least in tax year 2012. The optional treatment for smaller employers will remain in effect until further IRS guidelines are issued.

Opportunity for Benefits Communications

Employers can utilize health care reform as a chance to better communicate with employees regarding their health and wellness benefits. The new requirements will help employees gain a better understanding of the cost, and value, of their coverage. Many employees are going to be surprised at the cost of their health care benefits, and employers can use this opportunity to open a discussion about health care cost containment. They can also emphasize the investment the company makes in each employee in the form of benefits.

their own health. None the less, as evidenced by the substantial increase in how many workers are taking advantage of wellness benefits, there is clear indication that there's a growing element of employees taking more personal responsibility for their health.

Employers Can Benefit From Wellness Programs Too

Personal responsibility may drive employee participation in wellness programs, but employees have much to gain from offering wellness and encouraging its usage. During the index, workers said the following occurred as a direct result of the wellness program offered by their employer:

- Forty-three percent felt they were motivated to perform better and work harder.
- Twenty-eight percent said they were absent less days from work.
- Thirty-eight percent said they experienced improved productivity and energy while at work.
- Forty-eight percent said that the offering of wellness benefits encouraged them to remain with their current employer.

In closing, this research is echoed by countless other studies showing employers that invest in the wellness of their employees by offering them the means and the educational resources they need to control their own wellness not only gain physically healthier employees, but also productivity and cost-saving increases.

Employee Handbook Serves as a Vital Communications Tool

An employee handbook serves as a vital communications tool between a company and its employees. When well prepared, it informs employees about their employer's mission, its employment policies and perks, and the consequences of not following the rules—all in a tone appropriate to the reading audience. A comprehensive, clearly written employee handbook also can be a protective shield for an employer to use in a lawsuit or less formal employee confrontation situation.

Set the tone for your handbook by opening with a bit of history about your company, what are its goals and mission, and how employees fit in to this. Your employees, and the products they produce or services they provide, are the face of your company, and your handbook should inspire them to strive for excellence, both individually and as a team. Review the process for employee evaluation and opportunities for employee advancement.

Your handbook should summarize the benefits provided to employees. Briefly describe the health, disability, life, other insurance and retirement benefits plans your company offers, along with work/life programs, absence, vacation and leave policies, and government-mandated benefits. Only brief summaries are appropriate, as the employee handbook is not intended to provide the level of detail found in a summary plan description.

Safety in the workplace is important for all companies, regardless of industry, and guidelines ensuring this belong in an employee handbook. Rules regarding building security, drugs and alcohol, weapons, and workplace violence should be covered, along with issues specific to the line of work your company is in that impact safety, such as workplace chemicals, protective gear,

etc. Also let employees know the procedures to follow in case of an emergency.

Your employee handbook should also cover workplace rules that comprise what amounts to an employee code of conduct. These include, for example, policies on harassment, discrimination, any dress code, and the like.

The handbook is also the place to inform employees of the consequences of not following company rules, whether they be regarding attendance, company property, workplace decorum or job performance. Clearly spell out grounds for firing, along with procedures for disciplinary action, including warnings, probationary periods and termination.

Advances in technology—and its availability in the workplace—have added new layers to employee handbook content. In addition to the topics covered above, today's employee handbook needs to address appropriate uses of technology in the workplace, and what employees can and can't do while on the job (blogging, visiting Facebook and Twitter, online shopping, etc.). Parameters of email communications also should be addressed, including transmission of chain mails and links to inappropriate Web sites.

The process of writing the handbook can be farmed out to a firm specializing in employee communications, or undertaken in house. Templates are

available that can be used for this purpose; they contain the basic information common to most employee handbooks, and beyond this can be customized to your company. If using the template approach, be sure to run the finished product past your company legal counsel or human resources professional for a final review.



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must be the best, right? The problem with applying the same theory to health care and trying to create a smart consumer through increasing their out-of-pocket costs is that many consumers, no matter how frugal or involved, can't get the comparative quality and cost data needed to make an informed decision. The same can't be said of purchasing a car.

You can help your employees benefit from quality and cost data with these steps:

- Alert local medical facilities/physicians that their plan favors transparent pricing and high quality, low cost care services.
- Help them know their choices and what each costs. Health care plans should be designed so that it's financially encouraging to choose the medical facilities, hospitals, and doctors providing contracted pricing data.
- Have ongoing monthly education about network choices and how these choices impact what they and everyone else spends on health care.

Transparent Cost, Quality Data Can Help Your Employees Make Informed Health Care Decisions

A lot of U.S. employees have noticed that their employers have started shifting the costs of health plans toward them. And, let's face it, as the increases in health plan premiums continue to outpace inflation, employers will continue to make such shifts.

Employees will be facing some difficult choices. One such choice would be between paying higher monthly premiums for a plan featuring lower out-of-pocket costs and deductibles -or- paying a lower monthly premium for a plan featuring higher out-of-pocket costs and deductibles. Decisions like this bring the age-old cost, quality debate to the forefront. Let's look at some facts:

1. Even in the same market and network, the cost and quality of health care can vary greatly from provider to provider.
2. Most employees are baffled by the complexities involved with health care and insurance pricing.

The majority of providers fail to see the importance of providing patients with clear and concise pricing information. From in-network and out-of- network, billed charges, custom-

ary and reasonable charges, contracted pricing and global pricing, and so forth, the technical language and multiple ways that users are charged make it extremely difficult for employees to understand and compare costs from one provider/facility to another.

3. An employee won't care what services cost if they aren't the one paying for the services.



In theory, the success of consumer-directed health plans greatly depend on the employer's ability to get their employees to think like buyers. The reasoning being that employees paying for some portion of the services will look toward high quality, low cost provider options and lower both their own health care costs and those of their employer.

However, the above theory rarely reflects reality. Most consumerism experts say that shopping for health care isn't akin to shopping for a vehicle or pair of shoes. Most people wouldn't hesitate to buy the most expensive vehicle when someone else is paying the bill. After all, the most expensive vehicle

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