

In Focus

Your Social Network

A recent survey by Nielson Wire found that *one quarter of Americans' time in 2010* was spent on social networking sites and blogs! This is priceless employee time and attention. What if the time your employees spend on social media web sites could include time spent on interacting and managing their health? If plan sponsors effectively used this social networking space, they could be dramatically more effective in communicating health improvement and related information to their employees.

Most benefits managers believe that communication is critical to achieving desired employee behavior change. Typically, printed or text-heavy materials are still the primary medium of benefits communication (HopeHealth, 2010). The biggest obstacle to effective workplace communication is getting employees to read the information in the first place. In fact, a recent survey by HopeHealth found that a stunning 79% of benefits managers report that their employees do not read the benefits communication materials they receive!

A big reason why employees do not take the time to read information sent to them from their employers is because they don't trust their employers (California Health Care Foundation, 2008). However, employees do trust their friends. And who is a "friend"? According to the 2008 Edelman Trust Barometer, a trusted friend is "a person like me" more than an authority figure, like the employer (California Health Care Foundation, 2008).

Using social media effectively, that is actually getting your messages read and stimulating dialogue, involves greater subtlety than choosing the right "who" to do the telling. It's also about the "what" that gets put out there. A recent survey found that 75% of employees are not interested in receiving benefits information via social media (Plan Sponsor, 2010). Since Open Enrollment and other related information is probably the wrong type of content for social media use, what about information that can build trust yet also contain an employer message? For example, ways to better manage one's own health? Putting this information out there, perhaps in the form of a blog or FAQs that permit dialog, can stimulate relationships. This is true because now the employer is trying to build trust by putting helpful information that has personal application and in a way that can be a *connector* between the employer and employees.

A 2008 study reported 60% - 80% of Americans have used the Internet to find health information. In fact, the Internet was referenced more than physicians for health information (California HealthCare Foundation, 2008). 36% of these Americans using their handhelds to get health information are

They Said It

"One problem is that companies don't want to promote employees using the internet at work. Most even have policies against it. Therein lies the dilemma. There's a place for these media once health managers figure out the best ways to use them."
 Wellness Communication Opinion Survey Results, HopeHealth, 2010.

doing so in response to a personal medical condition. But they are not just looking for data or text. They also are looking to find out what other people have to say about a medication or treatment for that condition. They are also seeking support from other people. So, for employers to establish a trusting relationship with their employees, they must provide more than information. They must provide the environment, the forum where both facts and human interchange take place. That's why it's called "social networking".

This means that benefits managers cannot be satisfied with just pushing out text and information, even if it's very useful content. Keeping faith with the "social" in social networking probably also means that benefit managers have to have someone on staff monitoring the flow of posts to the blog and queries to the FAQs. This is someone who will interact with employees who raise questions, direct them to other resources and connect them with *other people*. This is not a traffic-cop role. By demonstrating interest, caring and expertise, this person helps make the benefits department one of the most important contacts in the network.

The many avenues for employees and their family members to connect, share stories, and learn about their health are already being used. Today, there are 5,805 health, medical, and fitness applications within the Apple AppStore (California Health Care Foundation, 2010). Hundreds of these focus on health, wellness and nutrition.

The volume, functionality and popularity of social media and healthcare is well established. It is time for employers to spend less money trying to explain everything via printed and analogous text-heavy intranet postings, and take advantage of the natural momentum and dialoging using social media.

Repeating what James Surowiecki notes in *The Wisdom of Crowds*, "groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them." Social media creates these groups and gives reason for individuals to stay in their groups. Social networking provides employers a medium to communicate and to interact with employees. It is a resource for health information and a low cost support system, that at the same time, employees crave as human beings. Social media is here to stay. Start putting it to use for the benefit of your employees and your company.

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