

In Focus

Food, Glorious Food!

They Said It

So goes the title of one of the more famous songs in Broadway musical history. But do you know the next line? Here you go: "Hot sausage and mustard!" For benefits managers, what was "glorious" sausage in the musical "Oliver," is a good example of remembrance of things past. That's because benefits managers whose companies have vending machines or onsite cafeterias are beginning to realize that a wellness program focused on HRAs, blood screens and water bottles is likely to wind up being perceived as just one more well intentioned, but fatally flawed, stab in the dark from HR.

Andy Hunziger, CFO of Lincoln Industries:
 "Senior leadership buy-in and action are vital," he says. "If you're a three-pack-a-day smoker, don't expect your company to be wellness focused," in *CFO*, June 9, 2011.

Maybe it ought to go without saying, but observation suggests otherwise, that so many wellness programs are directed at the periphery, not the center. High cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, all of these "conditions" and many other typical wellness program targets, are the results of something; sometimes multiple somethings. They are not self sufficient, independently viable states of being, in and of themselves. Yet, our wellness programs mainly aim at them and miss more fundamental opportunities that are just down the hall.

Frequently, one of the root causes of unhealthy symptoms is not hidden in the biometrics that requires a centrifuge and a PhD to decipher. Frequently, one of the root causes is right in front of us. It's what's on our plates! Literally, what we eat and drink. There's some truth in every cliché. That verity can have no more direct application than in the case of "you are what you eat."

Many benefits managers don't get out much. No, we don't mean *that*. What we mean is that many benefits managers don't roam too far down the hall or up the stairs to meet and talk with the people who are responsible for the company's buildings and grounds; you know, *the plant and facilities guys*. The thing is, these are the folks who hold the keys to a good bit of benefits management's future success . . . or failure. That's because these are the people in charge of the company's vending machines and onsite dining facilities. These are the people who can influence, if not control, what's on our corporate plates for breakfast and lunch, and what's in the vending machines when it's time for a snack. If we're going to apply the dictum of "you are what you eat," we've got to get into the heads and then the purchase orders and vendor contracts of the facilities fraternity.

If one of a benefits manager's priorities is to provide a healthy place to work, what are the priorities of the facilities folks, and do theirs conflict or cohere with the desire to improve health? In the case of corporate food service, very likely, the priorities of facilities managers are to deliver edible food at the least cost and vending machine snacks at the greatest profit (don't you just love those \$1.00 bottles of water?). So, right from the beginning, the potential for "prioritization dissonance" and, perhaps, turf control is apparent if not immediate.

It's not just a control thing. Ultimately, it's a cost thing. Let's admit it. There's just no win for us in arguing that switching from hamburgers to bison burgers or from candy bars to granola bars isn't just about feeling good, literally. That's because it's also about there being fewer filled seats in the cafeteria and fewer coins in the belly of that machine down the hallway. That's usually what happens when the menus go from slow-death to pro-life and the candy bars and chips get only two slots and drop to the bottom rung. Up against the immediacy of those realities, we have the hope that in the long run healthier eating means healthier people. Healthier people will have better attendance, be more productive and use the medical plan less. This is when we realize that being right may not be enough and that leadership requires vision, creativity and resolve.

Sometimes functional managers with conflicting priorities can work things out and sometimes it takes those with higher pay grades to distribute the toys in the sandbox. Employee Benefits frequently reports up to the Chief HR Officer and Facilities often reports up to the Chief Financial Officer. Getting your company into going healthy with cafeteria menus, vending machine stocking and meeting snacks may require a “conversation” of classic dimensions. So, when “money talks” is on the other side of the table, it may help if benefits managers coach their bosses into not being bashful about the following*:

- Fully half of your employees really want to lose weight and to get healthier.
- 40% of your people are already involved in some kind of health improvement.
- About 20% of your people are dedicated to eating nutritious diets. Another 50% are fully aware that they should.
- Only about a third of employees think cheeseburgers are paradise.
- There **are** food service vendors who “get it” and know how to tailor their dining, catering and vending contracts to align with your health improvement goals. They also can offer excellent infrastructure support like dining staff training, program promotion and employee education.
- It's an **investment** not a subsidy. You **will** have empirical targets and you **will** measure the impact of your effort.

It's the CFOs who have told us that annual health care cost increases of more than 8% are not sustainable. Well, in May, Pricewaterhouse Coopers issued a report predicting that we're right on the cliff at +8% in 2011 and another +8.5% in 2012. In response, we can nibble around the edges (again, still) and make raising deductibles and payroll deductions our centerpieces for next year. Or we can attack causes and not just symptoms by realizing that while higher payroll deductions and the like aren't going to make anybody healthier, healthier food will.

* International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation

2008 FOOD & HEALTH SURVEY

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