

# Getting MORE

From Health Screenings

by | Pete Desai





Workplace health screenings have the potential to catch serious health problems early, thereby improving worker health status and outcomes. To operate a successful screening program, however, employers must address issues including communication with health plan participants and coordination with physicians.

# benefits

MAGAZINE

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One of the many challenges facing health plan sponsors and employers is how to identify employees who may be at risk for significant health problems and encourage them to change behaviors and seek treatment. Health screenings, conducted at worksite wellness events or even in employees' homes, are emerging as one step to improve worker health status and outcomes. However, historically some health screenings haven't met expectations, so plan sponsors are looking for new ways to ensure screenings provide maximum benefit to their organization and all plan members.

More than 141 million people in the United States have one or more chronic conditions.<sup>1</sup> However, a recent study reported that more than half of health plan members with chronic conditions are contacted by their insurer less than once a year.<sup>2</sup> And, even then, participa-

tion in health plan-sponsored screening or other member programs is low—often less than 20%.

Employers are uniquely positioned to engage employees who wouldn't otherwise participate in health screening initiatives. Employers can incentivize employees to participate in screenings and, because of daily exposure to employer messages and co-worker participation, employees may be more likely to engage in on-the-job wellness programs.

Health screenings are designed to identify employees at risk for high-cost and productivity-draining conditions that also negatively affect their quality of life, overall satisfaction and the shared cost of care. As fewer employees visit their physician for routine physicals, they miss out on opportunities for dialogue, engagement and education that can lead to lifestyle changes. Health screenings can be the bridge

that employers need to engage a broader array of employees and to encourage more active participation in health improvement initiative.

Reaching that objective begins with establishing clear goals for health screenings, which could include:

- Identifying people at risk for chronic conditions like diabetes and colorectal cancer (CRC)
- Configuring and managing screening programs in a simple and efficient manner
- Maximizing employee participation and engagement by making programs flexible, convenient and valuable
- Educating and encouraging employees to take a more active role in their health.

### Challenges

While those are the opportunities, some organizations have faced a number of challenges in making wellness programs and health screening programs successful. And employers that haven't implemented screenings in the past may be concerned about the cost and return on investment.

Some plan sponsors may have operated programs that had low participation or were difficult to administer. They may have received complaints about inconvenient and/or poorly administered screenings, especially if employees received incorrect or inconsistent results or didn't get results quickly enough to secure the promised reduction in premiums—often the “carrot” used to encourage participation.

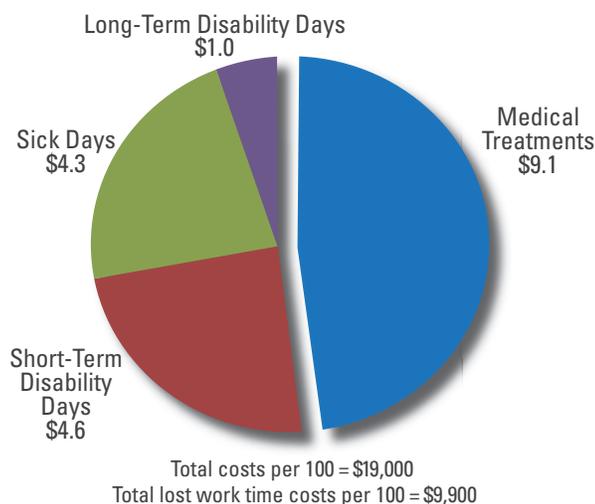
### The Cost of Not Screening

While there can be challenges to conducting a successful screening pro-

## FIGURE

### Cancer in the Workplace

#### Annual Cancer Costs per 100 Employees (\$ thousands)



Source: IBI Chronic Disease Profile: Cancer in the Workplace (Integrated Benefits Institute, March 2014)

gram, screenings have the potential to generate significant savings by avoiding future health care costs if serious problems are discovered early. For example, cancer annually costs employers \$19,000 per 100 employees for medical treatment, disability and sick days, many of which can be reduced or eliminated by early detection. (See the figure.)

Screening for CRC is one example. About half of all workers haven't had recommended screenings for CRC. If found in the early stages, there's a 90% five-year survival rate for CRC.<sup>3</sup> Considering that the average one-year cost of treatment for an employee with late-stage colon cancer is as high as \$310,000, catching CRC at an earlier stage has the potential to save significant amounts of money.<sup>4</sup>

### Steps to Take, Questions to Ask

So what's the best way to ensure success of a screening program?

Employers may want to consider working with a company that has advanced technology to support efficient implementation, ensure engagement and provide needed reporting and analysis. Here are seven questions that will help employers take the right steps when it comes to health screening programs.

1. **Have employees who can best benefit from a screening program been identified?** The first step is to ensure that the right screenings get to the right employees. In the past, screenings often used a broad-based versus targeted strategy, and programs haven't leveraged evidence-based treatment guidelines and disease-risk models from recognized organizations such as the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. For example, an invitation sent to a 30-year-old employee for a CRC screening is not an ideal way to launch a program. Such generic invitations typically get little attention from employees and lead them to think there's little effort put into personalizing their health care experience. It also can lead to lower participation in future programs.
2. **Are the right communication channels to connect and engage with participants being used?** All employees are different; not everyone responds to the same type of outreach. Employers should select screening program partners that enable automated outreach via multichannel communication options, including e-mail, text messages, interactive voice response or pa-

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International Foundation. 2017.

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per mail to drive awareness and encourage participation.

3. **Is the program coordinated with network physicians?** Studies show that employees and plan members will respond much more favorably to a screening invitation from their physician rather than their insurer. Physicians also need clear information on their patients participating in programs and results—as well as information on what educational materials those patients will receive—so doctors can support the messaging and participate in followup. Members may be more likely to read communications from their health insurer, which may be well-known and trusted, and participate in a screening sponsored by their health plan compared with one offered by an unknown third party.
4. **Are the right incentives available?** To secure maximum employee engagement, education, promotion and a strong incentive program are key. Health screenings without incentives typically generate participation of only about 20%. Employers that have learned from behavioral analysis that incentives work far better than penalties can see screening participation reach 70-80% or higher. When it comes to incentives, members will become immune at some point. The \$100 gift card that worked the first year of a program is unlikely to be a sufficient incentive by the third year. Employers should consider more creative options, such as the ability of employees who take advantage of screening programs to participate in cash rewards, paid time off or other perks through screening-participation lotteries. Partners should have the behavioral analytics experience to identify the incentives that will work best for the population.
5. **Do participants promptly receive results?** Simply put, screenings that delay results are a waste of program dollars. Once the screening has taken place, within a few weeks participants should receive a thank-you and a notice on when they can expect results. Those results

should be sent via e-mail or standard U.S. mail if requested or made accessible via the organization's wellness portal. A plan with specific recommendations and next steps should be shared and ideally additional followup communications made as needed. (For example, the employee who screens positive but doesn't schedule an appointment with his/her provider will need additional contact.)

- 6. Do program participants have the tools and resources they need to succeed?** Data and intuition are clear on a single point: When screenings are convenient, flexible and simple, participation increases. Employees should have multiple options for screenings—an on-site event or visits to their primary care physician, lab or a retail pharmacy. Customized participant portals from a screening partner can make viewing options and scheduling appointments easy. When a participant selects a lab or pharmacy visit, the portal should automatically populate nearby locations, available appointment times and dates, and driving directions. Participant portals can also be used to guide participants through all aspects of a screening program, from explaining the importance of a test to viewing results to accessing resources and tracking health improvements over time.
- 7. Does the organization have a culture of health from the top down?** Sustaining a long-term wellness pro-

gram is a commitment—not just for employees, but for the entire organization. Companies must establish a top-down strategy in which leaders, including the president/CEO, participate. Wellness means something different to every organization, and it's important that companies create a program vs. a one-time activity to meet the needs of its population. Organizations looking for a starting point should ensure their company values promote health and their executives model these values, whether that's running in a company-sponsored 5K or participating in an on-site health screening event.

### Timing and Other Critical Factors

With those basic questions answered, it's time to move to the fundamentals of screenings, starting with when to hold them. Employers report greater success when holding CRC screening during observational months when there are national educational programs to tie into, such as Colon Cancer Awareness Month in March, but this may not work for all types of screenings.

Also, employers should avoid busy times of the corporate year, such as budgeting periods, major trade shows, customer conferences, major holidays or other significant activities. Historically, participation data reveals that conducting screenings at the same time as open enrollment—when employees are thinking about benefits—or with planned on-site events, such as workplace wellness activities, to minimize lost productivity are good options for screenings for diabetes, body mass index (BMI) and cholesterol.

Privacy has become a significant concern for workplace wellness programs. Employees don't want their employer or colleagues to know their health information. Addressing those concerns starts with program transparency, communication and education. In addition, employers should encourage employees to authorize having their screening information sent securely to their primary care provider. Employees should be reassured that their employer won't see the detailed results but will receive verification that the screening has occurred and that a care plan following evidence-based best practices is being implemented to foster a worker's best health. Collaborating with the workers' primary care providers also ensures they are apprised of relevant information and helps bring them into efforts for further education on prevention as well as appropriate followup.

## takeaways

- Health screenings are designed to identify employees at high risk for health conditions such as diabetes and colorectal cancer.
- Some employers have struggled to operate successful screening programs because of low participation or poor administration.
- Questions to consider when implementing a health screening program include which employees should be targeted for which screenings and how best to communicate with employees.
- Incentives can help drive participation in screenings to 70-80% of the employee population.
- After screenings are conducted, results should be provided to employees as quickly as possible, along with a plan with specific recommendations for how to respond to the results.

### Gain Valuable Insight and Act on Key Findings

Once program data is available, employers must be able to gather, analyze and use it to identify population trends and measure the success of the program. Screening partners should provide access to aggregate reports and analytics tools that offer detailed insight into overall employee health, helping organizations structure programs that appropriately address risks, improve productivity and reduce costs. The most valuable reports can filter program data by demographics and other variables to reach certain groups and understand their unique health risks.

### Next Steps

Health screenings can be a good way for employers to identify members at risk for chronic conditions, develop meaningful interventions and inspire employees to take a proactive role in their health.

The key to successful programs is to remember that one size doesn't fit all. Employers should look for programs that provide convenience and flexibility for the employee as well as what will provide the biggest return on investment for the employer.

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### Endnotes

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