OVERVIEW

Health is on the decline. Throughout the world, health care costs are rising and people are becoming less healthy. The World Economic Forum estimates that costs related to non-communicable diseases alone will reach $47 trillion by 2030. In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates annual health-related productivity losses cost U.S. employers $225.8 billion. From addressing complex health systems to battling rising costs, improving our population’s health is complicated.

Against this backdrop, recent findings from Aon reveal a conflict at the heart of U.S. health trends: people believe their health is important, but at the same time, they are placing less importance on traditional ways to improve their health. For example, an overwhelming 80 percent of people say physical wellbeing is extremely important in their lives, but healthy behaviors such as improved diet and more exercise are actually declining in importance. “The idea of overall wellbeing is attractive – who doesn’t want to be ‘well’?” says Ray Baumruk, Consumer Experience & Research Partner, Aon Hewitt. “However, it appears that people are beginning to redefine what ‘well’ means and it may not include the typical areas of diet and exercise as critically.”

Interestingly, Millennials, are the ones leading positive health thinking and behaviors. This is the generation that has grown up during significant technological change, and that has put off marriage, having children and purchasing homes. How are Millennials approaching health and what can we learn from them?

IN DEPTH

Aon’s Consumer Health Mindset ® Study results highlight clear generational differences in how people perceive and act on health and wellbeing priorities. Baby Boomers, for example, are most likely to view physical wellbeing as important, while Millennials, on the otherhand, consider wellbeing more broadly. To this generation in particular, the idea of health isn’t confined to just the physical. Joann Hall Swenson, Partner, Strategic Advisory at Aon, further explains: “This generation tends to have a more holistic view and overall health and wellbeing is something that is in their vernacular.”

How Millennials view and approach health offers some interesting and actionable insights:

1) Think Holistically About Health and Prioritize Stress Management & Sleep
According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five Americans have a diagnosable mental health issue and the World Economic Forum projects an associated global cost upwards of $6 trillion by 2030. “Though mental illnesses are reasonably prevalent, from our findings, not only do we see people with conditions encountering challenges to getting help, we are also seeing that people continue to report high, and growing, stress levels,” says Baumruk.

While mental illness and stress are separate issues, it is becoming clearer that emotional health is becoming an increasing priority for individuals and employers alike. Survey respondents are asking their employers to help “reduce the social stigma around mental and emotional health” so that they are able to seek help. And Millennials are the generation most willing to voice issues that relate to their mental wellbeing. Baumruk explains: “Of all generations, it is the Millennials that are making their mental health a priority.” As more light is shone on the impacts of mental illness, employers would likely prioritize emotional and psychological support programs for their employees – especially as it relates to addressing increasing stress levels and encouraging healthier sleep behaviors.

2) Make A Strong Health Culture Core To Your Employer Brand

Across all generations, prioritizing diet and exercise to improve health is on the decline and Millennials appear to be the generation most willing to mitigate their personal health risks with health care coverage. 73 percent of this generation say a company’s health and wellness program makes it more attractive as an employer compared to other companies. Considering the fight for top talent, Swenson recommends that an organization “introduce and aggressively promote their health offerings as part of their employer brand.”

Baumruk agrees: “Millennials are more likely than others to say that health programs make companies more attractive. Knowing this about this generation suggests a missed opportunity in how organizations market and message their health culture to new hires – who are increasingly Millennials – and the newest college near-graduates, Centennials.”

Employees of all generations are four times more likely to be engaged at work if they’re in a strong health culture. 69 percent of employees who work in strong health cultures, and experience the benefits, say health and wellness programs make their company more attractive. With almost half of respondents citing such programs as one of the reasons they stay in their job, health messaging should be core to employer brand messaging, beginning with onboarding and continuing through the entire employee life cycle.

3) Determine How – Not If – Technology Can Be Used In Your Health Program

Millennials are leading the trend in seeking assistance with health care, especially as it relates to technology. A significantly higher number of Millennials, as compared to other generations, are asking their employers to provide tools that help them understand health care spending. Millennials, too, are also in favor of mobile apps that help them get “In the Moment Information” (IMI) to help them navigate the health care system.

And this one is not just for the Millennials – across all generations there is an opportunity for employers to improve their approach to health care-related technology. Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers all cite that an information-based website including cost and quality information is the most important thing that an employer can do to assist in getting them access to the best health care services and programs.

Learning From The Millennials

Of all generations surveyed, it’s the Millennials, in particular, that noted a specific interest in understanding health care basics. They’d like to better understand what to do, when, how, and with whom. According to Baumruk: “This is a generation that takes pride in making smart choices based on a variety of information sources.”

Whether embedding a “health-first” mentality into an employer brand proposition as Swenson suggests or developing a multi-channel communication system to better deliver health messages to all employees, it is becoming increasingly clear: health is declining, individual attitudes are shifting, and the role of the employer in helping decision-making is becoming more and more important.

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**TALKING POINTS**

“Employers who understand the link between employee wellbeing and organizational performance are best positioned for success in the economic recovery.” – David W. Ballard, Director of the APA’s Center for Organizational Excellence
“The time has come for mental health to get the recognition it deserves at work. Coming from a background in construction, I know the lengths companies go to protect the physical health of their staff, but their mental wellbeing has often not received enough attention.” – Stephen Martin, Director General at the Institute of Directors

FURTHER READING

- Millennials Are Skipping Doctor Visits To Avoid High Healthcare Costs – Business Insider UK, March 21, 2017
- Americans Don’t Sleep Enough, And It’s Costing Us $411 Billion – The Washington Post, November 30, 2017
- Stress At Work Could Lead To Depression – Times of India, April 6, 2017