

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE CASE MANAGEMENT SOCIETY OF AMERICA

CASE IN POINT

Reprinted from Case In Point Weekly, November 2009

Coordinating Care, Changing Lives



The Right Path to Health
Care Reform at Work
Consumerism

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For the past decade, corporate America has increasingly sought to manage health benefit costs in a way that mirrors the switch from pensions to 401(k). The so-called health care consumerism movement, much like the “defined contribution” approach to retirement savings years before it, is built on a philosophy that individuals need to take more responsibility for their financial protection.

It also is part of a raging debate among lawmakers, policymakers and pundits about the best way to reform the nation’s ailing health care system, with some arguing that it unfairly shifts burgeoning costs from corporate coffers to strained household budgets and others saying it actually empowers people to make smarter choices when they finally realize the “true” cost of their health care.

Consumerism means that individuals should have greater control over decisions affecting their health care and are motivated by aligned incentives, relevant information and distinct choices. More recently, employers have turned their attention to more aggressively promoting employee accountability and engagement in strategic benefits redesign implementation plans.

But for consumerism to succeed in the workplace, employers are advised to take the road less traveled and focus on putting their employees in charge of their own work-life health care. And if this message is articulated carefully enough to President Obama and Congress in the weeks and months ahead, then the U.S. will be able to take a bold step in the right direction en route to its primary objective of offering affordable and high quality health care to more of its citizens.

Employers gain a competitive advantage by engaging and supporting employees to reach their full potential in terms of health and job performance. Health care is increasingly helping shape business success or failure. Cost-shifting and cost-cutting alone will not optimize the value of health benefits investments in the workplace. Employers must promote strategic achievement initiatives that integrate employee accountability and engagement with a corporate culture of health in order to provide employees with affordable benefits plan redesign options in 2010 and beyond.

The best way for organizations to realize the

total economic value of health, well-being and optimal employee engagement is to execute a three-pronged consumerism strategy featuring a competitive benefits package, employee accountability and health-risk management. These key elements must be part of a political attempt to remove waste and dysfunction from the health care system, as well as improve medical outcomes, cut costs and increase the value of an employer-based system of health benefits that critics dismiss as an accident of history following World War II.

Consumer values and personal preferences drive individuals’ health care decisions and behavior. There are inextricable links between health, well-being and optimal employee engagement. Employees are beginning to embrace the call to wellness improvement through work-life balance achievement goals. Employee health and total well-being achievement begins with a personal dedication to a balanced life that includes successful work and life-fulfillment components. Optimal employee engagement evolves when an employer creates a meaningful and emotionally enriching work experience that fosters personal accountability, engagement, health improvement and balance.

Employers are uncertain about their perceived role in influencing employee lifestyle choices and health care decision-making. But in reality, they’re doing whatever it takes to engage, support and optimize positive behaviors to help employees achieve work-life goals. The optimal result is a worksite where employees are able to balance individual needs and desires, and are motivated to contribute extra time, brainpower and energy to their job.

To ensure rapid business growth, maximized profits and lasting success, organizations must not only offer a competitive benefits package aligned to a culture of health, but also provide documented measures of success from instances of evidence-based care that can be administered in a cost-effective manner. The two other approaches that need to be factored into the equation include promoting employee accountability and engagement, as well as managing employee health risks.

The most critical challenge is to control employee health care costs while also foster-

ing a sense of personal responsibility and accountability. This nonpartisan message resonates in the halls of Congress where lawmakers lament the emergence of a national obesity epidemic traced to a fast-food culture that continues to fuel health care costs as a percentage of gross domestic product — which stands at about 16 percent and can easily reach 20 percent in just a few short years. Pursuing such action will help unveil the hidden costs of health, well-being and employee engagement at a time when policymakers expect organizations to be as transparent as possible regarding their labor costs and overall business practices.

As part of this thinking, employers are urged to redesign their health benefit programs and employee engagement strategies to better serve corporate priorities. Only then can businesses really begin to recover annual employee benefits investment and reap meaningful healthy dividends to power business growth. The conduit for such change will come through aligned employee achievement strategies and initiatives that promote a culture of health, well-being and optimal employee engagement.

TO MANY EMPLOYERS, CONSUMERISM IS A JUST FAD OR TREND THAT HAS RUN AMOK.

But the reality is that employees are becoming engaged, informed consumers of health care at work, where they spend at least half their waking hours. Enlightened employees want to know what their health care will cost much like they do car insurance or groceries — and they don’t just want a doctor’s bill or hospital bill. They want to know what the total costs are, from drugs to devices.

The effects of health care reform may just reach all the way to employee health and total well-being at work. Many employers will choose to promote whatever options are affordable. And in working with insurance companies, employers will most likely drive change too.

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