

# Finding health coaching that really works for employees

By Caroline Hroncich

When employees at Reliance Steel and Aluminum first heard they were getting a new health coaching benefit, they were ... skeptical.

It wasn't the first time they'd been down this road. In the past, health coaches had not been effective at helping them achieve their health goals, says Marcie Contrer, the wellness director at the company, which has more than 12,500 employees spread across the U.S.

"In the past they had bad experiences with the coaching sessions," Contrer says.

So after re-educating their workforce on the value of health coaching, Reliance switched to Staywell, a wellness program provider that also offers coaching, in 2016. The coaches Staywell provided gave employees the support they were looking for and prioritized the importance of a good coach-client match-ups.

"[The coaches] are understanding," Contrer says. "If they can't help they refer to another coach."

Reliance was pleasantly surprised by the reaction from their workforce.

"We've had great feedback," she says.

The metrics bear it out. "Through our measurements we have seen those who do participate in the program have a higher rate of success, versus participants in the program who don't participate," says Contrer.

Reliance is not alone. Companies are experimenting with health coaching as a method to encourage engagement in wellness programs, which are offered by about 58% of employers, according to data from the Society for Human Resource Management.

Another goal of health coaching is to help employees stay on track with their health goals. A study from wellness provider Health Fitness, found that employees that worked with health coaches gained 70% less weight and saved employers, on average, \$586 per year.

Despite this, employers have historically struggled to up engagement in these programs and many offer financial incentives to encourage workers to participate.

Staywell's clients include energy drinks maker Red Bull and oil giant BP. Employees using Staywell's app can communicate with their health coach over the phone, via online chat or in person. They also complete biometric screenings — which include blood pressure and cholesterol testing — to get more information on employee health, says Mitch Collier, senior vice president of product management at Staywell.

"It's really helping to see what ways they can set up accountability," he says.

Molly Heisterkamp at the Wisconsin Department of Employee Trust Funds says since they invested in the health coaching benefit in 2017, participation rates have more than doubled and they have seen a 10% reduction in health risks among members. In general, members meet with their health coach about once a month to ensure they are on track to meet their health goals.

"It's a really great service for those who are interested in having that dedicated support, knowing that a coach will be calling them with that time and frequency," says Heisterkamp, who is disease management and wellness program manager of strategic health policy at the trust funds.

Staywell's Collier says health coaches can help employees create actionable health goals based on where they are now. It also helps those who get easily discouraged stick with a wellness program.

"If someone is just left to a self-directed program, only the most motivated individuals will do that. People [who] get easily discouraged will quit," he says. "Combining that with health coaching is something that is powerful."

For Contrer, offering wellness benefits such as health coaching reaches beyond just the office. Employees also help to improve the health of their families, which can help create major lifestyle changes down the road. It also shows employees that the company values them, she adds.

"You're at work the majority of your day and this is where you really need to focus on the employee's well-being. Then they can take this home," she says.