What Good Are Employee Benefits If No One Knows About Them?

By Janice Litvin, Workplace Wellness Speaker and Author of Banish Burnout Toolkit

As I interact with clients from different industries, talking about burnout and how to prevent it by changing behavior, I am amazed to learn that many employees are not aware of the key wellness benefits available to them through their jobs, especially mental health benefits. Many companies are finally paying attention to the importance of incorporating and expanding mental health benefits into their wellness strategy. If we haven't learned it before, we certainly learned this important lesson last week when Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, famous for her magnificent and seemingly fearless aerial feats, announced that for her safety, both mental and physical, she was taking herself out of the most competitive event of her career.

How burned out are people at their workplaces, who in general, don't have to literally soar and twist through the air with the whole world watching?

According to a February 10, 2021 survey by Deloitte, (as reported in https://www.apollotechnical.com/remote-work-burnout-statistics/) 77% of 1,000 respondents said they had experienced burnout at their job. Ninety-one percent said that unmanageable stress or frustration impacted the quality of their work. Even those passionate about their jobs were still stressed at work with 64% saying they were frequently stressed.

Yet, I want to draw your attention to the fact that many employees' eyes glaze over when I suggest they reach out to their EAP (Employee Assistance Program) when their stress level is getting extreme and does not let up.

"EAP?" they respond.
"Yes, Employee Assistance Program, your company has one. It's where you can get telephone access to licensed therapists all over the country who are ready to help you."

"Oh, how do I access my EAP?"
"You look in your wellness portal or contact your wellness or human resources representative."

"But I don't want to be labelled as mentally ill."
"You won't be. Under HIPAA rules (Healthy Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) providers are not allowed to reveal the individual identify of anyone who uses an EAP."

Onboarding day is filled with so much information, it's hard for new employees to remember everything, including details about their EAP and any other mental health components. However, mental health benefits are a great example of benefits that need to be highlighted on a regular basis so that people do not forget about them, or neglect to access them when needed.

"How do I highlight?" you ask. By not only having a vibrant wellness portal, but also by driving traffic to your wellness portal. As you can see from the above conversation, many employees never bother to log in.

My best suggestion is to bring the message to them, for essentially the same reason major retail brands, like Apple, Nike, and Coca Cola, spend fortunes on billboard ads. The common advertising tenet is that buyers need to be "touched" seven times before they will take action. Applying that rule of thumb to marketing your workplace wellness programming, why not use of all your avenues of communication, such as:

- Slack channel
- Flyers in the elevators and on the walls throughout your departments and kitchen areas, highlighting a different wellness offering or activity every couple of weeks
- Flyers in the beautifully painted stairwells (which serve to entice people to take the stairs)
- Electronic billboards in the lobby
- Employee newsletter or email blasts

The employee newsletter is a perfect vehicle to share highlights of different wellness and other benefits in each issue, perhaps in a very visible display ad. Also you could write about a success story, of how a young couple learned from your financial wellness education program how to save or invest their money, or how someone improved her health by participating in your workplace wellness programs.

Another way to drive the information to teams is through their managers. Every manager should be educated enough to know what the company's basic wellness benefits are. And the manager should be engaging in wellness activities with their team. Just imagine their doing a water-drinking challenge or a daily 3 PM outdoor walk challenge.

As I referenced in the newsletter example above, financial wellness is another important and fundamental wellness element, and links with mental health. Financial stress distracts and strains employees and impacts their productivity. Seventy-three percent of Americans rank finances as their number one stressor, according to Gordon Stein, financial wellness speaker and author of Cashflow Cookbook. "Four in ten households don't have enough savings to handle an auto-breakdown or unexpected illness," according to a Forbes report "Why Workplace Financial Wellness Programs Are Hot" (5/18/2017).

Financial education as part of wellness should be provided by an educational company, not a financial services firm whose business it is to sell their services.

Whether employee mental health is affected by financial distress, family health problems, or broad issues like Covid-19 risk, ask yourself what you are doing to remove the stigma around mental health in your organization.

Did you know that one in four adults experiences mental illness or addiction in a given year, but less than one in three of those seeks treatment? According to NAMI (National Association of Mental Illness) "stigma is the greatest single barrier to treating mental illness."

Prudential worked to remove the stigma by getting company leaders to talk in front of the whole company about their challenges with depression. Getting issues out in the open begins to reduce the stigma and paves the way for others to change their attitudes and actions.

With burnout so widespread, you may know well that stress and burnout can lead to anxiety, depression, lost productivity, and high employee healthcare costs. But burnout is a two-way street. It's not just about individual action and self-care, but also about the work environment that caused the stress.

What are you doing to ensure your employees don't get burned out? According to Gallup three drivers of workplace burnout are:

- Too much work
- Not enough support from managers
- Lack of control over work

Most managers are promoted for technical skills, and no experience helping workers emotionally. Are you providing training for managers, so that when they encounter an employee who displays ongoing aberrant or concerning behavior, they know what to say or do?

Gone are the days when we thought a worker was just supposed to go to work, collect a paycheck and be happy to have a job. To remain competitive in this current Covid climate of unfilled jobs, you're going to have to treat your employees the way you would treat your children, family members, or friends — with kindness, respect, and assistance making sure they have what they need to thrive. ■

Happy employees make a healthy company.

To learn more about Janet and her book *Banish Burnout Toolkit*, visit janicelitvin.com.