

Huntington Memorial Hospital Raises the Bar on Wellness

Exemplary Health Screening Program Puts Employees in Charge

By Justin Bellante

Like the parable of the cobbler's children going without shoes, many of today's hospitals are so focused on providing quality patient care that they overlook the needs of their own employees. They understand the importance of prevention and early detection, but it's difficult to ensure that employees receive the same health screening services that they recommend for their patients.

That's why Huntington Hospital, a 625-bed, not-for-profit hospital in Pasadena, California, chose to outsource health screening and wellness services to third-party wellness vendors that can spearhead the entire process and maintain the confidentiality of employee results.

Like many organizations, Huntington's goal with its wellness program is to help its employees stay healthy and be more productive at work. Over the last couple of years, as Huntington's wellness program has matured, HR executives have recognized the importance of establishing measurements for gauging progress. They realized that wellness efforts are most successful when driven by specific information about the risks that drive costs, such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.

An effective screening program must include tools and communications to engage the entire population in a consumer-friendly manner. In addition, screening data must be integrated and connected to wellness interventions in order to funnel at-risk individuals into health improvement programs. Ideally, all of the wellness services should be connected so that participants have a cohesive experience.

Huntington accomplished this synergy by working with a wellness vendor that could not only spearhead its health screening program, but also create a Web portal to anchor other health and wellness activities. The portal has become an online hub for signing up users, sending reminders, conveying lab results, and integrating data from multiple wellness vendors into cohesive electronic health records.

"Screening is often at the front end of a wellness program, so the greater the engagement early on, the more people you will pull in for other health and wellness services," said Robin Rager, Ph.D., Director of Health Management at Keenan, a health insurance broker that works with the hospital.

2,078 employees enrolled in Huntington's health screening program. Of those that enrolled, 1,956 followed through to complete the screening—a 94 percent completion rate. Since the industry average for participation in such programs is about 25 percent, it's worth studying Huntington's methods to see what they did right.

Best Practices in Employee Engagement

First, Huntington offered an incentive for employees to participate: a \$13-per-paycheck reduction in healthcare premiums, which amounts to \$338 in savings per year. Second, they promoted the program heavily through a combination of email messages, overhead pages on the PA system during screening events, posters in the employee areas, postcards sent to employee's homes, and lots of face-to-face interaction. Employees who were on a leave of absence received a letter explaining how they could participate. Thanks to this well orchestrated communications blitz by Huntington and its screening vendor, more than 85 percent of the employees signed up in the first three days after the program was launched.

Another reason for the outstanding participation rates was the steady barrage of online messages emanating from the portal. Once people expressed interest in the program they received continual progress reports, reminders, and confirmations: acknowledging their enrollment status, making sure they signed up for a screening event, confirming the place and time of their appointment, notifying them when their lab results were ready for viewing, encouraging them to complete a Personal Health Assessment (PHA), and directing at-risk individuals to appropriate interventions.

Dr. Rager said that having this type of “communications continuum” is one of the benefits of enlisting help from a third-party screening vendor that specializes not only in the logistical aspects of screening an entire population, but also in the psychology of individual motivation. “Keeping people engaged is the key,” he added.

Private Data, Group Insight

Once they had created their accounts, each Huntington participant selected a preferred date and time for an on-site screening. Alternatively, they could print a lab requisition to take to their personal physician. In either case, lab results were posted in personal health dashboards, accessible on the portal through password-protected accounts.

The biometric data was integrated with the results of the PHA—self-entered data about diet, exercise, and personal habits. About 1,500 employees completed both the screening and the PHA, a number that Huntington Hospital would like to improve for future programs.

As the employer, Huntington Hospital did not have access to employee's individual data or results. However, they did receive aggregate reports that help the program-development team to gain a deeper insight into the overall health of the work force.

According to Debbie Ortega, Chief HR Officer at Huntington Memorial Hospital, this aggregate population data helps the hospital to identify important trends and make adjustments to the institution's health coverage and wellness incentives. For example, if Huntington discovers that the incidence of pre-diabetes is 10 percent higher than the national average, wellness administrators can add diabetes education to their palette of services, or engage health coaches who specialize in diabetes prevention to work one on one with at-risk individuals.

“Having screening as part of our wellness program has been tremendously valuable for our employees,” Ortega said. “Many people have discovered risk factors or learned about borderline health conditions, and then gone on to change their lifestyles to improve their health.”

When asked about their primary motivation during surveys handed out at the screening events, 43% of the participants said receiving a discount in their insurance premium was their main reason for participating, and 53% cited personal health reasons as their primary motivation. More than 80 percent of participants said they valued the confidentiality of the program—another reason for engaging an independent third-party vendor.

A Cycle of Continuous Improvement

In the future, Huntington Hospital may expand access to the biometric testing services by offering an at-home testing option. Employees who choose this option would sign up as before, then enter a mailing address to receive an at-home test kit. The at-home testing process is simple: users simply prick a finger, squeeze a few drops of blood onto a sample card, seal it in an environmentally safe envelope, and drop it in the mail. The anonymous envelopes are then routed to a certified lab for processing, and the results uploaded to each user's account. All screening data is aggregated as before, giving employees additional options without sacrificing the integrity of the population data.

“Offering multiple screening options is a great way to drive participation,” said Rita Essaian, Director of HR at Huntington Memorial Hospital. “By giving employees flexibility, you make it more easier and more convenient to get screened.”

Essaian admits that the hospital's wellness program isn't perfect, but each year the hospital encourages more employees to reach their health and wellness goals. Biometric screening provides a foundation for measuring improvement as the she and her team continue to institute various wellness programs.

As a wellness professional who works closely with many hospitals and other employers, Dr. Rager believes Huntington is on the right track. “Wellness programs must emphasize the whole picture, from engaging participants to achieving specific wellness outcomes to funneling people into disease management programs,” he said. “Ultimately, those are the tactics that mitigate healthcare costs.”

Justin Bellante is CEO at BioIQ, a health-improvement technology company that helps employers to optimize investments in health and wellness programs. BioIQ works with some of the largest employers and health companies in the nation and has launched over 1,000 successful health improvement programs since its inception in 2005.