



# Wellness: For the Well

Interview by Terence F. Shea

**P**rofessor Dee Edington is director of the University of Michigan Health Management Research Center. Its mission includes evaluating employers' health programs and helping them develop *strategic wellness initiatives*. This spring, the center published his book *Zero Trends: Health as a Serious Economic Strategy*.

"Helping the healthy people stay healthy is an emphasis that has been missing in our sickness-oriented health care system," Edington laments. "We have shown that many of

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*The interviewer is associate editor of HR Magazine.*

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the individuals with chronic disease, including heart disease and diabetes, come from the low-risk, healthy population. The low-risk healthy people are the champions in terms of health care costs and job performance. Any HR person knows that you sustain what you reward, and that means taking care of your champions."

## Are wellness programs focused on the employees who need them the most?

Wellness programs are generally focused on the high-risk or diseased employees. While these individuals need help, to ignore the others is sort of insane. If you keep doing what you are doing and getting the same results, you probably should be fired. I credit both Steve Covey and Albert Einstein with that observation.

Everyone should be the focus of wellness programs. The strategy is to help them prevent their health from declining—even those who are healthy now—and enable them to access the resources they need.

## If employers provide more wellness resources for healthy employees, would it mean a diminished focus on employees with health problems?

If the available resources [represent] a fixed amount, then yes. Currently, wellness resources are focused on 10 percent to 25 percent of the population, and we recommend that a healthy company has to focus on 100 percent of the population.

If the total is not a fixed amount, then my answer would be to increase the efficacy of the resources now directed toward those with health problems and add resources for those with fewer health risks or problems. A high percentage of the recovered or additional resources would be invested in the environment or culture of the organization, and all employees would benefit—both those with and those without health problems.

## How can employers be persuaded to direct more wellness resources to the healthy?

Companies are leveraging health plans to do more with employees, and they're doing this with such stepped-up intensity that I feel the movement could be the most important

development in employer-sponsored health benefits in the past several decades.

The problem is that no entity in the current U.S. health care system makes any money until people get sick. The only entities that benefit from healthy and productive people are the companies.

We need to change the conversation. Although health resources will always be skewed toward those with sickness needs, we need to find the economic balance to help the healthy people stay healthy.

## How can employers be persuaded to direct more wellness resources to the healthy?

Most people in the wellness field do not know what to do with someone with few or no risks. They have been told their mission is to help people reduce risk factors or to manage their diseases. So, the primary issue is to convince the professionals that the ultimate solution is to prevent employees from moving into high-risk status.

The next and perhaps greater challenge is to change the definition of health. It has to be defined as energy, vitality, well-being and high performance rather than—as it is now defined—just the absence of disease.

The first direct step is for the senior leadership to articulate a vision of a healthy and high-performance company.

The second direct step is for operations leadership to redirect the environment or culture to support that vision. This means aiming at the easy targets—getting more-healthy choices into vending machines and cafeterias, promoting the use of stairs instead of elevators, discouraging smoking, and so forth—and then looking at all environmental and cultural policies and

procedures for ways to foster health.

In the process, all leaders get the message that workplace and workforce health is critical for the organizations' success and for helping employees and their families avoid pain and suffering.

## Do you think that properly focused wellness efforts can help rein in the escalation of overall health costs?

We not only think that, but we believe that is the only solution. Intuitively and mathematically, the only solution is to stop the upward flow of the population from low risk to high risk to disease to high cost. ■

### Online Resources

For articles and videos on wellness initiatives and Dee Edington's research, see the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine).