

Employers Identify Workforce Mental Health Priorities for 2022

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One-quarter of large employers have adopted a formal well-being strategy

As the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt peoples' lives, employees' mental health remains a top HR priority.

As in the past two years, employers identify stress and burnout as a major threat for their workforces, according to survey results released in January by consultancy WTW (formerly Willis Towers Watson). The firm's 2021 Wellbeing Diagnostic Survey, conducted in October, asked 322 U.S. employers with 100 or more employees about their expectations for 2022. Among the findings:

86 percent of employers said mental health, stress and burnout were still a priority.

49 percent, however, had not formally articulated a well-being strategy for their workforce.

26 percent had adopted a well-being strategy.

"As stress and burnout levels continue to climb amid the ongoing pandemic, employers are putting the overall well-being of their employees at the top of their list," said Regina Ihrke, WTW's senior director, health and benefits. "The organizations that most effectively move the needle are those that develop a comprehensive strategy that supports all aspects of their employees' well-being. It's also important to articulate that strategy to employees, conduct manager training and measure effectiveness."

The survey identified the top two actions respondents planned to take in 2022 to improve employee well-being in each of the following four categories:

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Implement an organizationwide behavioral health strategy and action plan.

Redesign employee assistance program benefits, including increasing limits on visits and expanding services.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

Consider programs that target specific conditions for high-cost cases such as maternity, diabetes and depression.

Promote the use of mobile apps for physical well-being.

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING

Set objectives and track financial well-being programs at pivotal financial decision points such as new family, young children and first-time home buying.

Assess financial well-being programs for consistency with inclusion and diversity values.

SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Examine onsite perks to support new work arrangements.

Incorporate inclusion and diversity priorities in benefits program design.

"As we move into 2022, employers struggling with recruitment and retention will look to make their well-being programs a differentiator to attract and engage top talent," Ihrke said. "Employers are seeking new avenues to engage and incent employees to take charge of their own well-being."

Omicron Adds to Stress

The omicron surge has added to the stress and anxiety workers are struggling with, said Michael Thompson, president and CEO of the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions, a nonprofit network of business groups focused on improving health care value.

"While we had hoped the worst was behind us, employers will want to double down on efforts to create a supportive environment as the issues created by the pandemic continue."

Ensure Access to Counseling

Paul Roelke, manager of member services at The Alliance, an administrator of self-funded health care benefits, advised employers to audit their networks and health benefits to ensure their employees have access to mental health resources. "And if they're serious about their employees utilizing those resources, affordability is just as important; ensure your health plan offers broad access to in-network mental health providers," he posted on The Alliance's website. "Removing or reducing co-pays for employee mental health counseling and certain prescription drugs also greatly improves mental health care access."

Roelke pointed to the growing use of virtual therapy. "Roughly half of counties across the U.S. have no psychiatrists, so it's necessary to ensure your health plan offers telehealth services," he wrote. "Telehealth eliminates multiple barriers to mental health treatment, like transportation and costs, while offering comparable results."