

## Key Factors In Determining the Success of Health Coaching

Health coaching has become a fixed part of the American health improvement landscape. The program offering that began as an attempt to bolster benefits packages has grown and changed into a strategic business solution that addresses health care costs, productivity and employee health status.

Organizations interested in offering health coaching, or changing their current vendor, face an increasing number of options/providers and approaches. While the health coaching discipline has helped increase our understanding of behavior change as it applies to health improvement, it has also led to a confusing landscape for purchasers of this service.

In this brief paper, we explore the history of health coaching and key factors purchasing organizations should consider when choosing a health coaching provider or service.

### A Look Back

While many organizations (including employers, hospitals and health plans) and specialty vendors offer health coaching, it is still a relatively new science. The interest in a program that would offer personalized counseling to facilitate health behavior change began to take root in the late 1980s. In the mid-1990's the industry's pioneering organizations began offering services. So from concept, through initial development, to present day, health coaching has a history that is about 25 years old.

Over that quarter century, health coaching has changed in focus, delivery models and outcomes. Many early health coaching programs were delivered telephonically and offered to make benefits plans more attractive and encourage loyalty. Today's health coaching programs are still primarily constructed over the phone. However, services are also offered in-person, online and even through text messaging.

The majority of modern health coaching programs are offered as a strategic business solution to help organizations/employers address health care and productivity cost issues.

### Measuring the Impact

Despite its popularity, providers and organizations/employers have struggled to define success for health coaching. In its early stages, both parties focused primarily on individuals who participated in the program and how many interactions they completed.

The field is now moving toward intermediate measures of behavior change. The importance of incremental steps is proving to be a powerful predictor of behavior change success.



With the advancements in reporting came the ability to provide cost savings reporting. As organizations/employers seek to justify the costs and resources necessary for their health coaching programs, Return on Investment (ROI) as well as Value-on-Investment (VOI) is being requested.

The earliest approaches to ROI reporting for health coaching measured the savings realized solely by reducing/avoiding health care costs. As the field continues to evolve and focus on overall well-being, organizations/employers are asking providers to include productivity and presenteeism in future ROI/VOI calculations. Regardless of how outcomes are measured, a health coaching program will be successful if it can:

- » Lead individuals to be in compliance with program recommendations.
- » Support individuals in completing a defined number of interactions.
- » Ensure coaches follow defined and flexible protocols while applying their professional knowledge and experience.

## Remaining Critical

Health and Human Resource professionals responsible for providing health coaching programs should be prepared to review the program options as a sophisticated consumer. These employer representatives are encouraged to scrutinize coaching services from every angle during the purchasing process, ensuring the solution will provide value for the organization/employer and the individual participants. However, once the program has launched there is a tendency of letting the program continue without periodic and ongoing evaluation of all facets of the intervention.

Often organizations/employers are focused on the quarterly and annual outcomes reports. However, they are overlooking the equally-important daily operations. Indicators such as points earned, activities completed and risks reduced are all precursors to behavior change and positive cost outcomes. A best-in-class program will demonstrate that individuals are taking regular, consistent steps toward behavior change.

Participants' reactions to the program are also important for organizations/employers to monitor. Indicators such as participation/satisfaction rates, and the participants' perception that the program is helping them are also important variables to measure and track over time.

## Protocol & Reporting

Best-in-class health coaching programs are based on adult learning principles, clearly defined program protocols, and applied behavior change theory. The theory and protocols are the major components of the program, and guide all interactions between the health coaches and the individuals.

Protocols give well-trained health coaches direction and structure for their coaching sessions, yet are flexible enough to encourage use of their professional expertise and motivational skills. Coaches are well-trained in health coaching theory/philosophy, and in identifying the activities and outcomes that are important to their clients.

In the best cases, protocols are built directly into the software used by the health coaches. In addition to guiding the health coaches, the protocols provide a framework to measure the success of the program.

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