



Are Health Risk Assessments Still Relevant?

medi**KEEPER**

Workplace morale and productivity, as well as health care costs, are major concerns for most employers. An efficient work force depends strongly on employee health and happiness. To gauge and maintain their workers' mental and physical health, many employers incorporate health risk assessments as part of their workplace wellness programs. These assessments provide both the employees and the employer with valuable insights about their health, including feedback about their diet and exercise habits, as well as any possible risk of development of illness or disease. Employers can use this data to implement various wellness initiatives, such as exercise competitions, health interventions, or changes in workplace culture.

Despite their significance, health risk assessments (HRAs) are often undervalued. When utilized improperly, they may not yield useful or actionable information, leaving some employers wondering: Are health risk assessments still relevant in the workplace?

The answer is yes, absolutely. When administered correctly, HRAs are an invaluable source of important information regarding workplace health. They not only address health risks, but health history and current health status. The problem is that many employers make misinformed decisions when choosing and implementing an HRA within their company. As with any tool, an HRA's utility is determined by the user. As an employer who is interested in tracking and improving workplace health, it is vital to know how to choose the right HRA for your company. Here are common mistakes employers make when choosing and implementing health risk assessments, and how they can be avoided:

Companies choose the wrong HRA

There are many factors to consider when choosing an HRA. For example, an assessment that is too short will not gather enough information to be useful, while an assessment that is too long may reduce rates of user completion. A well-written HRA will be just long enough to collect the necessary information without resulting in participant frustration or boredom.

An accurate assessment does not overly rely on icons, as picture-based answers do not allow for an appropriate range of response options. Because there is so much variety among individuals, a wide spectrum of answers must be available for the participant to choose from. Otherwise, there is a risk that the responses provided will not accurately represent the individual.

In order to be reliable, an HRA must be backed by a range of healthcare practitioners. A wide variety of specialized medical expertise ensures that the assessment will gather the appropriate information to give an accurate evaluation of the participant's overall health in every area, including both mental and physical.

Despite accuracy, the feedback provided by an HRA is not useful if the individual is not interested in benefiting from it. By including questions regarding the participants' desire to change their habits or otherwise achieve good health, the assessment can offer recommendations which are tailored to the individual.

Low participation

One of the most frustrating issues an employer faces when administering an HRA is low employee participation. Often, individuals who are already interested in healthy living complete the assessment with no issue, while those who are less concerned about health may be difficult to motivate. It is important to include as many participants in the assessment as possible because this will create an accurate baseline moving forward in a wellness program. Additionally, low participation creates a generalization issue; it is difficult to make an overall assessment about office health when only a handful of employees have completed an HRA.

Offering incentives is a great way to encourage higher participation. An incentive can be almost anything, from a gift card to points in a workplace rewards currency system. Because most HRAs are quick, low-energy tasks, most employees will respond to even simple incentives, such as a t-shirt. Although 100% participation is rare, it is important to aim for the highest completion rate possible, and can be done by making the HRA a pre-requisite for participating in social challenges and Incentives & Rewards.

Monetary reward is a particularly good incentive, and can be effective even at the low cost of five dollars per participant annually; a generous incentive will help ensure that you get excellent participation rates.

HRAs are treated as a commodity

While it is a common assumption that all HRAs are created equal and are interchangeable, this is certainly not the case. Some employers make the mistake of switching between assessments or replacing an older HRA with a newer model. Because every HRA is different, this can result in an inaccurate evaluation of wellness program outcomes. Once a baseline has been created using an HRA, that particular assessment should continue to be used throughout the course of a wellness program. Since newer HRAs may include different or new questions that were not included in the original assessment, switching to a different assessment halfway through will skew data or provide no comparison from which to draw conclusions.

Health risk assessments are one piece of technology that should grow better with age provided they are reviewed and updated regularly by medical professionals. A flashy, new-age model may seem trendy, but a good HRA relies on time-tested standards. Choosing an assessment that is certified by an established accrediting body such as NCQA, and that incorporates only established facts that are widely accepted by the medical community, will ensure that the program will provide reliable and accurate feedback for participants.

Improper administration of assessments

It is essential that HRAs be administered properly, otherwise they will not yield reliable data. Administering an HRA before implementing a wellness program is vital to create a baseline and monitor any further changes resulting from the program. Additionally, re-administration or allowing updating during the course of the program can be helpful in establishing whether any changes to the program should be made. An assessment after the program has been completed will determine its effectiveness. It is advised that assessments are completed at least once annually.

Ignoring important data provided by the HRA may result in program failure. For example, an employer may put a large amount of time and effort into a workplace exercise program without first determining whether employees are interested in such a program. Even a well-designed health program can fail if the administrator does not carefully consider the specific needs and desires of his or her employees.

Outdated analytics

Where some HRA providers are hindered by slow, outdated reporting (such as hard copies sent in the mail), an effective HRA will provide instant, real-time results to the participant and administrator. Detailed, online reporting is a reliable way to improve a program's effectiveness.

Any data provided to the employer must be de-identified, aggregated and HIPPA-compliant to ensure the privacy of the participants. A practical HRA will incorporate risk stratification to sort this data into pools or subgroups so that the administrator can get the most use of it. Integrated messaging allows an employer to target these subgroups and send customized, specific messages that are tailored to the audience - rather than overwhelming every employee with information that may not be relevant to him or her.

Limited customization/integration

Even a well-designed HRA can be made more effective by including customization and integration options. By allowing the administrator to add custom questions, the assessment becomes an extremely useful tool for gathering any specific information the employer may be interested in. For example, an employer could invite input regarding what incentives the participants might enjoy, or use it to assess workplace ergonomic concerns, etc.

Often, information provided by HRA participants can be incorrect, such as weight or cholesterol numbers. However, if the company employs an on-site health screening, these results can be

integrated with data in the HRA. The lab-collected numbers replace the incorrect data, allowing for a more accurate representation of the participant's objective health measures.

Inadequate options and poor user experience

To be truly valuable, an HRA must offer excellent user experience and sufficient customization options. Otherwise, employees will be dissatisfied with their experience and participation rates will suffer.

Language options are imperative to ensure adequate participation and accurate information; integrated translations provides the user with a huge selection of languages. A branching question format makes for an efficient and accurate assessment without boring the participant or wasting time. A modern, intuitive interface is user-friendly, and incorporating a progress bar reduces participant frustration and increases completion rates. Mobile optimization provides convenience and accessibility.

Test delivery options make the assessment convenient and easy to administer in any situation. Whether the participant prefers to complete the HRA on paper or online (via phone, tablet, or computer), the test is accessible to all individuals. By supplying multiple options, the employer can raise participation rates and create an agreeable experience for the employees.

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of health risk assessments to choose from; however, HRAs are not one-size-fits-all. An educated and discerning employer can use this information to differentiate between a poorly-designed questionnaire and an exceptionally useful assessment. With the right HRA and a competent administrator, any workplace wellness program is bound for success.

About MediKeeper

MediKeeper offers a comprehensive suite of population health management tools intended for employer groups, health plans, brokers, TPA's, and wellness companies. MediKeeper's Health Risk Assessment and Wellness Portal tools enable healthcare consumers to make smarter health-related decisions. Founded in 2003, The MediKeeper technology gathers and analyzes disparate health data. By providing de-identified population reporting in a seamlessly integrated portal, MediKeeper's customers are better able to manage their population's health and make smarter wellness investments.

Learn more about how we may help you by calling us at (858) 251-3250.