

HR Compliance Library, ¶10,234, Managing diversity — benefits issues

Just as diversity will effect the workplace and productivity, it can also impact benefits. Some companies that have diverse workforces have reported problems trying to get employees acclimated to benefits in the American workplace. In many countries, health coverage is administered by the state and there is very little choice involved. In America, however, employees are afforded more choices. Employees need to understand the concepts of dependent coverage, of deductibles and copayments and of HMOs and managed care principles. Some companies with large segments of foreign cultures help combat the problem by providing benefits information in the native language of those segments.

Beyond maneuvering within the confines of the system, however, the actual medical practices and beliefs of some countries are also very different from those of Americans. For example, in Asian cultures, many people believe that diseases are caused by the wind, and that only remedies such as rubbing a coin on the skin will cure them. Similarly, the idea of hospice care for the terminally ill is also foreign to the Asians. They believe that a close member of the family should inform a patient of a terminal illness, not the medical professional treating the patient (.⁰⁵).

There are also diseases that tend to be indigenous to a particular racial group or culture. Sickle-cell anemia (an inherited blood disease), for example, is predominantly found in black people, and Tay-Sachs disease (a fatal enzyme disorder which effects the lipid metabolism) is found in Middle Eastern Jews. If there is a large segment of the workforce population of one cultural or ethnic background, it might be worthwhile to research any such risk factors or problem areas and try to tailor a wellness approach including any specifics relating to that group.

One potentially volatile issue is AIDS. Studies show that the AIDS epidemic has risen higher in certain ethnic groups than in the general population, and employers certainly want to approach the issue with care. In communicating with employees about the AIDS issue, some experts recommend targeting each ethnic group separately, to help put the members of the group at ease and lower inhibitions. That way, specific risks and problems particular to that group may be more fully addressed. For maximum effect, employers can also use different role models that appeal to the specific culture or group being targeted (.⁰⁵).

Even methods of prevention must take on a tailored approach to be effective with diverse workforces. Wellness, for example, is a new concept for some ethnic groups. Wellness is dependent on genetic factors to an extent, but perhaps even more dependent upon lifestyle factors, such as diet and other choices determined in part by cultural custom. These kinds of habits and choices can effect the organizations's bottom line by making insurance premiums and experience rates soar. Breaking the unhealthy habits of employees may take more than scientific facts—it may require an attitudinal change.

Footnotes

- .05 Shutan, Bruce, "Ethnicity Playing Role in Health Benefit Plans," *Employee Benefits News* , May 1992, p. 32.