

# what's working

changing employee  
health behaviors



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An annual health assessment and biometric health screening in 2012 indicated that unhealthy behaviors were reducing the quality of life of employees and raising health care costs at Richmond, Virginia-based Dominion Resources.

With 14,000 employees in 16 states, Dominion is one of the nation's largest producers and transporters of energy.

The assessment and screening showed that five risk factors—weight, stress, blood pressure, eating and cholesterol—accounted for 84% of the self-funded company's costs for treating avoidable health problems.

Management, the company's wellness team and external provider StayWell set a short-term goal of increasing wellness program participation and long-term goals of engagement and behavior change.

"At Dominion, we believe that if employees are healthy and well, they will perform better and be safer while at work," said Wendy Wellener, vice president of human resources. "Initially, we just wanted employees to know their numbers, but now we are focusing on engagement in various health activities. We are confident they can work together to improve overall health and reduce health care costs."

Three steps have led to a wellness program that resonates with the company's diverse workforce.

## Step 1: Know the Audience

Five different unions represent about 35% of Dominion's workforce. The majority (90%) of union-represented employees are men in their mid-40s. Most work in either the gas or electric side of the business, with a small portion of

union employees in technical or service positions in offices.

The combination of union-represented and nonunion employees creates challenges in how the company structures, implements and communicates its wellness program. For example, the benefits team must work through union leadership when making changes to wellness benefits, and any communications to union-represented employees are reviewed with union leadership before being sent to individual employees. (See the sidebar, "8 Tips for Maximizing Participation Among Union-Represented Employees.")

"This collaboration with the labor relations management and union representatives has become an integral part of our wellness strategy and something we see as a considerable asset," said John Larson, director of labor relations at Dominion Resources. "The labor relations manager serves as a liaison to our five unions and gives us invaluable insight into how our materials, messages and program changes will be perceived by employees."

To account for diversity among its population and to ensure the program is being adequately communicated, with the most effective types of messages through the best channels, Dominion has conducted online focus groups. Pat Branch, labor relations manager, said that through this work, his team is able to identify nuances in images, design elements and messages in wellness communications that may seem minor but could possibly trigger a negative reaction among employees.

"You need a good communications vendor who can research your population and tailor your communications accordingly," said Branch. "We have integrated three communi-



cations plans into one and are continually working with the benefits team to ensure that, between all of the various benefit communications being sent to employees, we are keeping them informed without overwhelming them with information.”

## Step 2: Tailor the Plan to the Workforce

Because changes to the wellness and health benefits must be negotiated with each union, leadership typically will introduce new programs to nonunion employees first and extend programs to union-represented employees in stages upon renewal of their contracts. This rolling implementation and the company’s relationship with union representatives allow Dominion to personalize the programs and marketing efforts to various segments of employees. The company tailors its programs and outreach by:

- Vetting all communications and program changes for union-represented employees through labor representatives
- Mailing program information to employees’ homes so spouses and partners have access to it and can influence participation
- Providing information to all supervisors and administrative assistants who work with union-represented employees so they can communicate important information with employees before they get in their trucks and leave for the day of work. Supervisors also use this time to show wellness and safety videos and lead employees in stretch breaks to start their day.
- Connecting with employees as much as possible without interrupting their workday, but then heavily targeting communications to their homes
- Asking administrative assistants, most of whom are well-known and trusted by employees, to encourage completion of the health risk assessment and participation in other program elements
- Using permission-based e-mails to send information to employees
- Working with the company’s 80 wellness ambassadors to educate employees and to encourage participation
- Making on-site health screenings accessible to spouses at several locations

- Offering unique on-site opportunities, like a juicing demonstration and “laughing classes.”

This rolling implementation approach has allowed Dominion to add participants each year. It is anticipated that, within a few years, almost all employees and spouses will be enrolled in the wellness program. While this ultimately is a good thing, managing a customized wellness program can become very complex, very quickly.

The wellness program, which officially started in 2012, is branded “Well On Your Way.” It consists of:

- An annual health assessment
- Health screenings
- Lifestyle coaching (telephonic and via mail)
- Incentives (medical premium credit)
- An online participant portal
- Online “Healthy Living” programs
- Wellness ambassadors
- On-site and Dominion-sponsored activities

## 8 Tips for Maximizing Participation Among Union-Represented Employees

Dominion provides eight tips for implementing wellness programs for union-represented employees:

1. Send mailings to home addresses for employees who do not have regular access to a computer. Mailing information to the home also enables the spouse to remind employees about wellness opportunities.
2. Provide material to supervisors and administrators who have close contact with union-represented employees without computer access.
3. Create an extranet website that is specific to the organization’s program so employees can access information outside of work. Customize that site for each union group within the company.
4. Create short videos about the program and post on an external site that is accessible to employees who work off site.
5. Learn about the daily habits and communications preferences of employees and tailor the program and outreach accordingly.
6. Make incentives (if incentives are offered) meaningful and substantial enough to trigger a loss avoidance among employees. If an organization simply offers a gift card, chances are it won’t get the same participation as it would with a premium incentive.
7. Customize communications to each union group to save time and reduce “noise” during open enrollment. In the long run, this can increase participation and employee satisfaction.
8. Be transparent with union leaders and with employees to build trust and improve long-term relationships.

- An employee assistance program
- On-site fitness centers at about 40 locations.

“As our program has evolved, it has become more complex, with more layers. At the same time, we continuously strive to make it easy to administer and easy for employees to use,” Wellener said. “That calls for continuous collaboration and integration and clear communication. It also requires planning. Our team is always looking at what’s next and how things like health reform or regulatory changes will affect our program and the broader industry.”

Leadership support and involvement, which many wellness experts believe are critical to the success of a wellness program, include management-led webinars that promote wellness opportunities during open enrollment and throughout the year. Leaders also participate in a variety of wellness activities and company-sponsored fitness events, such as Team Dominion Running Club, softball and volleyball teams and the Annual American Heart Association Walk. The company also sponsors blood drives and on-site flu shot clinics.

Communication is important to the program’s success—from “pop-up” reminders when employees sign onto their computers to the numerous communication pieces from consultants; through postcards, targeted e-mails, posters and fliers; and on channels such as the company’s intranet and internal news outlets.

About 80 wellness ambassadors promote the company’s program. This initiative started at the employee level in 2013 and remains driven by employee volunteers.

### Step 3: Measure Outcomes

Leadership and the wellness team are pleased with outcomes including:

- The average number of health risks for first-time health assessment completers decreased from 3.17 to 3.
- The average number of health risks for repeat health assessment completers went from 3.16 to 3.09. This demonstrates that people are building on positive behavior change from year to year.
- For people who participated in the company’s lifestyle coaching programs, the average number of health risks went from 3.73 to 3.54.
- Among people who participated in a NextSteps program, health risks decreased by 5.1%.

More than half of all union-represented employees participated in the program during the first year. Since then, participation has averaged approximately 68% across all union groups.

### Planning for a Healthy Future

Wellness efforts continue to be focused on weight, and more emphasis is being put on stress management. More incentives recently were added to try to increase engagement. Consumerism and health education are central to ongoing efforts, and additional topics extend beyond physical health to overall well-being, including a new initiative focused on financial wellness.

Dominion currently offers a medical premium credit, which allows the company to engage its population in health improvement over time. This is important because the average employee tenure is long and the jobs can be physically demanding, if not dangerous. Additional incentives are connected to locally organized challenges conducted on site at different locations. These homegrown contests include walking clubs and weight-loss or fitness challenges that complement corporatewide activities.

Response to the program continues to be positive, as more than 300 employees submitted personal testimonials of how the “Well On Your Way” program has helped them. Wellener said the secrets to success are quite simple: Get management support, make sure incentives match the culture and use behavioral economics to drive participation.

*David Robinson has held several human resources positions in the banking and utility industries over the past 20 years. His current role as supervisor—benefits at Dominion Resources, a power and energy company headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, allows him to focus on process improvements and cost savings in benefits administration. Robinson received his undergraduate and graduate degrees in psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University.*

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