

# Motivating Employees to Complete Health Risk Assessments



The use of health risk assessments has become an important tool in helping workers understand how to live a healthier life. Unfortunately, it has also become a pain for companies to get their employees to complete health risk assessment questionnaires, let alone use the information they learn to make healthier changes in their lifestyle.

Mercer, a human resource consultancy, surveyed over 2,900 companies and found that 73% of employers in 2009 asked their workers to complete health risk assessments, up from 53% only three years earlier. This rise could be attributed to use of incentives by almost a quarter of employers, given to workers who fill out and return their assessment.

Cash was the most popular incentive offered, used by 45% of businesses polled, with 32% of companies offering reduced premium costs on employee benefits packages. A smaller percentage of companies made contributions to their employees' health care savings accounts or similar flexible spending accounts. In all, the incentives averaged a value of around \$150.

Smaller rewards, like coffee mugs and lower health care deductibles were also very common in the Mercer survey. About 4% of employers forced health care plan participants to complete a health risk assessment in order to receive benefits, but that can create a whole other set of problems.

## Incentives that Motivate

Money talks, and in the case of health assessments, money gets employees to talk. By simply offering gift cards to employees who complete different steps of the assessment process, one international corporation was able to raise their participation level from 10% up to 38%, costing the company only \$25 per employee incentive.

To ensure that employees continue to push for healthier lifestyles after the assessment process, some employers offer incentives to workers who participate in health-conscious activities, like a walking club or eliminating soda from their diet. Gift cards and other prizes are handed out to those who participate in multiple programs.

Reducing health care premium costs has shown to be a very effective method of motivating employees to complete assessment questionnaires. A lump-sum annual reduction of \$250 was able to get half of the employees of one international company to complete their assessment process, and monthly reductions of \$50 was enough motivation to get 93% of another international company's employees to participate.

The researchers at Mercer agree that it is next to impossible to achieve total participation in employee health risk assessments, due to skepticism or other fears, but companies should shoot for about 60% participation. At this level, significant and reliable statistics can be generated.

## Non-Financial Motivators

Not every employer can afford the incentives mentioned above, but other methods can be used to motivate employees. Interoffice and departmental competitions can increase teamwork and peer pressure to complete the health assessments, even if the reward is small. Employers must understand what types of things their staff values before offering an incentive, whether it is sporting event tickets or contributions to a local charity.

The most important non-financial motivator is how the company presents the health risk assessment process to their employees. Workers who understand why the assessment exists and how it can help improve their health and reduce their benefits costs are more likely to fill it out.

Health risk assessments must be presented in a way that makes it sound simple, beneficial, and quick to complete. They should be offered online and in paper form, and they do not need to have “risk” or “assessment” in their name, since these terms might sound like a turnoff to some employees. Think of a more inviting title, such as “health questionnaire.”

## The Next Step

Completing the assessment is only the beginning of the process to create a healthier workforce, reducing health care costs along the way. Once the results come in, employers need to formulate a plan to encourage healthy living habits among their staff in order to catalyze real changes.

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