

# HEALTH CARE

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## WELLNESS PROGRAMS

# Wellness program momentum leveling off

But telecommuting, bonuses and professional development opportunities are on the rise, SHRM research finds



BY NICK OTTO

**E**mployer adoption of wellness programs has seen a dramatic jump in the last 20 years, but new research from the Society for Human Resource Management suggests plan sponsors are starting to re-evaluate their programs.

In 2016, wellness programs were

offered by 72% of employers, up from just 54% in 1996, although the number of wellness benefits offered by organizations has begun leveling off.

And while weight-loss and smoking-cessation programs "have stood the test of time," other wellness program components have not, Evren Esen, SHRM's director of survey programs, said during SHRM's annual conference in Washington, D.C. in June.

"I think wellness is here to stay," she added. "However, it may be that organizations are taking a step back to see what's working."

For example, 37% of organizations now offer health and lifestyle coaching for employees, a decrease

from 46% in 2015. And, 41% offer smoking cessation programs to discourage smoking, down from 45% in 1996.

SHRM's annual benefits study details more than 300 benefit offerings. "While there have been changes over the last 20 years, what stood out are some of the core benefits

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employers offer haven't changed too much," Esen said. "In 1996, we saw benefits used as more of a one-size-fits-all strategy compared to today's more demographically targeted benefit offerings," she said. "When we think about some benefits like Lasik or gender reassignment surgery, it's a high-cost benefit, but offered as a way to appeal to select employees an employer has determined would be attracted to these benefits."

During the most recent recession, benefit offerings didn't see as much creativity, she noted, adding that when the economy is stronger and there's a war for talent, more interesting perks start to appear. "These are benefits that stand out because few organizations offer them, but it shows how some [companies] strategically use benefits in order to meet business needs," she said.

"When we see these, we usually see them in the tech or start-up industries and later embraced by the larger employer base," she added. "Some benefits like egg freezing for nonmedical reasons ... and student loan repayments, they're great ways to attract top talent." Four percent of employers offer student loan repayment, SHRM found.

One of the biggest trends that emerged from the study is the increase in telecommuting. In the last two decades, the percentage of employers offering telework has jumped from 20% in 1996 to 60% today. Those offering telework benefits to employees on an ad hoc basis also went up between 2012 (45%) and 2016 (56%).

In a separate SHRM study released recently, employers reported increasing their training benefits as a way to deal with skills shortages.

"HR professionals from all industries report a highly competitive market for talent, with recruiting difficulty reaching levels not seen in years," said Jen Schramm, manager of SHRM's workforce trends and forecasting program. ■