

Bridging the Gap:

**Communicating
about Public Health
to Employers**



CDC Foundation

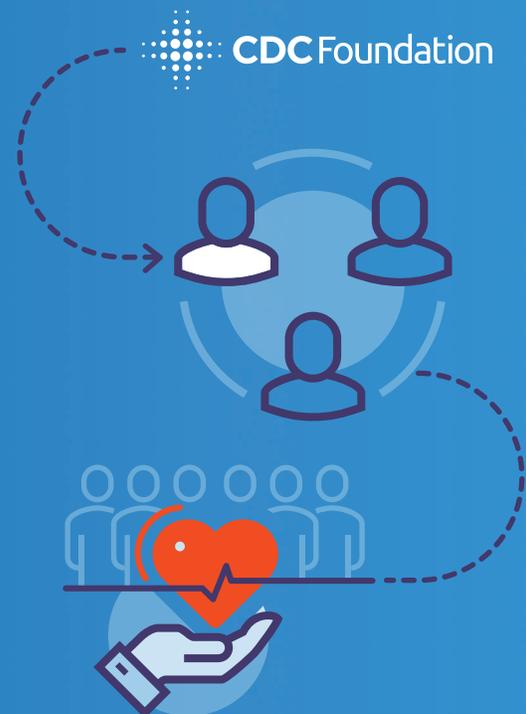
Introduction

One of the many challenges we face as public health professionals is how to create change on a systemic level to improve the health of all Americans. As healthcare in this country is largely tied to employment, one of the biggest focus areas to improving public health is through employers -

especially in chronic disease management. But what is the best way to communicate with those employers? What messages resonate with human resources professionals who are creating and managing employee health benefits, and who have the greatest potential impact for systemic change?



The CDC Foundation sought to understand how private sector employers addressed chronic disease in their workforce and how to support them as they pursue that role. In April 2020, the CDC Foundation partnered with a public opinion research and message development firm to conduct a message testing project with HR decision makers. The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the most effective messages for motivating organization decision-makers to offer chronic disease prevention and management benefits and programs. The primary audience for the inquiry included human resources professionals and C-suite executives who were involved in choosing and designing employee health and welfare benefits programs. The insights revealed the types of messages that resonated with these professionals when it came to health and wellness.



Methodology

This project included three phases for gathering insights.



Phase 1

15 in-depth interviews with HR executives



Phase 2

Online opinion survey of over 300 human resource and benefit design decision makers



Phase 3

Additional 15 in-depth interviews

Participants represented companies ranging in size from 50 - 1,000+ employees from a wide variety of industries including manufacturing, professional services, retail, technology, construction, health care, and more.

A total of ten key messages were tested (Table 1). All the messages were supportive of providing employee benefits to prevent and manage chronic disease. However, some of the messages were purely altruistic in nature (e.g., “Employers have an obligation to look out for the best interests of their

employees”) while others were focused more on return on investment (ROI), employee turnover, or reducing employee absences (e.g., “Preventing and managing chronic disease has been shown to produce a strong return on investment”). For this portion of the inquiry, participants indicated the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ options from a given set of messages. This forced choice approach produced a score for each message based on how it was rated by participants, and a “reach analysis” showing which messages worked best together to reach the largest audience.

Table 1: Key Messages Tested, in Order of Participant Preference

- 1 People with chronic diseases may be at higher risk for diseases like COVID-19. Preventing and managing chronic disease could help make an organization’s workforce less vulnerable to new and emerging diseases.
- 2 Employers have a responsibility to look out for the best interests of their employees.
- 3 Showing a genuine concern for employees’ health and wellbeing increases their morale and their commitment to the organization.
- 4 Preventing and managing chronic disease among employees can reduce costs paid by the employer.
- 5 Preventing and managing chronic disease is good for the individual employee, the organization, and the community.
- 6 Providing health and wellness benefits can make an organization more attractive to the best potential employees.
- 7 Preventing and managing chronic disease has been shown to produce a strong return on investment.
- 8 Preventing and managing chronic disease increases productivity by reducing employee health-related absences.
- 9 Providing health and wellness benefits enhance an organization’s reputation and can be used as evidence of responsible corporate citizenship.
- 10 Preventing and managing chronic disease helps retain employees and reduce the cost of workforce turnover.



Findings

Overall, the findings showed there is a strong and growing awareness of the importance and value of helping manage the health and well-being of employees. **When asked whether over the last five years the number and quality of health and wellness benefits offered by their employers increased, decreased, or stayed about the same, over half (54%) of participants stated it had increased (Fig. 1).**

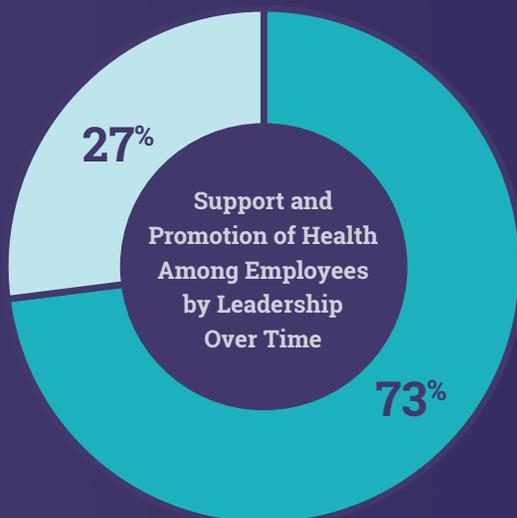


Fig. 1:



Additionally, **when asked about the leadership of their organization and whether the support and promotion of health among their employees had become more important, less important, or stayed the same over time, 73% said that it has become more important (Fig. 2).**

Fig. 2:



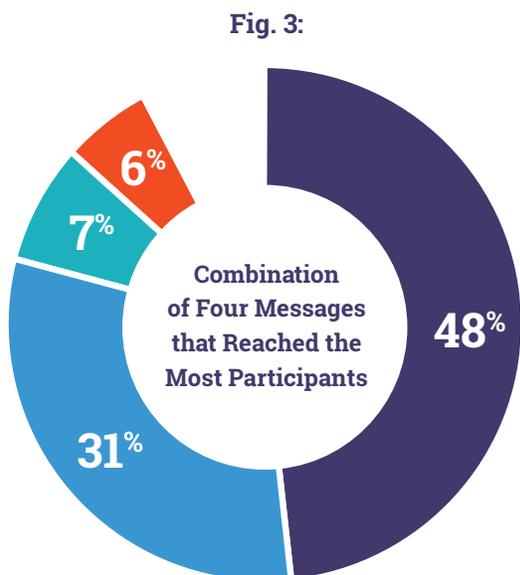
The strongest messages focused on three major themes: the influence of COVID-19, altruism, and showing concern for employees. The top three messages were:

- COVID-19:**
"People with chronic diseases may be at higher risk for diseases like COVID-19. Preventing and managing chronic disease could help make an organization's workforce less vulnerable to new and emerging diseases."
- ALTRUISM:**
"Employers have an obligation to look out for the best interests of their employees."
- CONCERN FOR EMPLOYEES:**
"Showing a genuine concern for employees' health and well-being increases their morale and commitment to the organization."



The messages that resonated most with human resource professionals had to do with taking care of employees' health because it is the right thing to do, but also because it improves employee morale and makes the workforce more resilient to new and emerging diseases. Messages that were based more on business performance scored in the middle of the pack but were still significant to

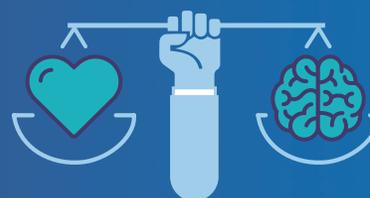
many of the participants. When a "reach analysis" was conducted using an algorithm examining the total reach for every possible message combination, it was determined that a combination of four specific messages packaged together had the broadest appeal. These four messages, outlined below, were found to reach, and resonate, with 92% of participants (Fig. 3).



- People with chronic diseases may be at higher risk for diseases like COVID-19. Preventing and managing chronic disease could help make an organization's workforce less vulnerable to new and emerging diseases. (#1 message by preference score)
- Employers have a responsibility to look out for the best interests of their employees. (#2 message by preference score)
- Preventing and managing chronic disease has been shown to produce a strong return on investment. (#7 message by preference score)
- Preventing and managing chronic disease increases productivity by reducing employee health-related absences. (#8 message by preference score)

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic made it clear to employers that to preserve their businesses and the economy, it makes sense to help employees stay healthy. When communicating public health information to the business sector, we recommend taking a two-pronged approach.



1

Present information in a way that appeals to the **"heart"** of the decision makers and focuses on how this information affects employees and their families. Demonstrating empathy is key and helps build trust with your audience.

2

Present information in a way that appeals to the **"head"** of the decision makers: how does this information affect their business and how it performs? Employers want to verify that any health messaging they relay to their employees is scientifically sound and valid.

Taking this approach not only increases the likelihood that your public health messages are heard, but even more importantly, it should help you disseminate messages that inspire action from employers.

