Episode #1 – January 2008  
Transcript of Interview with Ron Z. Goetzel, PhD

Ballard: Welcome back to the Good Company podcast. Joining us this month is Dr. Ron Goetzel, Director of the Institute for Health and Productivity Studies at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health, and Vice President of Consulting and Applied Research at Thomson Healthcare. Welcome Dr. Goetzel. It's an honor to have you as our first featured interview on this podcast.

Goetzel: It's delightful to be here on this podcast with you.

Ballard: With all of the research you've done on health and productivity management, I thought we'd start out with the basic question. -- What do we know about what actually works?

Goetzel: Well, we know a lot more than we actually admit to. There just hasn't been as much dissemination and application of what is known, what the research has shown us, what some of the best practices are. So, we're hoping to get more and more of that out, because health promotion programs, when structured right, when they're evidence based, when they're theory based, actually produce some pretty fantastic outcomes.

Ballard: What are some of the success factors in these efforts?

Goetzel: Well, one that is critically important is organizational support, senior management support, engagement of the management of the organization. Essentially, making health a priority for the organization is as important as the production of its goods and services. So noting it as a strategic initiative, knowing that it's a priority, knowing that it's something that will actually have an impact on the business; its profitability, its competitiveness, is something that makes a huge difference.

Ballard: Can you give us a few examples?

Goetzel: Sure. Having health as part of the mission statement of the organization. Now, it doesn't have to be kind of the overall mission statement, but it can be part of the human resources mission statement. Providing the employees the opportunity to engage in health improvement programs and activities, making them accessible. Also, encouraging employers to use those services. The next important step is to provide incentives for people to participate in these programs. A good health risk appraisal tool serves really three purposes. The first is to increase awareness about health issues among the employees who take that HRA. Second is to help triage individuals into different tailored intervention programs, based upon their level of risk and their interest in addressing those risks. And then thirdly, it's also obviously, a very useful data collection tool, so that you can, along the way, figure out whether
you're improving the risk profile of the population. So the health risk appraisal is essentially a cornerstone or a gateway to other programs that are tailored and suited to the specific needs and requirements of each individual. And the people who are at highest risk typically receive more intensive support and counseling and coaching, whereas those people who are not at high risk or not interested in receiving that kind of service, are going to receive less of it.

There are also obviously, different ways of providing these services. There's the “Tell” approach, which is you know, you've got to quit smoking and lose weight and eat healthy and so forth, and then there are other approaches which apply a lot of psychological theory, including reflective counseling, self-management techniques and motivational interviewing, that are obviously, much more effective than just telling people they have to change their behavior. Then, having connections back to the community, whether it's a local fitness center, a local Y, a weight watchers program, and making them complimentary to what you're trying to do at the worksite is very helpful. And then finally, ongoing measurement and evaluation, and providing feedback to everyone; the employee himself or herself, the managers, and senior managers, to make sure that the interventions that are being put in place are actually effective.

So if you've got those components, and I've just you know, provided you a Cliff Notes summary of what those are, then you can go about determining whether the program is effective.

Ballard: Well, let's drill down to the bottom line. What kinds of outcomes might be expected?

Goetzel: Two main categories are really health effects and financial effects. So, health effects typically look at the risk factors that these programs are attempting to address in the psychosocial dimension. They include stress levels, depression, anxiety, essentially the ability to cope with your day to day activities, and to be able to manage them effectively. On the physical side, common things that are addressed include weight, your blood pressure and cholesterol and glucose levels, smoking status, whether you get preventive screenings, those kinds of things. Then when you move over to the financial side, you're looking at healthcare utilization, absenteeism, workers comp disability, and presenteeism, which is on the job productivity losses related back to health issues. Any and all of those can be monetized.

Ballard: You started to talk about getting employees involved and increasing participation rates. What are some effective ways of doing that?

Goetzel: Well, there are some financial and non-financial ways of doing it. I'll start with the non-financial. Essentially, if the culture of the organization is one that's health promoting, then it's a norm, it's what you do. For example, I worked at an organization where the lunch hour typically, the vast majority of employees went out to work out in the fitness center, or they went out for walks, or they did things that were health promoting, and this was because their managers and supervisors were doing it and often times encouraging them to do that. But it's this norm, this culture
that develops in the organization, where it's communicated that health is important, work-life balance is important and so forth and so on.

The other way is of course, of getting people to participate, is to provide them with incentives. The most common incentives that are currently used are a reduction in the premiums that employees pay for health benefits. There are requirements, and they differ organization by organization. Sometimes the organization just says, all you've got to do is complete an HRA, a health risk appraisal, once a year. Other organizations say well, you need to also do a follow-up coaching session, to tell you what you can do to improve your health and well-being. Other organizations may go yet a step further and say, you've got to participate in certain classes or seminars or counseling activities or fitness center activities, in order to maintain that premium reduction. Other things that work include gifts and gift cards and lotteries and things like that, but they are usually less effective than actually showing a direct connection between participation in programs and a reduced benefit cost.

Ballard: What are your thoughts about providing financial incentives to encourage behaviors that ideally, you want to become intrinsically motivated?

Goetzel: Ideally, what happens is when people get introduced to certain lifestyle patterns; healthy eating, physical activity, moderation in terms of drinking, not smoking, stress management, so forth and so on, that in turn creates an intrinsic reinforcement for those activities and those behaviors. But you've got to get people engaged and involved in trying these things out initially, and often times you do that, but over the long term, you've got to maintain that behavior over time. And then hopefully, there is an intrinsic reward with just feeling better, looking better, feeling more energized, and those things sustain and maintain that behavior.

Ballard: Many large organizations have pretty sophisticated and comprehensive health and productivity management programs in place, but how can a small or mid-size employer move into health and productivity management?

Goetzel: Well, there are three ways. The first is to work with the vendor. So, assuming the small employer has hired somebody, a vendor to come in and deal with these issues, the first question that an employer should say is, how are you going to measure your performance, and let's put together some performance measures and performance outcomes that we're going to be tracking and monitoring over time. You know, what are your reporting capabilities, how do you feed back information to us, to let us know that things are working? So that's obviously the first place to go.

The second place would be, especially if you're working with your health plan, is ask the health plan to provide reports and analyses on the effectiveness of its programs, not just for you, but really all the employers who are purchasing these programs. And they are able to aggregate those data across those employers and provide some fairly sophisticated analyses, where they compare the employers that have these programs in place versus the ones that don't.
The third way is independent of the health plan itself. You can form community consortia, essentially coalitions in a given geographic area, get your employers together, and together decide what it is you want to achieve, what are your objectives, who are the partners that you'll be working with, and what are the measurement systems and reporting systems that you will want to look at on an ongoing basis as a consortium. That way, you essentially are able to coalesce many employers into a unified group, where you've got enough data, you've got enough statistical power to evaluate program impacts. And you can also have a much greater influence on the types of programs that are being delivered than any one employer alone.

Ballard: When you were talking about vendors, you mentioned looking at the way they measure performance and their reporting capabilities, but what else would you want to look for in selecting a high-quality health promotion or wellness vendor?

Goetzel: One thing that's important is how long has this vendor been out there doing this, and what's been the track record. Now, that's not to decry what a new organization may bring to the party. In fact, there's a lot of innovation that I'm seeing with new players, new vendors coming into this area. But they're obligated to essentially document to you that their programs don't just look nice and are colorful, but they actually produce results. So, you should be asking for their results and better yet, you should be asking whether third parties have evaluated the results, so that there is some level of objectivity in determining whether these programs are really effective or not.

Ballard: It seems to me that organizations are focusing on secondary and tertiary level interventions, when the organizational or primary level interventions might have the biggest bang for the buck. What can organizations do at that environmental level, to really have a big effect?

Goetzel: Well, there are many, many things that they can do environmentally, that are actually relatively low cost. Some simple examples are changing the offerings in vending machines and changing the offerings in cafeterias, providing signs and encouraging people to walk instead of using the elevators, using the staircases, and a variety of different policies and programs that they can introduce, including no smoking policies and you know, when you bring in food for a company gathering, that healthy choices are included in the menu. So, there are many types of interventions that are possible, but most importantly, I think it is having senior managers acknowledge that this is an important part of doing business.

Ballard: Dr. Goetzel, thanks so much for joining us today.

Goetzel: You're quite welcome. Thank you very much for inviting me.