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There is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to workplace wellness. The types of workplace wellness initiatives that organizations offer differ by organization size, geographic location and worker demographics.

One key factor organizations should consider when assessing wellness offerings is the amount of physical activity required in a worker's typical day. Organizations with jobs that are predominantly active (e.g., construction, nursing, etc.) report costly conditions that are different from organizations with jobs that are predominantly sedentary (e.g., desk jobs).

About the Data

In the summer of 2019, the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans surveyed more than 500 U.S. organizations about their workplace wellness programs. As a part of the survey, respondents were asked whether the majority of their workers performed "sedentary" or "active" tasks on a typical workday. This article discusses some key differences in health care expenditures and wellness practices between organizations that have predominantly sedentary workers and those that have predominantly active workers.

Organizations were categorized as either *sedentary* or *active* based on how they responded to the following question:¹

On a typical workday, the majority of our workers are:

- **Sedentary** (58% of responding organizations): Perform work that requires minimal movement (example: an analyst who sits at a desk for most of the day).
- **Active** (42% of responding organizations): Perform work that requires physical movement (example: nurses, who spend a large amount of time on their feet, performing physical tasks).

Primary Reason That Organizations Offer Wellness Benefits

Overall, 69% of U.S. organizations responding to the survey reported that the purpose of their wellness program is to improve the health and wellness of their workers, while 31% do so to control/reduce health-related costs. However, organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs leaned more heavily toward improving health and wellness, with 79% saying it was their primary reason. The difference was not as pronounced among employers with predominantly active jobs, with 56% citing worker health and well-being as their primary motivation and 44% saying their main reason was to control or reduce health-related costs.

Health Conditions Impacting Overall Health Care Costs

When asked to identify the three costliest health conditions for their organization, slightly more than half (52%) of organizations reported that musculoskeletal conditions (such as arthritis, back, carpal tunnel syndrome, etc.) were among the costliest health conditions, followed by cancer (47%), diabetes (44%) and cardiovascular disease/heart disease (32%).

Musculoskeletal conditions remain among the most expensive conditions regardless of the activity level of the workforce, identified as such by 53% of organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs and 51% of organizations with predominantly active jobs.

However, there are notable differences in the costliest health conditions when organizations are grouped by the activity level of their workforces.

Organizations With Primarily Sedentary Jobs

- **Cancer:** Just over half (54%) of organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs

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reported that cancer is among their most expensive conditions, compared with 48% of organizations with predominantly active jobs.

- **Obesity:** One-quarter (26%) of organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs reported that obesity is among their costliest conditions, compared with 15% of organizations with predominantly active jobs.
- **Mental/behavioral health:** Twice as many organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs rated mental/behavioral health costs as one of their costliest conditions, compared with organizations with predominantly active jobs (28% vs. 13%).
- **High-risk pregnancy:** Seven percent of organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs rated high-risk pregnancy as one of their most expensive conditions, compared with 2% of organizations with predominantly active jobs.

Organizations With Predominantly Active Jobs

- **Diabetes:** Three in five (60%) organizations with predominantly active jobs report diabetes is among their top three costliest conditions—almost twice the percentage reported by organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs (34%).
- **Cardiovascular disease/heart disease:** Forty percent of organizations with predominantly active jobs report this as one of their costliest conditions, compared with 28% of those with a predominantly sedentary workforce.
- **Smoking/tobacco-related diseases and prescription drug addiction:** Though a small minority of organizations rated these conditions among their costliest, organizations with predominantly active jobs were significantly more likely to include smoking-related diseases (7% for active vs. 3% for sedentary) and prescription drug addiction (4% for active vs. 1% for sedentary) in their top three costliest conditions.

Productivity

Organizations were asked to indicate the top three issues that negatively affect productivity. Overall, stress was the most commonly selected issue regardless of the activity level of the workforce, followed by poor work-life balance, personal financial concerns of workers and morale.

However, the two categories of organizations reported that different issues negatively impact their productivity:

- Organizations with a predominantly active workforce are more likely to report difficulty recruiting new workers (27% vs. 16%), low retention of current workers (27% vs. 9%) and absenteeism (20% vs. 11%).
- Organizations with a predominantly sedentary workforce are more likely to report that stress (76% vs. 66%) and sleep deprivation (16% vs. 9%) negatively affect productivity.

Wellness Initiatives

For most of the wellness initiatives tracked as a part of the 2019 *Workplace Wellness Trends* survey, organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs offered each wellness initiative at the same or higher rate compared with organizations with predominantly active jobs. In most cases, these differences make sense, based on the structure and nature of the work.

For example, organizations with predominantly sedentary jobs are more likely to offer standing/walking workstations compared with organizations with predominantly active jobs (69% vs. 53%), since a notable proportion of active jobs are in fields such as construction and manufacturing, where standing, walking and other movement are part of the job requirements.

The prevalence of other offerings, such as providing flexible work arrangements (68% sedentary vs. 43% active) and encouraging the use of vacation time (61% vs. 41%), may be explained by differences in the nature of the work. For example, nurses and retail workers cannot work from home and are required to be present during a designated shift to do their jobs, whether it is completing work at a store or working with patients. On the other hand, it is increasingly common for em-

ployers to allow workers with “desk jobs” to work remotely or to adjust their schedules since day-to-day business operations are not dependent upon their physical presence.

Initiatives such as employee assistance programs (EAPs), flu shot programs, health screenings and mental health educational/informational sessions were offered at a slightly higher rate by organizations with a predominantly active workforce.

Takeaways

Each organization has a unique workforce with unique strengths and weaknesses. However, these broad findings suggest that there are different workforce needs depending on the activity level required of the majority of workers. Based upon the findings of this study, organizations may want to evaluate their current wellness offerings, keeping in mind the activity level required of workers.

Organizations With Predominantly Active Jobs

Since a larger share of these organizations reports that diabetes and cardiovascular disease/heart disease are among their costliest health conditions, they may want to consider offering wellness benefits that encourage exercise and healthy eating, such as offering healthy food choices at work

or encouraging workers to take activity/exercise breaks during work time. A diabetes case management program might be a good fit for these groups.

Organizations With Predominantly Sedentary Jobs

A larger share of these organizations reports that mental/behavioral health and obesity are among their costliest health conditions. They may want to consider including mental health assessments with their health risk assessments (HRAs) as well as offering programs that focus on topics such as resiliency or stress management. In addition, organizations can offer more initiatives that target obesity, such as weight loss programs, health coaching or efforts that encourage physical activity.

For more information about the differences in health care expenditures and wellness practices between organizations that have predominantly sedentary workers and those that have predominantly active workers, visit www.ifebp.org/activesedentary.

Endnote

1. The reader should keep in mind that the respondents were asked to respond based upon the majority of their workforce; they were not asked what percentage of the workforce fell into each category or whether the wellness offerings varied based upon workers' tasks.

