

special feature

beyond participation: seven tips to build real engagement in workplace wellness

As an affiliate of the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, the Wellness Alliance connects the wellness and employee benefits industries to drive meaningful change. Through education and a broad range of integrated services, the organization supports millions of people advancing health and wellness for individuals, workplaces and communities. The following is a blog post that originally appeared on the Wellness Alliance website and may be helpful to single employer plan sponsors.

by | **Ashton Sholund**

Over the years, workplace wellness has gained significant buy-in, though the concept has evolved for many organizations—shifting from programming to creating healthy environments and cultures. Whether the primary goal is to improve return on investment (ROI) and reduce costs, enhance employee health and company culture, or ideally all the above, one thing remains true: None of it matters if employees aren't participating and engaged. This leads to a few worthwhile questions for many: People are participating in our workplace wellness initiatives, but the needle isn't moving. Why? And beyond that, if people are participating, does that mean they are engaged? Are participation and engagement the same thing?

Participation vs. Engagement

Participation and engagement are both important to the success of workplace wellness initiatives. While the terms are often used interchangeably, there are important differences between them, and understanding these differences can positively influence the outcomes of your workplace wellness efforts. It's also important to recognize that how these terms are defined can vary by worksite, depending on each organization's unique needs and goals.

Participation

For employees, most workplace wellness journeys begin with participation. This can look like attending an event, completing a screening or signing up for a challenge. According to WebMD, one way to think about participation is by viewing it as "checking the boxes," especially when workplace wellness is new or when organizational buy-in is still developing. Incentives are commonly used to drive participation but, because the investment is sometimes short-term, it doesn't always lead to lasting behaviour change. While participation offers many benefits, on its own, it can leave both

organizations and employees feeling frustrated by the lack of commitment, meaningful outcomes and measurable results.

Engagement

Whereas participation is a step toward engagement, engagement itself occurs when employees are intrinsically motivated and genuinely invested in their health and wellness. It reflects a personal, emotional and behaviour commitment, one that aligns with the organization's wellness vision and values. An example of true engagement is when an employee who participates in a step challenge continues incorporating movement into their daily routine because they enjoy it and recognize the physical and mental benefits, such as increased energy and stress relief. Their initial participation has, at least in part, inspired behaviour changes and has the potential to produce other health outcomes over time. Engaged employees still take part in wellness offerings, but their participation goes beyond checking boxes—They're fully invested in ways that are meaningful and self-driven.

Applying the 7 Benchmarks to Increase Engagement

Employees are more likely to participate and stay engaged when they understand the "why" behind wellness. Leadership, culture and communication all play a role in shaping that experience. The 7 Benchmarks: A Framework for a Well Workplace, is an essential step in the Well Workplace® Process and offers a trusted framework that can be adapted to align with your organization's unique values, mission and wellness goals, helping to drive deeper employee engagement. Here's how:

Benchmark 1: Committed and Aligned Leadership

Leadership support directly impacts ongoing employee participation and engagement. When leaders at all levels of the

Reproduced with permission from Plans & Trusts, Volume 44, No. 3, May/June 2026, pages 4-5, published by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (www.ifebp.org), Brookfield, Wis. All rights reserved. Statements or opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views or positions of the International Foundation, its officers, directors or staff. No further transmission or electronic distribution of this material is permitted.

organization are genuinely committed to employee wellness, and they demonstrate that commitment in their own lives, employees are more likely to take steps toward improving their own well-being. This makes leadership support a critical first step in building successful worksite wellness initiatives.

Benchmark 2: Collaborate in Support of Wellness

Creating a formal or informal team dedicated to building and sustaining worksite wellness initiatives provides an opportunity for deeper buy-in and ongoing support. Including stakeholders from all levels of the organization helps increase alignment and strengthen the likelihood of participation, engagement and long-term success.

Benchmark 3: Collecting Meaningful Data to Evolve a Wellness Strategy

Confidential and secure data collection helps measure what matters to both employees and the organization while also offering valuable insight into the overall employee population. It can drive participation and engagement by identifying needs, preferences and patterns. When handled transparently, data collection also helps build trust and demonstrates a true commitment to employee wellness.

Benchmark 4: Crafting an Operating Plan

A wellness operating plan provides a clear path by outlining the organization's vision, values and purpose for wellness. When the plan is defined, it supports a more strategic and consistent approach to wellness within the organization. As a result, employees are more likely to trust worksite wellness, leading to increased participation and, ultimately, deeper engagement.

Benchmark 5: Choosing Initiatives That Support the Whole Employee

Selecting the right health and wellness interventions is key for encouraging participation and sustaining long-term engagement. The collected data serves as a tool to under-

stand what employees value most in wellness initiatives. Meeting employee expectations and interests, while also addressing health concerns, helps ensure that the wellness strategy is meaningful to all.

Benchmark 6: Cultivate Supportive Health Promoting Environments, Policies and Practices

When wellness is grounded in the core vision and purpose of the organization, it becomes the norm, not the exception. As it begins to align within the culture, it brings consistency across resources, interventions and the employee experience. A supportive culture removes barriers to participation and creates more opportunities for employees and organizations to thrive.

Benchmark 7: Conduct Evaluation, Communicate, Celebrate and Iterate

Data collected during evaluation helps determine how successful the approach has been by identifying what worked well and what needs to improve. Communication, recognition and ongoing improvements are also key steps. Each adds a layer of trust by keeping employees informed, incorporating their feedback and adjusting the wellness strategy to better meet both employee and organizational needs.

Conclusion

Participation is a stepping stone to engagement, and engagement is what delivers real value. A well-designed wellness strategy that considers how to embed wellness into the fabric of the organization, rather than treating it as just another "thing" employees have to do, is likely to foster meaningful outcomes.

