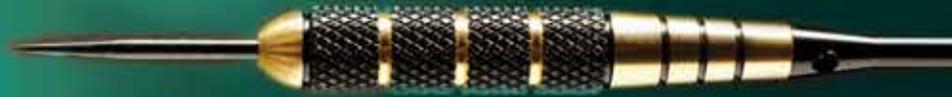
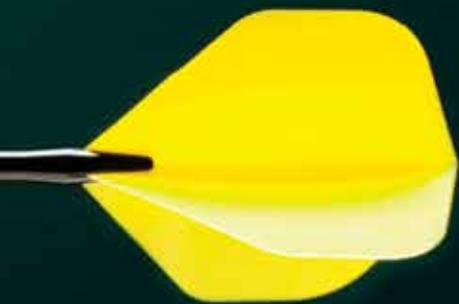


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HEALTH RISKS WORTH TARGETING

by | Hector De La Torre and Ron Z. Goetzel, Ph.D.





Evidence shows that wellness efforts aimed at exercise, nutrition, smoking cessation, stress and sleep can be effective and needn't be expensive.

benefits

MAGAZINE

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Controversy surrounding workplace health promotion (wellness) programs continues to swirl, with opposing sides arguing these programs “work” or “do not work.”

The authors think this is a futile and overly simplistic approach to discussing prevention and health promotion efforts employers have instituted over the past several decades. The narrative needs to shift from a stark “yes” or “no” in terms of whether these programs are beneficial to an intelligent exploration of what elements are effective and the evidence base behind various workplace wellness practices.

As background, consumers are becoming empowered to take an active role in deciding the type of care they need. This growing trend of self-directed health is also seen in the workplace. Employers have an interest in workplace wellness programs because healthy workers consume fewer health care resources, are absent less frequently and, in general, are more productive. Employees also benefit from workplace health promotion programs, which can help them stay healthy and productive,

avoid debilitating illness and save money by keeping them away from expensive and often avoidable medical treatment.

According to a recent national survey conducted by Small Business Majority,¹ many businesses are interested in implementing a workplace health promotion program but fear they are “too small” to support a comprehensive program or that the program will “cost too much.” Other barriers cited by Small Business Majority were “time, money and lack of knowledge” about how to implement an effective wellness program.

To give employers, especially small to midsized companies, practical advice about how to start and maintain an effective and evidence-based workplace wellness program, Transamerica Center for Health Studies (TCHS) and the Institute for Health and Productivity Studies (IHPS) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health jointly published a 2015 report entitled *From Evidence to Practice: Workplace Wellness that Works*.² The report combines the latest scientific evidence on effective workplace wellness programs along with expert opinions and anecdotal experiences of business leaders.

Methodology

To provide insights on best and promising practices for employers, the report was developed with three focus areas in mind: (1) what employers can do to improve individual modifiable risk factors, (2) ways in which employers can improve the organization’s health by focusing attention on organizational risk factors and (3) the experience of companies that have put exemplary programs in place and their advice to others wishing to replicate their success.

Five Individual Risk Factors

Five major risk factors can affect employees’ overall health and productivity at work, as noted in the first part of the *Evidence to Practice* report. To address these issues and others, many companies are testing and implementing creative strategies to help employees get moving, eat better and seek preventive medical care and other initiatives to improve their health and well-being.

1. Sedentary Lifestyle

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes regular physical activity as “one of the most important things you can do for your health.”³ Regular physical activity has been proved to reduce the risk for heart disease, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, stroke, depression, certain kinds of cancer and premature death.

Motivating employees to be more physically active can create a healthier workforce, increase productivity and decrease absenteeism. Studies show physically active employees are absent less frequently than their inactive counterparts, and employees who get at

takeaways

- Americans are known for consuming too few fruits and vegetables and too many carbs, added sugars and refined grains, leading to 60% of them being overweight or obese.
- Smoking is the main cause of preventable illness and leading cause of death in the United States.
- Allowing employees to engage in brief bouts of physical activity or lunch breaks to socialize with co-workers can have meaningful stress-reduction benefits.
- Between 50 million and 70 million Americans chronically suffer from sleep deprivation, leading to increased rates of chronic diseases and cancer, increased mortality and reduced quality of life.
- To launch or expand on a workplace wellness program, employers may want to start by examining individual risk factors among their employee population and creating strategies to address those particular concerns.

least 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week miss on average 4.1 fewer days of work per year.⁴

Research also shows that physically active employees can lower employer health care costs. For example, a recent U.S. study found that physically active adults have lower annual health care expenditures than less active adults. Plus, inadequate levels of physical activity are associated with 11.1% of total health care expenditures.⁵

One company that is highly committed to helping its employees stay physically active is e-commerce company Next Jump. Employees participate in weekly physical challenges where virtual cash rewards are awarded to winning teams. The company has found that motivating employees to fit in a workout during the workday gives them more productive energy, attracting top talent and helping drive better sales performance. For example, approximately 5,000 applicants apply for roughly ten positions per year at Next Jump, and turnover rates consistently have been in the low single digits. The company has enjoyed significant sales growth over the last few years.

2. Healthy Eating and Weight Management

Our diets play an important role in both the cause and prevention of medical conditions, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes and some cancers. Americans are known for having unhealthy diets—consuming too few fruits and vegetables and too many carbs, added sugars and refined grains. Our poor dietary choices have led to more than 60% of Americans being overweight or obese, which can lead to the early onset of diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses.⁶

Unhealthy dietary patterns and weight gain take a toll on workplace health and employer costs. Studies have shown that overweight and obese workers often miss more workdays and cost employers more money when it comes to health-related insurance costs.⁷ According to the CDC, “obesity and related chronic diseases cost employers up to \$93 billion in health insurance claims.”

Recently, the Google Food Team collaborated with the Yale Center for Customer Insights to study how behavioral economics can improve employee choices when it comes to snacks. By studying the process, persuasion, snack possibilities and individual employees who consume snacks at Google, the research team got a sense for using behavioral economics to boost better snacking habits and work performance while reducing Google’s health-related costs.

3. Tobacco Cessation

According to the surgeon general, quitting smoking is “the single most important step that smokers can take to enhance the length and quality of their lives.”⁸ In addition to being the leading cause of death, smoking is the main cause of preventable illness in the United States.⁹

The financial impact of tobacco use on productivity is profound: \$150.7 billion of lost productivity per year is attributed to smoking, with an additional \$5.7 billion per year lost due to premature deaths caused by smoking.¹⁰ In the United States, smoking accounts for approximately 7% to 9% of total annual health care spending.

For individual employers, it can cost up to \$1,623 per smoker per year in excess medical expenditures (not including lost productivity), whereas comprehensive tobacco-cessation benefit programs cost an average of \$1.20 to \$4.80 per person per year.¹¹ In addition, smokers often have higher health and life insurance premiums and claims, greater absenteeism and lower productivity rates.

Offering resources to help employees try to quit smoking is in everyone’s best interest. Some companies offer tobacco-cessation programs to their employees or cover the cost to participate in a nearby program. Other companies have taken an even firmer stance against smoking. Cleveland Clinic implemented a smoke-free environment in 2006 by updating its policies and no longer will hire any candidates who smoke. When the new policies were first introduced, Cleveland Clinic’s leadership team made tobacco-cessation aids (including counseling and medication) available for free to employees.

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Laura Putnam. Wiley. 2015.

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Ilona Bray. Nolo. 2012.

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4. Stress Management

Work-related stress is a common and costly problem. Research shows that most employees feel they have more on-the-job stress than employees a generation ago.¹² Some stress is normal, but chronic stress at a workplace can impede organizational functioning. Employees who are stressed are more likely to miss work, quit their jobs, be involved in accidents and perform at a lower level than less stressed peers.^{13,14}

Recent studies show that 80% of workers report feeling stressed on the job, 40% report feeling very or extremely stressed and 25% view their job as the No. 1 stressor in their lives. These high stress levels lead to an estimated one million workers absent every day due to stress.^{15,16} Furthermore, past research has shown that health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for employees reporting high levels of stress in comparison with their less stressed peers.¹⁷

Allowing employees to engage in brief bouts of physical activity, such as 30 minutes of brisk walking, or to take a break during lunch to socialize with co-workers can have meaningful stress-reduction benefits. As a part of its wellness program, which focuses on holistic health, Allegacy Federal Credit Union pays for employees to visit their choice of mental health care providers to help deal with stress and any other work or life challenges. Since the inception of the wellness program, employees of the North Carolina credit union have decreased their average risk factors per person by 50%.

5. Sleep

Sleep is a critical part of health and well-being, as it can help protect mental health, physical health, quality of life and safety.¹⁸ Regular good-quality sleep improves learning, attention capacity, decision making, emotional control and creativity.¹⁹ Sleep deprivation can lead to depression, suicide, risk-taking behavior and using drugs or alcohol as a sleep aid.²⁰

Unfortunately, it is estimated that between 50 million and 70 million Americans chronically suffer from sleep deprivation, leading to increased rates of chronic diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, depression and obesity, as well as cancer, increased mortality and reduced quality of life.²¹ According to National Sleep Foundation's 2015 *Sleep in America* poll, 13% of Americans reported rarely or never getting a good night's sleep.²²

CDC is now saying Americans' sleep deprivation is a "public health problem." A 2015 *Trends in Consumer Mo-*

bility Report showed that 71% of the poll takers sleep with or next to their mobile phones, and 3% said they sleep with their devices in their hand.²³

Some companies approve of employees taking a brief nap during the workday to recharge. For example, Huffington Post has two napping rooms in its New York City offices. Other companies like Google, Zappos, Cisco and Procter & Gamble have special napping chairs on site. As of 2015, roughly 6% of employers had nap rooms on site, according to a *Fast Company* article.

If sleeping rooms or chairs aren't an option, employers should consider offering National Sleep Foundation's "Healthy Sleep Tips"²⁴ and other resources from the leading sleep source to employees.

Putting Best Practice Into Action

As many as 61% of employers offered a workplace wellness program for their employees in 2015, according to a recent health care reform study that TCHS conducted. Half (49%) of the employers that implemented their wellness program in the last 12 months cited saving money as the main motivation.

Among the companies with a workplace wellness program that were polled, 82% said their program had a positive impact on workers' health, 80% said it had a positive impact on productivity and performance and 71% said it had a positive impact on health care costs.

Despite the varied opinions on the effectiveness of workplace wellness programs, there are a lot of options for structuring a successful program. To launch or expand upon a workplace wellness program, employers may want to start by examining individual risk factors among their employee population and creating strategies to address those particular concerns. Then employers can build from there on what the evidence says works. It may seem daunting at first, but employers should be flexible and willing to scale up or down to create a unique wellness program that works for employees and the company's bottom line. 📌

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