

# benefit trends

## well-being emphasized in workplace wellness trends

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**C**anadian employers are continuing to evolve in their rationale for offering wellness initiatives—transitioning away from merely reducing costs toward improving overall worker health and well-being.

In February, the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans deployed a survey to members representing corporations, multi-employer trust funds and public employers/governmental entities across Canada and the United States. In addition, the survey was deployed to the membership base of the International Society of Certified Employee Benefit Specialists (ISCEBS). The study examines the various types of wellness offerings organizations provide to their employees and participants. *Workplace Wellness Trends: 2017 Survey Results* addresses the current status and approach of wellness programs, key initiatives, wellness communication strategies and resulting outcomes. The survey received a total of 530 completed responses, including 99 Canadian survey participants. The following information reflects the responses from Canadian organizations.

### Current Status and Approach

More than eight in ten Canadian organizations (84.8%) offer at least one wellness initiative. Organizations offer wellness initiatives for different reasons—86.9% offer wellness primarily to improve overall worker health and well-being, while 13.1% primarily aim to control/reduce health-related costs. Corporations are more likely than public employer and multi-employer plans to offer wellness programs with the primary purpose of improving worker health and well-being. On average, organizations have had their programs in place for 8.6 years. More

than one in four organizations (27.4%) have just started offering wellness in the last four years. On the other hand, 34.5% have been offering wellness initiatives for ten years or more. As found in previous editions of the survey, public sector respondents have the longest operating wellness programs.

More than one-half of responding organizations (51.2%) have budgets devoted to wellness. More than three in five organizations with wellness budgets (60.5%) expect their budgets to increase in the next two years. In addition, one in seven organizations without a wellness budget (14.6%) expects to adopt a budget in the next two years.

Respondents were asked about the conditions that had the most significant impact on costs. The most frequently cited conditions were depression/mental illness (48.8%), arthritis/back/musculoskeletal issues (41.7%) and diabetes (27.4%).

Responding organizations face a number of barriers to their efforts. The top barriers organizations have encountered when incorporating wellness initiatives are difficulty in workers finding time to participate (32.1%), dispersed worker populations (29.8%) and prohibitive costs (26.2%).

The study also looked at the internal and external stakeholders that assist in wellness program operations. Internally, three in five respondents (58.3%) utilize benefits staff, followed by representatives from the human resources department (45.2%), organizational leadership (38.1%) and a specific committee devoted to wellness activities (34.5%). Externally, programs most commonly utilize insurance providers (50%), benefits consultants (29.8%), health care professionals such as nurses and doctors (29.8%) and health care providers (23.8%).

## Initiatives

Responding organizations offer a wide variety of screening and treatment initiatives. Four in five offer chiropractic services coverage (79.8%), followed by a smoke-free worksite policy (65.7%), acupuncture coverage (61.6%) and free or discounted flu shots (49.5%). Respondents also offer a number of fitness and nutrition initiatives. The most common ones are nutrition counseling (33.3%), off-site fitness centre/gym membership subsidies (33.3%), ergonomic training/supports (30.3%) and standing/walking stations for workers (30.3%). The most common social and community health initiatives offered by organizations are on-site events and celebrations such as wedding and baby showers, bake sales and department parties (55.6%), followed by staff outings (52.5%), community charity drives (47.5%) and community volunteer projects (38.4%).

Recent International Foundation research has shown an increased emphasis on workplace mental and behavioural health initiatives, a concept echoed by this data. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) (84.8%), mental health coverage (44.4%), educational/informational sessions at the workplace (43.4%) and massages (40.4%) are commonly offered. Respondents also offer a variety of initiatives aimed at encouraging worker growth and purpose. The most common worker-growth and purpose-related offerings are service recognition (71.7%), staff notification of internal job openings (67.7%) and encouragement to use vacation/time off (62.6%). Organizations are looking to increase their emphasis on a number of wellness-related offerings in the next two years. Most often, organizations are increasing their emphasis on mental health/stress-related offerings (52.5%), wellness communication (46.5%), financial education (42.4%), health literacy education (42.4%) and the use of wellness incentives (35.4%).

## Communication

Organizations are communicating wellness initiatives using multiple vehicles to reach their diverse workforces. The most common communication vehicles include e-mails

(53.6%), seminars/speakers (33.3%), websites (29.8%) and efforts communicated to staff by organizational leadership (29.8%). Organizations are increasing efforts to communicate their initiatives to a diverse body of employee types. Nine in ten organizations address full-time workers (90.5%), while more than three in five organizations (63.1%) include part-time workers. Nearly two in five (36.9%) organizations target spouses or domestic partners of workers when communicating information regarding their wellness programs. As organizations become more strategic in their communications, messaging becomes more tailored to specific interest groups. Overall, about one-half (47.6%) of organizations target their wellness information by age group, while two in five (40.5%) reported targeting those with common health risks such as diabetes, high cholesterol and obesity. More than one in three (34.5%) target those affected by various life events such as parenting, retirement and caring for aging parents. Best practices suggest that organizations obtain information about the health and interests of their workforce to design more effective initiatives. Two in five (40.5%) responding organizations use participant surveys, followed by a comment/suggestion box (27.4%) and a database for workers to track wellness activities and participation (14.3%).

## Outcomes

Organizations use a number of methods to measure the success of their efforts. In particular, organizations want to know if there is sufficient worker participation to realize benefits from their initiatives. Participation rates vary widely by type of wellness initiative. Among commonly offered initiatives, the highest average participation rates are seen for flu shot programs (42.7%), seminars (35.9%), fitness programs/competitions (34.1%) and health risk assessments/appraisals (28.3%).

Wellness benefits can be difficult to measure because improvements in worker health, morale, productivity, absenteeism and turnover can be influenced by a combination of factors. Among responding organizations with wellness initiatives, about one in five (21.5%) analyzes the return on

investment (ROI) of their wellness initiatives. Measurements are most often conducted by internal staff (13.1%), wellness vendors (3.6%) or an actuary (3.6%).

Although only a small percentage of organizations calculate their program ROI, a number of data elements are tracked in relation to wellness efforts. Almost one-half (45.2%) track health care costs in relation to their efforts, followed by EAP usage (35.7%) and disability/workers' compensation claims data (35.7%). Similarly, respondents are tracking turnover (29.8%), the number of workers pursuing internal advancement/development (29.8%) and absenteeism (28.6%) with regard to wellness initiatives.

Those who tracked these measures in relation to wellness efforts were asked if the results were positive. Four in five respondents found a positive impact on productivity (81.8%), followed by overall organizational sustainability and growth (71.4%), engagement/satisfaction/culture surveys (69.2%) and health screenings (66.7%).

Finally, respondents that tracked the ROI of their wellness initiatives were asked to rate the success of their efforts. More than four in five (83.4%) stated that their efforts were a success (either very or somewhat successful).

*For more information and to read the full survey report, visit [www.ifebp.org/workplacewellness](http://www.ifebp.org/workplacewellness).*



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