

benefit trends

the evolving face of workplace wellness initiatives



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The International Foundation has surveyed benefit practitioners about their workplace wellness initiatives for nearly a decade. Over that time period, there has been a marked shift in the primary motivation for offering these benefits—from controlling organizational health care costs to improving overall worker health and well-being.

In the new study, *Workplace Wellness Trends: 2019 Survey Report*, this evolution is demonstrated in the initiatives offered by organizations that responded to the survey. In addition to time-tested offerings like physical fitness, nutrition, health screening and tobacco/smoking-cessation programs, organizations are adding or increasing emphasis on initiatives such as mental and behavioral health as well as offerings designed to target worker growth and individual purpose.

The study collected responses from 619 corporations, multiemployer trust funds and public employers across the United States and Canada. Responses revealed details about these initiatives as well as issues affecting medical costs and productivity, wellness budgets, communication, participation incentives, wellness stakeholders, return on investment (ROI) and value on investment (VOI) calculations, and barriers to wellness success. This article explores the initiatives offered by 514 U.S. survey participants.

Physical Fitness and Nutrition Initiatives

The most commonly offered initiative designed to improve worker physical fitness and nutrition is workplace standing/walking workstations, offered by more than three in five (62%) responding organizations. Other popular initiatives include wellness competitions such as walking/fitness challenges (51%) and ergonomic training/supports and/or workstations (44%). More than two in five

offer fitness center/equipment (43%), encourage activity/exercise breaks during work time (41%) and offer health coaching services (40%). This is followed by off-site fitness center/gym membership subsidies (39%) and on-site or subsidized weight loss/management programs (38%).

Other offerings include healthy food choices in cafeterias or vending machines (38%); on-site walking trails/paths/loops (35%); organized group run/walk events (35%); and on-site exercise classes such as yoga, tai chi and aerobics (33%). Other commonly offered initiatives include nutrition counseling (30%) and wellness/engagement-related worksite design changes (26%). These include an emphasis on natural lighting, collaborative spaces, open stairwells and other design concepts. Responding organizations are less likely to offer massages (24%), employer/organization-sponsored sports teams (23%), free or subsidized wearable fitness trackers (21%), subsidies for off-site fitness classes (18%) and fitness equipment discounts (16%). Finally, fewer than one in ten (8%) respondents offer access to employee nap rooms.

Health Screenings and Flu Shot Programs

The report also took a deep dive into health screenings and flu shot programs. Flu shot programs are offered by four in five (80%) responding organizations, followed by health screenings (including blood pressure and cholesterol tests) (62%), and health risk assessment/appraisals (55%).

Tobacco/Smoking-Cessation Initiatives

Historically, one of the most commonly offered wellness benefits is tobacco/smoking-cessation programs, and the survey showed that more than two in three (69%) respondents offer these programs.

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Social/Community Initiatives

More than nine in ten respondents (91%) offer at least one wellness initiative intended to create and enhance connections in the workplace and in the community. These are most often on-site events/celebrations (80%); community charity drives/events, including food and school supply drives (63%); community volunteer projects (56%); and staff outings (54%). One-half of respondents (50%) host on-site blood drives (50%), followed by team-building activities (45%) and cultural/diversity initiatives or training (36%). Responding organizations are less likely to offer paid time off for volunteer activities (34%); provide matching gift/matching donations (29%); host themed dress-up days (25%); happy hours (22%); or game leagues such as bridge, chess and fantasy sports (15%).

Mental/Behavioral Health Initiatives

Foundation research has shown an increased emphasis on mental and behavioral health as part of respondent workplace wellness initiatives. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) are offered by nine in ten responding organizations (90%), followed by mental health coverage (87%) and substance abuse treatment coverage/benefits (73%). More than one in three respondents (35%) include a mental health assessment in their health risk assessment (HRA) offerings, while similar proportions host mental health educational/informational sessions at the workplace (34%). Additional respondent offerings include stress management programs (23%), on-site meditation/mindfulness classes (23%) and gratitude/appreciation journals/initiatives (17%). Finally, more than one in seven responding organizations (15%) offer mental health first aid/crisis training. *Mental health first aid* is defined as training to identify and help individuals who are in a mental health crisis or may be developing a mental health problem.

Worker Growth and Individual Purpose Initiatives

An emerging field of wellness initiatives is targeted at the professional and personal growth of workers. Currently, 97% of respondents provide one of more of these offerings. These initiatives most often take the form of service recognition (69%), followed by tuition reimbursement/assistance (66%) and professional memberships that are paid for by the organization (64%). More than three in five responding organizations notify all staff of internal job openings and encourage qualified candidates to

apply (61%). A similar proportion host lunch and learns (58%) and offer flexible work arrangements (58%) including telecommuting, condensed workweeks and job sharing. Five in nine respondents (55%) design their performance reviews to be tied to the organizational mission (55%), while similar proportions encourage worker transfers when internal opportunities better fit worker interests (54%), subsidize professional development (53%) and encourage workers to use vacation time (53%).

One-half of respondents offer financial education (50%) and manager training (50%) initiatives to improve worker growth and individual purpose. A similar proportion offer full or partially subsidized continuing education for professional designations (47%). In addition, more than one in three responding organizations (38%) offer leadership opportunities outside job hierarchy structure. This could include work teams, committees and/or councils. About one in three (32%) offers formal mentorship programs for more experienced workers to guide younger workers through their tenure. While less common, nearly one in four responding organizations (23%) provides transportation/parking subsidies, which can be valuable in areas of congestion or among workforces with longer commutes.

About one in seven (14%) respondents conducts *stay interviews*, a retention tool that entails periodic meetings designed to keep and engage talented workers. More than one in eight (13%) respondents provide built-in *creative/autonomous* time for workers, defined as the flexibility to spend a certain amount of time on independent or “pet” projects. Finally, student loan payment programs are offered by one in ten respondents (10%). This emerging benefit entails employers paying a full or partial amount of a worker’s student loan balances. Without this assistance, workers with high balances may not be able to accumulate personal savings or contribute to their retirement accounts.

About nine in ten responding organizations track the participation rates of their professional growth initiatives, with an average participation rate of 46%. Going forward, 49% of responding organizations plan to increase emphasis on these initiatives in the future.

See the Quick Look on page 10 for more information about *Workplace Wellness Trends: 2019 Survey Report*. The survey is available free to members at www.ifebp.org/workplacewellness2019. Nonmembers can download the survey at www.ifebp.org/books.asp?8133E for \$50.

