

Workplace Wellness Programs: A Comparison Between Best Practice Guidelines And Implementation


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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study to determine best practice guidelines for employee wellness programming amongst organizations and/or employers. A sample of convenience (n = 200) from a local human resource management association was surveyed via e-mail with an internet based questionnaire containing 19 items regarding employee wellness programming, activities, effectiveness, and measurement. The results indicated that Best Practice Guidelines can be established from empirical literature. In addition, the findings indicate employers are implementing best practice guidelines in their existing workplace wellness activities. Most employers are participating in and engaged in workplace wellness activities which utilize effective communication, continuous improvement, accessible and involve employees, and partner with existing and established business relationships to create wellness activities. One area which requires further evaluation and development is the engagement of leadership within organizations.

Keywords: Employee Workplace Wellness Programs; Best Practice Guidelines

INTRODUCTION

 Employers and employees have an increased interest in wellness programming for a variety of reasons. However, the primary purpose for the implementation of a workplace wellness program is to comply with the Affordable Care Act (Yach & Dugas, 2013), and to reduce employer sponsored health insurance premiums (Baicker, Cutler, & Song, 2013). Employee or workplace wellness programs are an organized, employer sponsored program that is designed to support employees as they adopt sustainable behaviors that reduce health risks, improve quality of life, enhance personal effectiveness, and benefit the organization's financial position (Berry, Mirabito, & Baun, 2010).

In an attempt to control costs for health insurance, employers are implementing programs with little evidence for the justification of the costs associated with the workplace wellness program. Most employers are focused on the “soft” data instead of the “hard” data to substantiate the costs associated with implementing and continuing these programs. According to Zula, Yarrish, and Lee (2013), human resource professionals are primarily responsible for workplace wellness programs including assessing the return on investment of the dollars spent on these initiatives. It has been noted by Yach and Dugas (2013) that “workplace wellness programs are gaining increased support, even though many rest on a shaky evidence base” (p. 193).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace wellness programs are a primary component of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) or healthcare reform law commonly referred to as the ACA. The ACA allows employers to reward workers who participate in wellness programs, and penalize those who refuse, with discounts or increases of as much as 30 percent of their insurance costs. These penalties can be thousands of dollars per year (Begley, 2014). Workplace wellness programs have been gaining in popularity even amongst evidence which suggests these types of programs lack effectiveness.

Employers have the opportunity to develop workplace wellness programs which can have a substantial impact on employee's income, insurance cost sharing, and health. Although, little research has been conducted to support a hard return on investment (Berry, Mirabito, & Baun, 2010); there is an increasing body of literature and research to suggest there are soft data to support the continuation of these programs (Mattke et al., 2013). These workplace wellness programs are impacting the overall organizational effectiveness and efficiency through a reduction in absenteeism, presenteeism, and health related productivity losses. (Mattke et al., 2013).

Most employers implemented a workplace wellness program with little to no concern for the cost associated with these programs. These programs developed as a mechanism to control and reduce employer costs associated with employer sponsored health insurance programs by attempting to control employee health costs. The original study conducted by the Health Enhancement Research Organization [HERO] (Goetzel et al., 1998) determined employees with specific disorders had significantly higher health related expenditures than did subjects at lower risk in seven of ten risk categories: those who reported themselves as depressed, at high stress, with high blood glucose levels, at extremely high or low body weight, tobacco users, with high blood pressure, and with sedentary lifestyle. This original study was the first comprehensive analysis conducted to determine health related expenditures amongst controllable diseases and the impact of these diseases on employer sponsored health insurance premiums.

Since the original HERO study, there has been much research conducted on the effectiveness and efficiencies of workplace wellness programs. The HERO study has set the path for employer-sponsored wellness programs evolve with many variations. Health and workplace wellness programs are gradually becoming what health maintenance organizations envisioned they should be at their inception. Walker contends that employers have concluded that getting ahead of illnesses rather than waiting for them to strike is the only viable to control and manage employee healthcare costs (2009).

Mattke et al. (2013) has determined "workplace wellness programs have emerged as a common employer-sponsored benefit that is now available at about half of U.S. employers with 50 or more employees, a group that employs three-quarters of the U.S. workforce" (p. XXV). Employers categorized as large are more likely to offer a workplace wellness program than smaller employers. Large employers are also more likely to offer a variety of workplace wellness activities for employees. In addition, most employers are committed to the long term support and funding for wellness activities since most regard these activities as a viable mechanism to control health related costs in order to continue to offer health coverage benefits (Mattke et al., 2013).

Despite the popularity of workplace wellness programs and activities amongst employers, few organizations are conducting formal assessments of impact or evaluation to determine effectiveness (Corporate Health Systems, 2009; Mattke et al., 2013; Zula, Yarrish, & Lee, 2013). Those employers that do conduct formal assessments or evaluations are heavily relying on employee or participant satisfaction (77%) to determine effectiveness. Other measures which have emerged are health claims analysis, health risk appraisals, absenteeism, productivity, and other measures (Zula, Yarrish, & Lee, 2013).

Most organizations are not internally assessing effectiveness, impact, or efficiencies amongst their workplace wellness programs. However, external organizational research has indicated success of these programs for reducing health related costs, reducing absenteeism, and increasing productivity. External research has also indicated the establishment of best practice principles and strategies for the most effective workplace wellness programs (Mattke et al., 2013; Berry, Mirabito & Baun, 2010).

According to Mattke (2013), there are five factors which influence the success of a workplace wellness program. These factors include: 1) effective communication strategies, 2) opportunity for employees to engage, 3) leadership engagement, 4) use of existing resources and relationships, and 5) continuous evaluation (p. 13). These five factors were constructed from their review of the literature, a case study of five employers, and a national survey of employers with 50 or more employees in the public or private sector (2013, p. 3).

In addition to the five factors established by Mattke et al., Berry, Mirabito, and Baun (2010), found there are six pillars to the success of an employer sponsored wellness program. This research indicated six essential pillars

of a strategically integrated wellness program despite the size of the firm. These six essential pillars are: 1) multi-level leadership, 2) alignment, 3) scope, relevance, and quality, 4) accessibility, 5) partnerships, and 6) communications (p. 5).

These two research studies have indicated the most successful workplace wellness programs are employing multiple modalities to engage employees in wellness activities. The crossover of these two research studies has established best practices for employers to develop, implement, and evaluate a successful workplace wellness program. These guidelines would indicate the most successful programs are utilizing five pillars to operate a successful workplace wellness program. These five strategic factors include: 1) effective and efficient communication strategies, 2) leadership engagement and commitment, 3) relationships and partnerships to leverage resources, 4) accessible and involved employees, and 5) relevance as well as continuous improvement.

Effective and efficient communication strategies include multiple modalities of communication to employees about the benefits, program, and activities. These modalities of effective and efficient communication should include face-to-face, electronic, and print media advertising of the workplace wellness program. According to Berry, Mirabito, and Baun (2010), the workplace wellness message should be delivered with sensitivity, creativity and include media diversity. Also, the message about workplace wellness should be delivered from the top leadership of the organization.

A quality workplace wellness program has leadership engaged at all levels of the organization. Employees are more likely to engage in wellness activities when there is demonstrated commitment from all levels of management within the organization. A leadership commitment to wellness activities should include their participation, policy, and procedure development, and shift the culture of the organization.

Relationships and partnerships to leverage resources are a cornerstone of a successful wellness program. Successful programs utilize all available resources to create and establish a success wellness program. These partnerships include health plans, and other internal and external partners to leverage and create greater opportunities and offerings for employees to participate in a wide variety of wellness activities. In addition, these partnerships and relationships enhance a wellness program at little to no additional cost to the employer.

Most successful wellness programs will have a component which allows employees to provide input into the activities of the program. The solicitation of employee input creates an engaged workforce which is committed to the wellness activities of the organization. In addition, the wellness activities of the organization must be easily accessible to the employees. Employees are more likely to participate in wellness activities if the activities are offered and available at a convenient location, and time. According to Berry, Mirabito, and Baun (2010), true on-site integration is essential because convenience matters (p. 5).

Continuous improvement and relevance to the workforce are ingredients to workplace wellness which are not ignored by successful programs. Employees are not only engaged in the development, and implementation of the initial wellness programs, but employees are engaged in the continuous improvement of the programs. Excellent workplace wellness programs solicit evaluative feedback from employees regarding current and future activities, as well as comprehensiveness. In addition, employers should conduct a needs assessment to determine the wellness needs of the workforce (Mattke et al., 2013).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine if the literature could establish best practice guidelines for workplace wellness programming, and to determine the utilization of these workplace wellness program best practice guidelines amongst employers. According to previous research, there are common themes among the most successful workplace wellness programs which engage and involve employees. However, there has been no empirical research conducted to compile the common themes within the literature to create best practice guidelines for employer sponsored workplace wellness programs. In addition, there has been no empirical research to determine the implementation of these established guidelines among varies size employers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research questions for this study were:

- RQ1:** Can a comprehensive review of the literature establish a common theme of best practice guidelines for workplace wellness activities?
- RQ2:** Are employer sponsored workplace wellness programs established with empirical based principles to provide for the greatest impact, and success?

These two research questions were developed to provide a firm foundation for the creation of best practice guidelines and to measure the success of implementation of workplace wellness programs from prior empirical research on employer-sponsored wellness activities.

METHOD

Participants

The participants from this study were selected from Northeast Pennsylvania (NEPA) and from a membership listing of human resource professionals from a human resource management association ($n = 200$). The northeast region of Pennsylvania is comprised of 14 counties and only two counties are consisted urban according to the United States Department of Commerce, United States Census Bureau data. The wellness programming survey was distributed via e-mail with an electronic link to a SurveyMonkey with 35 participants responding. This resulted in a 17% response rate which is consistent with previous internet research and an acceptable response rate (Sheenan & Hoy, 1999).

Survey

The survey for this study was a first generation instrument developed from previous research (Corporate Health Systems, 2008; Berry, Mirabito, & Baun, 2010). In addition, the survey was developed to collect data regarding the implementation of best practice guidelines. These data will address the second research question. Survey questions requested responses for demographic data, wellness programming, employee incentives, financial investments, and return on investment in wellness activities (Zula, Yarrish, & Lee, 2013). The survey was to be collected by a human resource manager or the person responsible for the implementation, development, and evaluation of the workplace wellness program.

RESULTS

In order to address research question one, this study involved a comprehensive review of the literature. The results of the literature review reveal there are significant indicators within the literature to establish best practice guidelines for workplace wellness programs. Previous empirical research conducted has established five themes among success wellness program and activities. These themes have been identified from empirical studies conducted between 2010 and 2013. These studies were conducted utilizing quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data from employers will successful workplace wellness activities and programs.

The first study was conducted by Berry, Mirabito, and Baun (2010) to establish the business case for investing in workplace wellness programs. The authors examined 10 organizations across a variety of industries and existing literature. The organizations were selected for this study whose workplace wellness program had systematically achieved measureable results (p. 3).

According to the results of the Berry, Mirtabito, and Baun study, these 10 organizations have six “pillars” (2010, p. 3) of workplace wellness activities and programs. These six pillars include multilevel leadership, alignment, scope, relevance, and quality, accessibility, partnerships, and communications. These six pillars are the essence of the organizations studied within the research. These pillars were critical to the success of the 10 organizations chosen for this study.

Another study conducted by Mattke et al. (2013) analyzed 13 empirical studies, surveyed 50 employers within the public and private sector, and conducted 5 case studies among employers with established wellness programs. The multi-analysis technique resulted in a comprehensive study commissioned by the Department of Health and Human Services. A random sample was utilized to administer the survey for this study, including the review of 13 previous empirical studies, and 5 case study organizations were selected from published media and award programs in order to conduct in-depth interviews regarding employee wellness activities (p. 13).

According to the results of the Mattke et al. study, these organizations selected to participate in the study have established five key facilitators for wellness programs. These organizations were utilizing effective communication strategies, opportunities for employee engagement, leadership engaged at all levels, use of existing resources and relationships, and continuous evaluation (pp. xxiv-xxv). These five facilitators are similar to the six pillars determined by Berry, Mirabito, and Baun.

These research studies have established that best practice guidelines can be established from the literature. The most successful workplace wellness programs will incorporate five strategic activities in order to reap the greatest return on investment in wellness activities. These five strategic factors include: 1) effective and efficient communication strategies, 2) leadership engagement and commitment, 3) relationships and partnerships to leverage resources, 4) accessible and involved employees, and 5) relevance as well as continuous improvement. Figure 1 represented the five strategic factors for the success of workplace wellness programs.

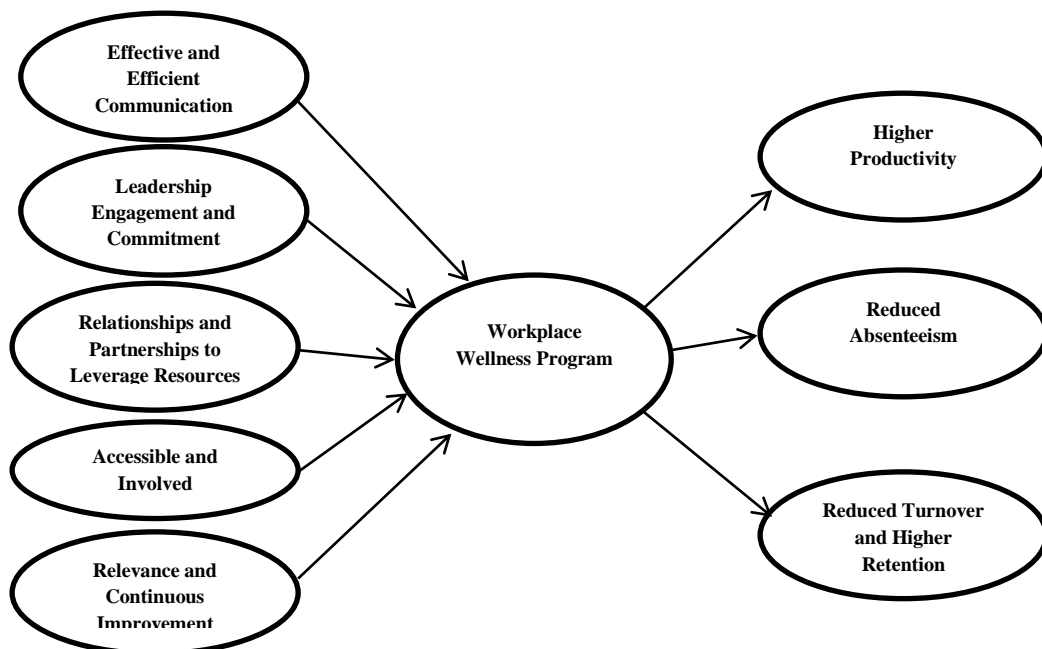


Figure 1: Employer Best Practice Guidelines to Establish Workplace Wellness Program Inputs and Outputs
Adapted from Berry, Mirabito, and Baun (2010) and Mattke et al. (2013)

In order to address research question, this study involved the collection of survey data from 200 employers in the northeast region of Pennsylvania. The response rate was 17% or 35 respondents with 34 participants (99%) having an active workplace wellness program. The survey data collected addressed the five strategic implementation mechanisms necessary for a successful workplace wellness program. The survey consisted of 16 questions to collect data regarding effective and efficient communication, leadership engagement and commitment, relationship, and partnerships, accessible and involved employees, and continuous improvement.

The majority of respondents in this study employed over 1000 employees (34.9%) and between 100-499 employees (34.3%). The smaller employers (less than 99 employees) were representing 8.9% of respondents, and employers with 500-999 employees responding 17.1%. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Organization Size

Organization Size	n	%
Less than 50	1	2.8
50 – 99	2	6.1
100 – 499	12	34.1
500 – 999	6	17.1
1,000 – 2,499	6	17.1
2,500 – 4,999	4	11.4
5,000 or more	4	11.4
Total	35	100

The study intended to determine the implementation of best practice elements from the literature amongst the surveyed employers. The results reveal that employee wellness programs are implemented with little regard for best practice guidelines established from the literature. In this study, employers are utilizing effective and efficient communication mechanisms (91.4%), engaging and involving employees in the development of wellness activities (88.4%), continuously improving their activities (85.7%), and relationship and partnership engagement (94.2%). Respondents indicated the use of 4 out of 5 best practice guidelines as being utilized with their wellness activities.

The survey data (Table 2) reveal 32 respondents (91.4%) are utilizing multiple modalities of communication to inform their employees about the workplace wellness program or activities available within the organization. The organizations are utilizing multiple media outlets to inform employees about wellness programs including posters/flyers (*n* = 22, or 68.8%), newsletter (*n* = 19 or 59.4%), intranet (*n* = 20 or 62.5%), and wellness fairs (*n* = 20 or 62.5%). Some additional respondents indicated the use of e-mail, and meetings as a means to inform employees.

Table 2: Communication Modalities about Workplace Wellness

Mode of Communication	Percentage	n
Newsletter	59.4%	19
Intranet	62.5%	20
Posters/Flyers	68.8%	22
Wellness Fairs	62.5%	20
Meetings	46.9%	15
E-mail Campaign	53.1%	17
Total		113

Note: The respondents were requested to check all that apply, thus the responses will not total 100 percent.

Employers are engaging and involving employees in the development of wellness activities. Respondents in this study indicate their employees are participating in the development of the wellness program, as well as participating in the activities (Table 4). The majority of respondents indicate that participation amongst employees has increased (61%), while 13% decreased, and 26% have maintained a steady employee participation rate of 26% to 50% of employees participating in the program (Table 3).

Total 3: Employee Participation Rate

	Percentage	n
Increased	61.3%	19
Decreased	12.9%	4
Remained the Same	25.8	8
Total		31

Table 4: Employee Participation Rates in Wellness Activities

	Percentage	n
Less than 10%	22.6%	7
11%-25%	19.4%	6
26%-50%	38.7%	12
51%-75%	9.7%	3
76%-90%	6.5%	2
Greater than 90%	3.2%	1
Total		31

In addition to effective communication and participation or employee engagement, respondents to the survey indicated continuous improvement of wellness activities with employees. Employers are continuously soliciting employee feedback about wellness activities within organizations. According to Table 5, the respondents indicated questionnaire follow up to be the most utilized mechanism (43%) to solicit employee feedback. Additional feedback follow up came from focus groups (6.7%), face to face contact (40%), phone call (16.7%), and e-mail (16.7%). An alarming 9 respondents (30%) indicated that there is no follow-up on wellness activities within their organization.

Table 5: Employer Follow-Up Mechanisms on Wellness Activities

	Percentage	<i>n</i>
Questionnaire	43.3%	13
Focus Groups	6.7%	2
Face to Face Contact	40.0%	12
Phone Call	16.7%	5
Email	33.3%	10
Text	0.0%	0
No Follow-Up is Conducted	30.0%	3
Total		54

Survey results revealed employers with a successful employee wellness program are utilizing multiple partners and relationships to provide quality wellness activities. Although, the primary responsible party for wellness activities is the human resource department (*n* = 23, 63.6%), many organizations are engaging and utilizing multiple partners including wellness committees (9.1%), outside consultants, benefit brokers, and wellness vendors (21.2%). Employers are successful in their ability to engage partners and utilize relationships to develop and implement an employee wellness program (Table 6).

Table 6: Administration Responsibility for Employee Wellness Programs

Responsible Party	<i>n</i>	%
Wellness Committee	3	9.1
Outside Hired Professional	1	3.0
Human Resource Department	23	63.6
Benefits Broker	3	9.1
Wellness Broker	3	9.1
Local Wellness Organization	0	0.0
Other	2	6.1
Total	35	100

Although, the survey failed to address and request specific information about leadership engagement and support, there was one question on the survey designed to solicit the results to this question. Respondents were asked to provide the amount of money spent per employee which would be an indication of leadership commitment through the allocation of financial resources for employee wellness (Table 7). The greatest number of respondents indicated the organization is spending less than \$300.00 per employee (*n* = 18, 58.1%) with only 3 respondents spending more than \$300.00 per employee. A surprising number of organizations were unaware of the amount spent per employee for wellness activities. Overall, 9 organizations or 29% indicated “not sure” of the amount of money spent per employee for wellness. Although, spending is a good indication of leadership commitment, there is no direct correlation between these indicators for the purpose of this study.

Table 7: Amount Spent per Employee

	Percentage	<i>n</i>
\$500 or more	3.2%	1
\$300-499	6.5%	2
Less than \$300	58.1%	18
Not sure	29.0%	9
Other	3.2%	1
Total		31

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There has been much anecdotal research presented within the literature about employee wellness programs from consultants, wellness practitioners, and others boasting the benefits of a wellness program. However, there has been little empirical literature completed to indicate the success of these programs. Furthermore, there is no empirical research or literature to establish best practice guidelines for the implementation of employee wellness programs.

This study attempted to establish best practice guidelines from empirical literature and to evaluate and assess employer integration of these guidelines within their existing wellness programs. The results of the study indicate that best practice guidelines are available within the current body of empirical literature, and employers are utilizing and integrating these best practice guidelines into their wellness activities.

The results of the comprehensive literature review indicated best practice employee wellness programs and activities. These best practice guidelines are established from a review of the literature which evaluated multiple successful programs. The following are established as best practice in workplace wellness programs: 1) effective and efficient communication strategies, 2) leadership engagement and commitment, 3) relationships and partnerships to leverage resources, 4) accessible and involved employees, and 5) relevance as well as continuous improvement.

In addition, the employers involved in this study indicate the use of these practices within their existing and established wellness activities. Survey respondents indicate the use of multiple communication strategies to inform employees of workplace wellness activities. Employers are utilizing multiple partners and relationships to implement a variety of activities to participate in and to reduce or maintain low cost programs. Employees are involved with the development of wellness activities and employees are actively participating in the wellness programs offered at their workplace. Finally, employers are utilizing continuous improvement with workplace wellness programs through the solicitation of employee feedback and input. Employees input and feedback is being utilized to improve, and change wellness activities.

Based upon the results of this study it would benefit employers to implement a workplace wellness program which includes these best practice guidelines. Although, employers are utilizing many of these guidelines already in their workplace programs; organizations must be more diligent about engaging and involving leadership. The commitment of leadership is a critical component of successful workplace wellness programs. Employees are more likely to engage and participate in wellness activities when the leadership of the organization demonstrates a commitment to the wellness program. Leadership can demonstrate a commitment not only through the allocation of financial resources, but through participation, and communication about wellness activities.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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