

TCHS & UC Berkeley Workplace Wellness Employer Guide Q&A

Introduction

Workplace wellness programs have become an important part of the workplace, because they can positively impact employee satisfaction and productivity, while helping promote lower employee health costs in some cases. Choosing the right wellness program for employers and employees is critical to ensuring successful implementation and participation.

The [Interdisciplinary Center for Healthy Workplaces](#) (ICHW) at UC Berkeley and [Transamerica Center for Health Studies®](#) (TCHS) have partnered on a new, evidence-based workplace wellness [employer guide](#) in an effort to help guide employers (with an emphasis on small and medium organizations) looking to match wellness program options to their workforce.

ICHW Director Dr. Cristina Banks and TCHS Executive Director Hector De La Torre offer perspectives on the process of identifying compatible wellness programs that encourage employee engagement.

Q&A

Q: What factors should an organization consider when evaluating wellness programs for their employees?

Although there are a number of factors an organization should consider when selecting a wellness program, the most important aspect is finding activities or programs that are a good fit for the organization and its employees. Starting with an employee survey or focus group(s) to establish needs and preferences can help align priorities, which will better inform the process of identifying potential programs.

It is also important to take into consideration company goals, current leadership involvement, dynamics of employee motivation and participation, and the full range of wellness programs that can be adopted.

Q: What were some key findings of the wellness program study?

Participation rates, trends and factors among organizations

When compiling the employer guide, we found that 55 percent of employers say they offer wellness programs, but only 40 percent of employees say that they work for an employer offering a program, creating a disconnect between company offerings and employee awareness.

In addition, a far smaller proportion of small organizations offer a wellness program (25 percent) compared to medium and large organizations (77 and 83 percent, respectively). We found that this gap was primarily due to employer perceptions that a small or medium company is “not big enough” for a wellness program, and because small employers thought that employees were not interested in such a program. Limited funds and resources were also a concern.

Facilitators and barriers to participation

We found that a variety of factors influenced how likely people were to participate in workplace wellness programs. Higher participation rates were associated with leadership and management support, friendly co-worker competition, interventions tailored to the employees or organization, conducting the program during work hours, monetary and non-monetary (e.g., PTO) incentives and embedding sensitive programs within a larger health promotion program.

Factors associated with lower participation rates include lack of time, concerns about confidentiality of health status, employer/employee perceptions on the program’s value, and difficulty ensuring participant accountability.

Finding the right program and meeting employee needs

Knowing an organization's opportunities and constraints can provide a starting point. The next step is to match facilitators and barriers with different sets of wellness programs. Next, it is important to understand how to overcome remaining barriers and bring leaders and employees into a conversation about which type(s) of program(s) fit best.

Key facilitators of a wellness program reported by survey respondents across organizations were: leadership commitment and support for the program, a culture that supports employee wellness, and clear and consistent communication.

Q: How can an organization assess its options and best *fit*?

Different types of wellness programs and key characteristics

First, an organization needs to consider the different categories of programs, including education, social community building, healthy habit development, preventative care, and disease management. For each successive type of wellness program, leadership involvement gradually increases which impacts investment in programs and an employee's working environment. The most involved programs include health professionals helping to monitor and care for employees with health-related issues.

Assessment methods—employee needs/preferences and wellness program *fit* tool

The employer guide provides an assessment checklist to help identify an organization's opportunities (facilitators) and constraints (barriers) and to ultimately evaluate which wellness program is most the suitable.

Understanding different types of barriers

It's critical for an organization to consider its existing constraints or barriers (e.g., perceptions that work and wellness are two separate goals, inconvenient scheduling) before choosing a workplace wellness program. The employer guide checklist also helps to identify critical barriers or "deal breakers" which indicate that a program will not be successful if implemented. For example, a disease management program could not realistically be implemented without adequate financial support, and social community building led by the organization is unlikely to be successful without quality methods for communicating to employees.

Q: What steps can an organization take to build a successful wellness program?

There are various steps to consider when building a successful wellness program. Our employer guide offers a checklist to help guide the process.

Understanding participation factors – employee needs/preferences

The major determinant of a program's success is the degree of participation. Following the maxim "What's In It For Me?" ("WIFM"), a successful program must speak to employee needs/preferences and encourage outcomes more desirable than not engaging in the program. External incentives rewarding behavior can help to enhance participation under certain conditions, but ultimately, a desire to take better care of oneself is needed for long-term behavior change.

Motivating/communicating with employees

Sustaining employee participation requires aligning the program to employee needs and preferences, clearly describing expectations for participation, and encouraging employee engagement without any penalties or negative consequences. In addition, organizational leadership needs to express and maintain support for the program throughout its lifecycle. Tracking and celebrating participant accomplishments, whether by public acknowledgment, monetary incentives or other non-monetary incentives, helps to keep employees energized and engaged.

Organizational investment

Organization leaders should keep in mind that investment means both financial commitment and employee support. The financial investment required for different programs can vary substantially depending on the extent of physical modifications to the workplace and the availability of specialized services. Some organizations may be ready to support a program with a dedicated wellness coordinator and an in-office exercise room. Others may not have a dedicated budget and rely instead on employee-led initiatives (such as a sports team or social group) and communicating health information. Beyond investing money and resources in a wellness program, organization leaders must support wellness as something the organization values and encourage participation in order to create a culture of health where employees will actually benefit from what is offered.

Overcoming other barriers

No matter how well organizations research and prepare for implementation of a wellness program, a variety of barriers may still exist, including a lack of knowledge of company offerings, privacy concerns, and a lack of leadership support. The driving factor for overcoming many of these barriers is aligning organizational leadership with goals for their company, employees, and overall health of the organization. Challenging leaders to drive awareness of and engagement with workplace programs helps encourage employee participation and enhance organizationally-valued outcomes.

Q: Can you share examples of challenges and successes you've heard from organizations?

We conducted focus groups with 29 (mostly) small and medium organizations in which we explored various issues regarding adoption of wellness programs and determinants of participation.

Specific examples of challenges and success can be found in the barriers section of the Employer Guide and in the upcoming Technical Report.