

Get with the Program: Wellness in the Workplace



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Life-saving medical treatments and devices have lulled many Americans into believing that an increase in life expectancy is a sure thing. But former U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona provided [sobering news](#) when he said that “Because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits, and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy their parents.” Do you agree that the children of Generation Z could have shorter life expectancies than their parents?

Perhaps even more devastating is the fact that this [decline in life expectancy](#) is largely preventable. National health epidemics related to obesity, such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart conditions, can be averted.

Fortunately, the trend of implementing wellness initiatives in the workplace is on the rise. And wellness in your workplace has the potential to do more than extend the lives of employees vital to your mission: *it may extend their productivity as well.*

Though research on effective employee wellness programs is still growing, many workplace wellness initiatives have already positively impacted employee health and productivity. If your office has yet to integrate these beneficial programs or you find your current wellness program to be ineffective, then it's time to assess the benefits of an office health program and reflect on the risks of abstaining from this surging trend.

Sedentary workers with poor eating habits tend to create greater medical expenditures, increase absenteeism rates, and decrease productivity within an organization. Any one of these conditions poses significant harm to both the organization and the employee. Office health initiatives establish practices in the workplace that promote healthy behaviors while offering social support to employees. Considering that a majority of public entity employees stay at their organization for several years, the positive interventions within a healthy office culture tend to benefit employees long-term. This is merely one of the many ways in which organizations limit employee risk through workplace health promotions:

- Organizations that invest in workplace health programs often benefit from reduced insurance premiums and reduced rates of employee absenteeism, saving money and time from not having to cover absent employees and train replacement workers. In 2012, the [American Journal of Health Promotion](#) published a meta-evaluation of workplace health programs, and found that such programs can save an average of 25% on employee health care and claims costs.
- According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), organizations supporting employee welfare through health programs have greater employee attendance than organizations that do not. Research

has shown that obese employees experience higher levels of absenteeism due to illness than their normal weight counterparts. For example, one study showed that in comparison to workers at a healthy weight, obese women (BMI greater than 30) miss 53% more workdays in a year, and women with a BMI over 40 miss 141% more work days in a year.

- Organizations with wellness programs might significantly increase their capacity to attract high-performing employees. Historically, health insurance has been one of the [top-valued employee benefits](#) offered by employers, so it stands to reason that preventative employee wellness initiatives would be valued as well.

A report by Nonprofit HR Solutions states that nonprofit leaders often overlook employee wellness programs due to cost and perceptions of low merit. Yet evidence clearly shows that a tailored workplace health initiative can bring cost-savings and happiness to both employees and employers. Today's entities have myriad opportunities to support employee health and productivity as means of mission advancement. You could be the next public entity leader to nurture members of Generation Z as they enter the workplace, helping to lengthen the life expectancy of America's workers. Are you willing to risk missing out on these benefits?

Elements of an Effective Employee Wellness Program

To create or revamp your own employee wellness program, consider implementing these popular and often-effective program components. Remember that the worth of any workplace wellness initiative rests on its alignment with your entity's culture and the health needs of your employees.

- **Design your program with employees in mind:** To help link program elements to expected health results, consider creating a [logic model](#) or roadmap to show how program components will foster the desired health changes.
- **Offer incentives:** Many workplace wellness programs offer incentives for employees to participate. The incentive model typically works best when employees demonstrate positive responses to rewards (e.g., a reward when an employee reaches 50,000 steps on his or her pedometer).
- **Lead by example:** Employees need support from the organization's leaders (e.g., entity leader wears his/her pedometer every day to set an example for employees)
- **Make your work space a healthy environment:** Employees need a healthy environment to support their healthy behaviors. Aim to integrate health initiatives throughout the workplace — not just within the employee wellness program (e.g., offering standing desks or Swiss balls; taking walking meetings or offering walk breaks, etc.). Also revamp your workplace policies if they do not support a healthy atmosphere (e.g., smoke-free workplace policy).
- **Link employees to community health resources:** For example, consider partnering with a local gym to offer discount passes to your employees; arranging for employees to meet at a local farmer's market for grocery shopping, etc.

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