

Health and Wellness Programs: Why Employees Don't Participate



Eighty-five percent of large firms and 58 percent of small ones currently offer at least one program to promote health and wellness (H&W) among employees. Usually these have the twin goals of reducing companies' healthcare costs while improving the quality of employees' lives. Research shows that well-designed programs often attain both goals. But even the best of them frequently experience low participation rates, particularly among employees who are most likely to benefit from taking part. Why is this? More specifically, what factors do employees see as the major barriers impeding their participation in these types of programs?

This study provides some answers to these questions. It is the first step in a larger research effort to identify interventions that are – and just as important are not – successful in overcoming barriers to participation in H&W programs. The study is taking place in a Fortune 500 company. The present analysis focuses on data provided by 3,000 of the firm's employees who responded to a survey asking them to assess the significance of 14 potential barriers to their participation in two quintessential H&W programs – one focusing on healthy eating and the other on exercise and movement.

Overall, the results were quite similar across both programs. The three most significant barriers pertained to time pressures: "life demands", "program is too time consuming", and "overwhelming to engage". Beyond these factors, respondents cited "the costs of the programs"; "a lack of information about the programs", especially "their benefits"; and an absence of social support from "friends", "family members", "colleagues", and even "supervisors". There was some "skepticism about the results" of the programs, but little concern about "privacy" or potential "reputational risk". Respondents rated "medical issues" as relatively insignificant impediments, even for the program involving exercise. Nonetheless, across both programs, less healthy respondents tended to see the full range of barriers as more challenging to participation than did their more healthy peers – and their actual participation rates were lower as well. Finally, remote workers generally perceived significantly greater barriers to participation in both programs than did those physically working in company offices, and they, too, had relatively low participation rates.

These results are suggestive of interventions that might encourage employees to partake in H&W programs. Providing time off to participate should help, particularly if it encourages mutual support among groups of peers who could engage together and if it has the active encouragement of supervisors. Reimbursing employees for any costs involved might facilitate participation as well. And the importance of communication is never to be underestimated. In this case, the focus would be on the availability of programs and on using colleagues' testimonials to shore up doubts about the programs' potential payoffs. It may be necessary to make special efforts to reach employees who are relatively unhealthy and those who work remotely.

But all of this is conjecture at this point. There is a clear need for further research and Phase 2 of this study is underway. Additional companies are welcome to participate; the more that do, the more robust the results will be. So, if your company is truly interested in learning why employees choose to participate – or not participate – in its H & W programs, now is your chance. Just let either Professor Bell or Professor Collins know as soon as possible.

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