



## The Wrong Way to Think About Wellness

If your organization is thinking about offering your employees a workplace wellness program, be sure that you've set the right expectations. Even if you already have a program in place, it's a good idea to re-examine your program's objectives.

Many employers look to wellness programs as a way to reduce costs and gain a quick return on their investment. That's the wrong way to think about wellness.

A better approach—and one supported by research—is to view your wellness program as a benefit to employees that demonstrates your commitment to their ongoing good health and the health of their family.

### Workplace Wellness Programs Are Not Tools for Reducing Costs

It's a mistake to attempt to use workplace wellness programs as a tool for reducing costs. That's not how they were intended to work, and that's not how they actually work. While they may result in cost savings for employers over time, employers should focus on using wellness programs to promote positive health outcomes for their employees.

The Workplace Wellness Programs Study mandated by the Affordable Care Act supports this approach.<sup>1</sup> Conducted by the Rand Corporation with the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the exhaustive study found that workplace wellness programs resulted in significant positive effects on health-related behavior and health risks among program participants.

The programs reviewed in the study offered wellness screening activities to identify health risks as well as interventions designed to reduce risks and promote healthy lifestyles. Overall, the programs resulted in:

- Increased smoking-cessation rates
- Improvements in physical activity
- Higher fruit and vegetable consumption
- Lower fat intake
- Reduction in body weight
- Decreased blood pressure rates

However, when examining the impact of wellness programs on reducing employer costs, the survey estimated the impact to benefit costs to be minimal. In spite of this small impact on costs, employers still overwhelmingly expressed confidence that workplace wellness programs reduce health costs. They're focusing on the wrong thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Rand Corporation, [Workplace Wellness Programs Study](#), 2013.



## Wellness Programs Improve Relationships with Employees

The true value of a workplace wellness program is in its power to improve the relationship between the employer and the employee as a component of your broader employee benefit strategy. When you implement your program properly—and with the right intentions—your employees feel that your organization cares about them and their family.

While you can certainly hope for a reduction in absenteeism and higher productivity, that shouldn't be your primary objective. If you expect immediate cost savings at the start, you will view your wellness initiatives as a failure even though they are actually working.

## Focus on the Benefits of Wellness Programs to Employees

Not surprisingly, the Rand study concludes that employers could realize a reduction in direct medical costs if employees participate in workplace wellness programs over time. The study also projected that these programs could be cost-neutral after five program years.

Instead of focusing on short-term cost savings, a better strategy involves laying the groundwork for long-term gains. The benefits of having a healthier workforce that views your organization as a partner in their health maintenance cannot be overestimated.

To ensure the success of your wellness program, the study identifies the following best practices:

- *Effectively communicate the benefit of participation to employees.* Face-to-face communication, broad outreach, and clear messaging from wellness program advocates help encourage participation.
- *Create opportunities for employees to engage.* It is important to make wellness activities convenient and easily accessible for all employees.
- *Leadership must be engaged at all levels.* Similar to other organization-wide initiatives, senior managers must consider wellness to be an organizational priority if they are to shift the culture.
- *Leverage existing resources and relationships.* It is possible to use existing resources to expand wellness offerings at little or no additional cost.
- *Evaluate the program on an ongoing basis.* Deploy your program with an attitude of continuous quality improvement. Even if you don't use formal evaluations, it is helpful to conduct needs assessments and solicit feedback from employees with the goal of improving your program.

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