



# WHY Employees Dislike Wellness Programs and How to Change Their Mind-Set

by | Debra Wein

Whether they're concerned about privacy or simply believe that wellness programs are no fun, some employees don't embrace wellness programs. This article offers tips for getting the less enthusiastic workers to join in.

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**Y**ou've heard the hype—Employee wellness programs can save money, increase creativity, boost morale, and help organizations retain and attract talent. But you've also heard rumblings that employees hate wellness programs. How can both be accurate, and what can your organization do to implement a wellness program that employees will rave about?

There are seven common reasons employees dislike wellness programs, but these issues are easy to avoid if you are starting a program and easy to fix if you already have one in place, when you know what to look for. Before we can discuss why employees are turned *off* by run-of-the-mill wellness programs, you first need to make sure they know about them.

It seems hard to believe; after all, you spend so much time and energy communicating your program. However, a *Harvard Business Review* survey of 465 full-time employees from companies that offer a wellness program found that the No. 1 reason employees did not participate was that they were not aware their employer offered a well-being program.<sup>1</sup>

### **What You Can Do**

Start by branding the program. The wellness initiative needs a name and a logo so that it is easily recognizable. Next, develop a communications strategy to promote your brand and your program. Determine what you will communicate, how often you will communicate and how you will disseminate your message. Develop information that is clear and straightforward, consistent and recognizable, and easily accessible. Use multiple communica-

tions methods (e.g., e-mail, hard-copy mailers, posters, a wellness portal, on-site meetings) and targeted messages to reach employees. In addition to letting employees know what is available, make sure they know where to access program information and what they need to do to participate. Most employees will not take the time to sift through information to find what they need.

To reinforce the message, develop a wellness committee made up of employees from all levels within the organization. The committee can help communicate the program, drive participation and motivate employees while also providing a voice for their colleagues' ideas and concerns.

Now, let's talk about how to engage employees by avoiding their "dislikes."

## **1. Employees Think They Don't Have Time to Participate**

Between long work days and 24/7 connectivity with the office, as well as family obligations, employees are busy. According to a report from the Global Corporate Challenge, 86% of employees don't participate in wellness initiatives because they do not have the time.<sup>2</sup> The UnitedHealthcare 2018 *Wellness Check Up Survey* also provides insight into the employee mind-set. It found that 63% of employees are unwilling to devote more than an hour a day to improve their health and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

### **What You Can Do**

Change the format of wellness offerings. Hour-long, weekly seminars no longer work for many organizations. Wellness programming can be effective and participation rates can increase when employees are offered shorter programs and more flexibility. A one-

hour seminar can be broken down into four 15-minute segments. The content is still the same; the information is simply disseminated over time.

Offer programs that can be done anywhere—on site at an employee's desk or at a remote employee's home office. Programs can be offered as recorded webinars, providing flexibility for busy and geographically dispersed employees. Allow employees to log on at their convenience and complete programs ranging in topic from nutrition and sleep to stress reduction and fitness.

Provide employees with the time to participate in wellness activities and improve their well-being during work hours. Offering employees company time to improve their health will increase participation. It also sends the message that your organization cares about the well-being of its employees.

Make the program hands-on. Include activities to add some excitement and interaction—bingo, Jeopardy games, fun giveaways (iTunes gift cards, free lunch in the cafeteria, a coffee card from the café, movie tickets, lottery tickets and raffles for bigger giveaways), make your own trail mix/yogurt parfait . . . you get the picture.

## **2. Employees Think the Wellness Program Isn't Fun**

Not everyone enjoys health and fitness. A quick look at the country's obesity rates—almost 40%<sup>4</sup>—is evidence that a large percentage of Americans are not focusing on their well-being. The reason? Many think it's not interesting or fun. And let's face it, taking time out of a busy work day to go to a biometric screening is not necessarily fun.

### What You Can Do

Find a way to make your program fun and exciting. Conduct a survey to find out what health topics or activities employees are interested in, and develop programs around the most popular topics. Just because a topic is a need-to-have, such as diabetes awareness or smoking cessation, doesn't mean these are the want-to-have programs employees will make time for. Understanding your culture, employees' interests and their readiness to change will go a long way to increasing the possibility that employees will appreciate and enjoy the programs being offered. Add activities that are hard to resist such as once-a-month chair massages, healthy cooking demos or fruit smoothie Fridays. Other ideas include:

- Add a dose of fun to your yearly biometric screenings by setting up a basketball hoop and inviting employees to take a shot for better health. For each basket made, add a dollar to a raffle that will be won by one of the participants. Better yet, make it a 50/50 raffle and donate half to the employee's chosen charity.
- Don't simply tell employees to exercise three times a week; invite them to be active at specific wellness events or encourage them to post a selfie on a wellness portal of them doing something physical.
- Host a quarterly wellness day. Invite local vendors to the office to set up tables for employees to get information on nutrition, yoga, meditation, healthy snacks and more. Have a nurse available to provide blood pressure measurements.
- Set up a fun physical activity once a week during work hours to get employees active. Host an employee field day once a month during which employees can head to a local park for Frisbee™, tennis, walking or soccer, or start a company sports team. Or, if space allows, try volleyball, games based around soccer or yoga, or a bean bag toss in the parking lot or grassy area.
- Offer walking meetings and standing desks or provide a game room with foosball and ping pong so that employees can take a break from sitting.

### 3. Employees Think the Program Does Not Meet Their Needs

Your smoking-cessation program may be enjoying success, but if only a small percentage of employees are smokers, then participation in your wellness program will not be high.

And while your wellness challenge may get incredible results, if the activities appeal only to weekend warriors, you are not meeting the needs of most of your employees.

### What You Can Do

Customize the program to meet individual employee needs. A program that is personalized will deliver better engagement and results. Every employee has different health needs, different interests and different priorities. Motivating employees to make healthy changes is more effective when the changes make sense to them. Likewise, programs that are relevant to their needs are programs they'll want to sign up for. It's important to engage employees where they want support, whether it is physical, emotional or mental. Provide options for employees in all stages of behavior change, from those contemplating making changes to those who are well on their way. Establish a connection with each employee and provide support and guidance for his or her wellness journey.

A wellness committee with active listeners can go a long way to gathering feedback and providing cheerleading for the wellness efforts. As an example, delivering a smoking-cessation program to an organization with 20 smokers and only three who are interested in quitting is not likely the best use of your time and resources. On the other hand, setting up a smoothie or breakfast burrito demo at 5:00 a.m., when the truck drivers are running in to the lumberyard to pick up their routes and can grab a quick taste and a recipe, is a way to make wellness personalized, approachable and relevant.

## learn more

### Education

To watch Debra Wein's recorded webcast presentation "Why Employees Dislike Wellness Programs and How to Change Their Mind-Set," visit [www.ifebp.org/webcasts](http://www.ifebp.org/webcasts).

### Health Benefits Conference & Expo (HBCE) January 28-30, 2019, Clearwater Beach, Florida

Visit [www.ifebp.org/hbce](http://www.ifebp.org/hbce) for more details.

### From the Bookstore

**A Closer Look: 2018 Workplace Wellness Trends**  
International Foundation. 2018.

Visit [www.ifebp.org/books.asp?7952E](http://www.ifebp.org/books.asp?7952E) for more information.

## takeaways

- Lack of awareness of wellness programs is a big hurdle for getting employees to participate.
- To ensure employees have time to take part in wellness programs, employers should consider offering programs that are short and flexible and allow employees to participate during work hours.
- Understanding employees' interests and adding engaging elements to wellness programs such as giveaways and games can help erase the perception that wellness programs aren't fun.
- Many employees are reluctant to participate in wellness programs because of concerns about privacy and employer access to medical records.
- C-level support and management buy-in boosts the perception that the employer cares about worker well-being and increases the likelihood that employees will get involved with a wellness program.

### 4. Employees Are Worried About Privacy

Many employees worry that participating in a wellness program will allow their employer to access their medical records. A survey from Willis Towers Watson found that almost half of employees are reluctant to sign up for a well-being program because they are wary of their employer having access to their personal health information.<sup>5</sup> This lack of trust is understandable—Employees may worry that a medical condition will impact their jobs or their health benefits or subject them to discrimination. It's important for employers to be both genuine and transparent when asking employees to participate in programs that involve disclosure of their health information. Most distrust in wellness programs comes from poor work relationships and communication.

#### *What You Can Do*

Don't dismiss employee privacy concerns. Make sure your program provides transparency. Take the time to communicate what data you will collect and how it will be used. Let employees know that your program meets all state and federal regulations. If the program is being administered by a third-party vendor, explain the vendor's role and how it handles confidential employee data, and keep it separate from

your business operations. A hands-off approach by human resources can go a long way in sending the message that employee privacy is valued. Continue to message around safety and privacy throughout the program.

### 5. Employees Don't Know What They Need to Do

You've branded your wellness program and developed a robust communications plan. You think your wellness program requirements and incentives are as clear as day. Employees may not agree with you. Some still may not understand why they should participate, and others may not understand what they need to do. If the program has too many steps and forms and is perceived as complicated, participation rates will lag.

#### *What You Can Do*

Employees receive numerous competing messages every day, so it's important that the wellness program design is simple and easy to understand. Employees should be able to locate information quickly and sign up effortlessly. Keep communications short and to the point. Consider using a wellness portal to house all information in one place; this makes it easy for employees to access information on a mobile app when they are on the go. If you need a 20-page brochure explaining the elements of your program, it's too complex!

### 6. Employees Think They Will Be Judged

Employees often feel they will be judged if they take an hour out of their day to attend a wellness seminar or a fitness activity, and managers often fail to realize how their habits influence their team. Managers lead by example and can inspire change within their company if they share the importance of well-being with their team.

#### *What You Can Do*

Get both C-level support for your program and management buy-in. It's important that these individuals act as healthy role models for your employees. Employees are more likely to participate in wellness programs if they see that it's important to company executives. They are also more likely to take time out of their day to participate in programs if they see their manager engaging in wellness activities. Train managers to tell their employees that it's OK—and even encouraged—to take a break and do something for their well-being.

## 7. Employees Underestimate the Value of Financial Rewards and Incentives

You may have developed great financial incentives for your program, but employees aren't aware of the value of the incentives. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of employees underestimate the value of wellness program financial rewards and incentives, which average about \$742 per employee per year.<sup>6</sup> In fact, 41% of employees surveyed estimated the average annual wellness program financial reward at between \$0 and \$300.<sup>7</sup>

### What You Can Do

Communicate your wellness program incentives in clear, concise language, and make sure the dollar value is front and center. Take the same steps you did when raising awareness of the program: Use different communication methods including e-mail, social media, postcards, fliers and text messages. Host on-site meetings and/or conference calls about wellness program incentives and discuss the dollar value of participation. If you are using a wellness technology platform, make sure wellness program incentives are easy to find and easy for employees to track.

Of course, the best way to ensure engagement is to customize the program to meet the needs of your employees. To personalize your program, consider utilizing some assessment tools to determine what employees want and need from a program. Surveys, health assessments, wellness champions and engagement tools can provide valuable information to help you determine the best ways to get started in your wellness program. To ensure your program is effective and meeting the needs of your employees, be sure to evaluate each aspect of your program, including program satisfaction, e-mail open rates, instructor ratings, behavior change and health outcomes. Bottom line: Behavior change is personal, so make your program personal, as well. 🎯

## Endnotes

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