



HERO Industry Research Review

Helping employees internalize the value of health is key to healthy lifestyle and a balanced work style, as well as employee productivity outcomes

Study Title: Motivations for Health and Their Associations With Lifestyle, Work Style, Health, Vitality, and Employee Productivity

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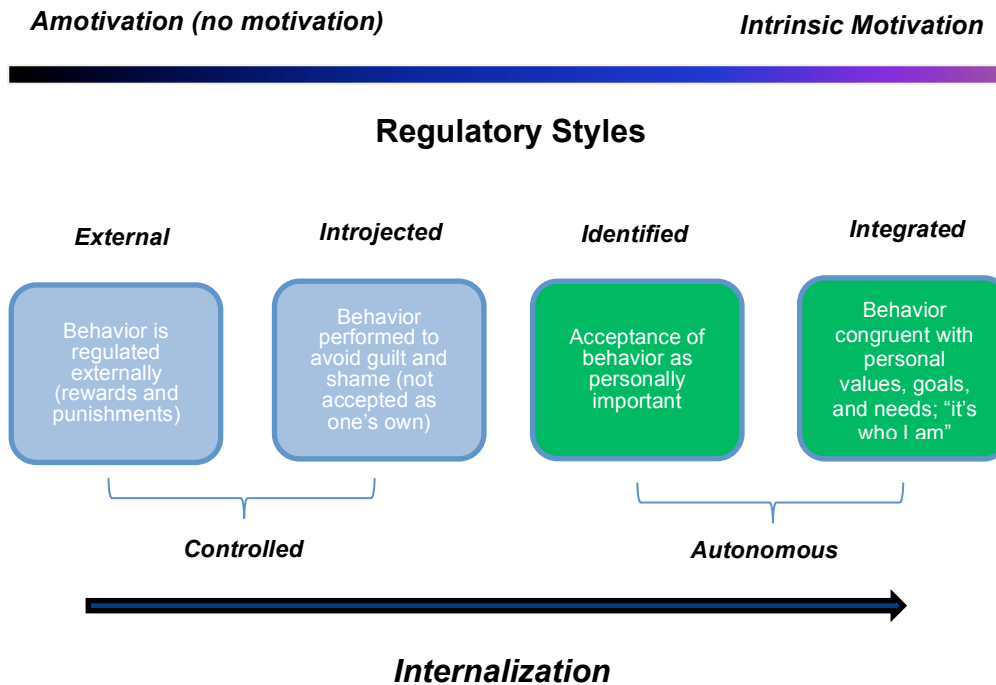
Overview of Study

This study investigated the relationships between employee motivation to improve their health and a healthy lifestyle, work style, perceived health, vitality and productivity. The findings will be of interest to organizations and practitioners who want to better understand how motivation style is associated with health behavior. Authors' findings provide valuable insight into employee engagement in their health and the relationship between health and productivity outcomes supporting the business case for employee health promotion.

A primary goal in Employee Health Management (EHM) is to effectively engage employees in performing healthy behaviors. To investigate motivation for healthy behavior, this study was based on the *Self-Determination Theory* of human motivation, and its sub-theory the *Organismic Integration Theory*. The Organismic Integration Theory offers that people have qualitatively different reasons for participating in health-promoting behaviors, with motivation ranging from the extremes of *amotivation* (not motivated) to *intrinsic motivation* (high-level, autonomous motivation). There are four “regulatory styles” of motivation along this continuum, which are described in Figure 1.

This study measured the associations between the four motivational regulatory styles and specific health behaviors among employees in the workplace (physical activity, smoking and alcohol intake, healthy dietary habits, and relaxation). The study also examined the relationships between healthy lifestyle and balanced *work* style – defined as a response to work demands in a certain environment – and considered how they work together to impact “prolonged employability and ability to do work”, commonly referred to as productivity or performance.

Figure 1. Motivation for Behavior Change



Methodology

This cross-sectional study was conducted among employees of a Dutch dairy company prior to implementing a workplace health promotion program. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the 1132 eligible employees completed an online questionnaire that included a modified version of the Exercise Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-E) to assess motivational regulatory styles. Lifestyle and work style were assessed using additional questions on physical activity, smoking, alcohol intake, healthy dietary habits, relaxation, and balanced work style. The questionnaire also included questions on perceived health, vitality at work, absenteeism and presenteeism.

A series of multivariate linear regression models were run to test the relationships between healthy lifestyle, work style, perceived health, vitality at work, absenteeism, and presenteeism. The models statistically controlled for gender, age, education level and shiftwork status. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and bivariate Pearson correlation coefficients were also computed.

Results

Analysis of the association of controlled (external) and autonomous (integrated) motivation on lifestyle behaviors and work style revealed the following key findings:

- Controlled regulation (external motivation) was negatively associated with physical activity, healthy dietary habits, relaxation, and with having a balanced work style. This

means that as levels of external motivation increased, measures of healthy lifestyle and work style decreased. Controlled regulation was not statistically associated with smoking habits or alcohol use.

- Autonomous regulation (integrated motivation) was positively associated with physical activity, healthy dietary habits, relaxation, and having a balanced work style. This means that as levels of internal motivation increased, the other measures also increased.
- Autonomous regulation was negatively associated with smoking and alcohol use, so individuals with high levels of internal motivation were less likely to smoke or use alcohol.
- Absenteeism and presenteeism were negatively associated with perceived health, meaning individuals with higher levels of health reported lower absence and presenteeism (on-the-job productivity loss).

Study Conclusions

This study's findings are consistent with previous studies; autonomous (integrated) motivation for healthy living was associated with the five measured healthy lifestyle behaviors and having a balanced work style. In addition, the results support the idea of transference of autonomous regulation to various types of health behavior, that is, if a person internalizes the "value of healthy living" in general, it is likely to contribute to the practice of a variety of healthy behaviors. This study also supports previous research linking employee health and productivity.

While a few previous studies have suggested that external (controlled) regulation may have some value in the initial process of *short-term* behavior change, it is not likely to be very useful for supporting *long-term* behavior change. Long-term maintenance of healthy behaviors appears to require autonomous regulation, or internal motivation. Since engaging employees in healthy behaviors is a primary goal of health management programs, it is important to help employees effectively internalize the value of health for themselves.

Practical Applications

To encourage the development of internal motivation, consider the following:

- Focus on making the value of healthy living very clear; encourage employees to articulate what the value of health means to them.
- Encourage and support employees' belief that being healthy is an important part of "who I am".
- Help employees define health goals and motives that are consistent with whom they are or aspire to be (life purpose).
- Engender a social environment (culture) that motivates employees to choose activities autonomously (based on internal values).
- Provide feedback that demonstrates to employees they are competent to perform healthy activities (builds self confidence).
- Provide interventions that foster internalization by offering choice, mastery, fun and positive interpersonal interactions.

- Broaden the business case for health promotion programs by noting how increased internal motivation relates to improved health, which is associated with better productivity outcomes.

HERO Reviewer's Commentary

Historically, the business case for investing in EHM programs in the U.S. has been the desire for healthcare cost avoidance. In countries around the world that have a primarily socialized medical care system, the business case has typically been focused on improving employee engagement at work, increasing productivity, and decreasing absenteeism/presenteeism. This study demonstrates that motivation style is a key element in effectively engaging individuals in their health, and impacting key business results.

Notably, this Dutch study had a 55% participation rate with no incentives, and prior to the introduction of a formal EHM program. While this may be indicative of a cultural influence, it also suggests that it is possible to achieve good levels of participation without external incentives.

Perhaps the most important message this study offers is the potential role of internal motivation for maintaining long-term behavior change. To encourage the development and use of internal motivation – and reduce reliance on external motivators (rewards or penalties) – it is important to help employees understand and articulate what the value of good health means to them individually within their life (purpose and goals). Moreover, employers should provide EHM programs that offer personal choice, evidence of skill mastery, fun experiences and positive social interactions.

In a practical sense, some of these necessary elements to support internal motivation can be provided through the use of the increasingly flexible technology platforms available from health management providers. This technology can be used to gather a variety of person-level data – including demographic, health status, motivation, readiness, etc. – and use it to provide more individualized programming for users. This approach encourages greater intrinsic motivation for health by offering autonomy (choices) and recognizing mastery (e.g., my personal activity/incentive tracking web page provides informative and reinforcing feedback when I successfully complete health-enhancing activities). Many of these technology platforms are also able to provide other elements that support internal motivation suggested by the authors of this study – fun and positive social interactions – by their use of gamification and social networking applications within healthy challenges, contests and competitions.

About the HERO Reviewer

Steven Noeldner is a Partner in the Total Health Management practice of Mercer Health & Benefits, LLC. He is also the Chair of HERO's Research Study Subcommittee, which is

responsible for providing oversight and guidance for HERO-sponsored research studies. Steven's health management industry experience includes university teaching, worksite health program design and management, President and COO of a health management vendor, and health management consulting. Steven earned a M.S. in Adult Fitness & Cardiac Rehabilitation and a Ph.D. in Exercise Science with specialization in Sport Psychology, Exercise Physiology, and Biomechanics. He has written a number of professional papers and book chapters, and served as a peer reviewer for professional publications.