



HERO Industry Research Review

Perceived workplace health support is an important element in better understanding the relationship between health and productivity.

Study Title: Perceived Workplace Health Support Is Associated With Employee Productivity

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Overview of Study

Employers and practitioners are increasingly interested in understanding the impact that a healthy workplace culture can have on business outcomes like productivity. In addition, industry guidelines¹ have suggested that perceived organizational support for health and physical activity is an ideal way to assess the effectiveness of leadership support for health and well-being within a company. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between perceived workplace support for health and employee productivity across a variety of occupations and work cultures. More specifically, Chen and colleagues sought to examine whether perceived workplace support for healthy living and physical activity is associated with work productivity independent of health risks, health behaviors and mental health.

Perceived organizational support reflects the level of support, commitment and care that employees believe their company has towards them². This is important because it relates to employee commitment, as well as satisfaction, engagement, motivation, and performance.³ More than 700 articles have been published on perceived organizational support, but this study is the first to examine whether perceived workplace support for healthy living and physical activity is associated with employee productivity. Therefore, this study provides a unique opportunity to understand the impact of perceived workplace support for healthy living and physical activity, independent of employee health status.

¹ HERO/PHA Program Measurement & Evaluation Guide: Core Metrics for Employee Health Management

² Mearns KJ, Reader T. Organizational support and safety outcomes: An un-investigated relationship? *Safety Science*. 2008;46(3):388-397.

³ Rhoades L, Eisenberger R. Perceived organizational support: A review of the literature. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 2002;87(4):698-714.

Methodology

This cross-sectional study was conducted among employees across a wide range of Washington State civil service occupations, with a total of 3,528 employees completing a five-page survey via mail or online.

Multiple survey instruments were used to measure the relationship between productivity and perceived workplace support for healthy living and physical activity:

Assessment Area	Survey Instrument
Modifiable Health Behaviors	Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Questionnaire (BRFSS)
Depression Symptoms	Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2)
Anxiety	General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)
Work Productivity	Work Productivity and Activity Impairment (WPAI) Questionnaire
Perceived Workplace Support	Two survey questions: 1) Overall, my agency supports me in living a healthier life and 2) Overall, my agency supports me in participating in physical activity.
Health Status Rating	Five level self-assessment scale

The authors used a series of sophisticated regression models to test the relationships between perceived workplace health support and productivity and control for variables that could influence survey responses, such as state agency affiliation, depression and anxiety, health status, BMI categories, health risk and health behaviors, and socio-demographic characteristics.

Results

The authors identified the following key findings:

- Employees with higher levels of perceived workplace support reported better physical and mental health.
 - 16.9% of those who almost never felt workplace health support had depressive symptoms, while only 7.9% of those who almost always felt workplace health support had depressive symptoms.
 - The prevalence of clinical anxiety was 29% for those with the lowest level of perceived support, compared to 7% for those with the highest perception of support.
 - Of those with the highest levels of perceived support, 88.2% reported excellent health, compared with 81.8% in the lowest-supported group.

- Presenteeism decreased as perceived workplace support increased. Within this study, presenteeism refers to impaired levels of on-the-job performance due to poor health. This means lower levels of presenteeism are desirable.
 - Employees with the lowest level of perceived support reported 10.3% more presenteeism (work impairment) during the past week compared to employees with the highest level of perceived support.
 - Employees with the lowest level of perceived support reported 6.9% more presenteeism than employees with the highest level.
- After accounting for all variables, such as BMI, health status, depression and related factors listed previously, the authors found there was a significant connection between perceived workplace support and presenteeism, demonstrating that employees who do not feel supported have higher levels of work impairment, regardless of their levels of health status.
 - The difference in presenteeism between those who almost never felt supported and those who felt supported was 7.1%.
 - Those who felt the least supported reported 4.3 percentage points higher presenteeism than those who felt most supported.
- Absenteeism did not vary based on levels of perceived workplace support, and was not associated with either of the perceived workplace health support measures.

Study Conclusions

Within their study of Washington State government employees, the authors found that higher perceived workplace support for healthy living and physical activity tended to be related to lower presenteeism, independent of personal health risks and health status. This means a culture of health is likely to have a positive influence on employee perceptions of support, and may ultimately have a positive effect on productivity. These findings, along with a recent longitudinal study⁴ showing that a lack of organizational support for well-being can influence total productivity impairment, suggest that organizational support of health and well-being may have a positive impact on employee work performance.

Interestingly, absenteeism was not associated with either of the workplace support variables. Although there have been many studies that have reported positive effects of wellness programs in reducing lost work time, there are other studies that have found wellness programs were associated with reduced presenteeism, but not absenteeism, like the present study. The authors note that self-reported absence data and presence of chronic conditions may play a role in these differences in findings.

⁴ Shi, Y., Sears, L. E., Coberley, C. R., & Pope, J.E.(2013). The association between modifiable well-being risks and productivity: a longitudinal study in pooled employer sample. *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, 55, 353-364.

HERO Reviewer's Commentary

Creating cultures of health within our organizations and communities has been a strategic imperative for many professionals within the health and well-being arena for the last few years. Likewise, a high level of perceived organizational support for health and well-being has been recognized as a key element within healthy workforce culture. In fact, there are multiple efforts taking place throughout the industry to determine the elements of a healthy workplace culture, how these elements can be measured, and whether evidence exists to help quantify the value of a culture of health^{5,6,7}. One of these efforts, the *Program Measurement & Evaluation Guide: Core Metrics for Employee Health Management*, published by the Health Enhancement Research Organization and Population Health Alliance, highlights the importance of measuring employees', managers' and leaders' perceived level of organizational support for health and well-being. The findings from this study not only reiterate the value and importance of measuring perceived organizational support, but also provide evidence of the relationship between perceived support of healthy living and physical activity and presenteeism.

As noted above, the positive relationship between perceived organizational support and key business outcomes such as employee performance, engagement and motivation has been demonstrated over the past three decades. Furthermore, perceived organizational support of safety has been shown to improve safety outcomes and behavior⁸, suggesting that perceived organizational support of health and well-being may have a similar impact on health outcomes and behavior. Based on this research and this study's findings, there is great interest in further understanding the health and business outcomes that are affected when organizations effectively support the health and well-being of their employees.

Finally, perceived organizational support is only one of the many areas being studied by organizational psychologists to better understand and measure employee motivation and behavior. The fields of organizational development, positive psychology, systems-thinking, behavioral economics and other disciplines have great insights and knowledge to offer health professionals as we challenge ourselves to create more supportive cultures and effective organizations. Collaborating with experts in these different fields will afford us great opportunities to expand our thinking and create innovative, alternative solutions. Chen and colleagues demonstrate this interdisciplinary approach in their research question, variety of measurement tools used and recognition of the broader value of wellness programs.

⁵ HERO Culture of Health Committee, 2014-2015.

⁶ RWJF Culture of Health Measurement Initiative, 2014-2015.

⁷ Program Measurement & Evaluation Guide: Core Metrics for Employee Health Management. HERO/PHA; 2014.

⁸ Mearns, K.J. & Reader, T. (2008). Organizational Support and safety outcomes: An un-investigated relationship? Safety Science, 46, 388-397.

About the HERO Reviewer

Jennifer Flynn is a Health Management Strategy Consultant for Mayo Clinic Global Business Solutions. She is also the Vice Chair of HERO's Research Study Subcommittee, which is responsible for providing oversight and guidance for HERO-sponsored research studies. In addition, she leads the HERO Culture of Health Research Workgroup, is a member of the steering committee for defining Culture of Health metrics for Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Culture of Health initiative, co-leads the Organizational Support domain work within the HERO/PHA Measurement & Evaluation Guide, and served as a core member of the HERO EHM Best Practice Scorecard V4 in collaboration with Mercer. Jennifer holds a MS in Health Fitness Management and a BA in Psychology and is working towards her doctorate in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. She is a recognized thought leader, award-winning speaker, and author in the area of cultural and organizational support for health management.