

HERO Industry Research Review: Predictors of Wellness Program Participation and Outcomes?

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Study Title: Examining Wellness Programs Over Time: Predicting Participation and Workplace Outcomes.

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Study Overview

While research studies have tried to simulate wellness program influencers, few real-life program evaluations have been recorded to assess the psychological factors around what motivates an individual to participate and how organizations benefit from wellness programs beyond health measures and monetary investment. This study reviewed data over a three-year period that included the launch of a wellness program, and assessed the influence of wellness program participation on job satisfaction, performance, intent to stay, and turnover. It also assessed employee beliefs about the value of wellness, intention to participate, and perceived organizational support (POS).

Methodology

The study reviewed archival data from a 3-year period (Y1=2010, Y2=2011, Y3=2012) including HR data (demographics, turnover either voluntary or involuntary, performance rating) wellness participation data (earning full/partial incentive or no participation) and employee survey data

(perceived organizational support, intention to participate in wellness, beliefs about value of wellness programs, intent to stay, job satisfaction). 17,245 employees from a major U.S. financial institution, largely based in the Mid-West, were assessed across all three years.

The wellness program was launched in Y2 so wellness program participation data was available for Y2 and Y3. The only values measured during all three years were performance and turnover. All other measures were collected in Y1 and Y3 only. The wellness program incentive consisted of a points system to earn up to \$200, where each point was equal to \$1. Table 1 below summarizes the earning opportunities for wellness program components.

Table 1. Incentive design for study

Activity	Point Value (1 pt=\$1, max 200 pts)
Health Risk Assessment (required to participate in wellness program)	100 points
Personalized wellness plan from an online screening	100 points
Phone call with a health advisor to review wellness program and wellness activities	50 points
Three phone calls from a lifestyle coach	50 points
Four phone calls from a disease management coach	50 points
Lifestyle coaching online or by mail	25 points
At-work wellness campaign or receiving flu shot	25 points

The study looked at locations with three or more employees and used gender, ethnicity and age as control variables in their analysis. They also conducted sensitivity tests to determine if directionality in study relationships was supported in multiple directions.

Results

The study looked at many different relationships including wellness participation and participation linked to outcomes. The main study findings are summarized in Table 2 for ease of understanding.

Table 2. Research Study Hypotheses and Findings

Research Hypotheses	Hypothesis Supported?	Findings
Beliefs about the value of employee wellness programs (Y1) will lead to subsequent levels of wellness program participation (Y2 and Y3).	Supported	Employees are more likely to participate in wellness programming if they had higher beliefs about the value of wellness programming.
Perceived Organizational Support for wellness (Y1) will lead to greater subsequent levels of wellness program participation (Y2 and Y3).	Supported	Employees who believed that their organization supported wellness were more likely to participate in wellness programming.
These relationships will be mediated by intention to participate (Y1) in the wellness program. That is, the more positive beliefs (Y1) and greater POS for wellness (Y1) will lead to increased levels of intention to participate in the wellness program (Y1), and greater intention to participate in the program will lead to increased levels of participation (Y2 and Y3).	Supported	Employees who thought that their organization supported wellness and had higher beliefs about wellness had greater intention to participate in wellness programming. The greater the intention to participate in programming related to their actual programming participation.
Controlling for past beliefs about the value of employee wellness programs (Y1), greater levels of wellness program participation (Y2) will lead to more positive future beliefs about the value of employee wellness programs (Y3).	Supported	Participation in the wellness program had a positive effect on future beliefs of value of the program.
Controlling for past levels of POS for wellness (Y1), greater levels of wellness program participation (Y2) will lead to higher levels of POS for wellness (Y3).	Supported	Participation in the wellness program had a positive effect on future perceived organizational support for wellness programming.
Controlling for past levels of job satisfaction (Y1), greater levels of wellness program participation (Y2) will relate to increased future job satisfaction (Y3).	Not Supported	Wellness program participation did not translate to increased job satisfaction ratings.
Controlling for past manager-rated performance levels (Y1), greater levels of wellness program participation (Y2) will positively relate to subsequent performance ratings (Y3).	Supported	Wellness program participation had a positive impact on job performance.
Controlling for past levels of intention to stay (Y1), greater levels of wellness program participation (Y2) will positively relate to subsequent intention to stay (Y3).	Not Supported	Participation in the wellness program showed no significant effect on intention to stay.
Greater levels of wellness program participation (Y2) will negatively relate to subsequent turnover behavior (Y3).	Supported	Individuals who met the full incentive or partial incentive were less likely to be terminated or voluntarily leave the organization.

Findings of particular interest include demographics of employees utilizing wellness programming and findings related to job performance, satisfaction, and perceived support. Females were more likely to participate in wellness programming, but showed lower job performance, and slightly lower job satisfaction. Conversely, females were more likely to have intentions to stay at their job.

Generationally, Baby Boomers were most likely to have positive beliefs about the value of wellness programs, had greater intentions to participate in such programs, had the highest intentions to stay, and were most likely to obtain the full incentive amounts. Millennials had the highest perceived levels of organizational support for wellness, but had the lowest job performance ratings. The study found that the generational differences had small study effects, meaning that generational differences were statistically significant but not strong.

In terms of race, Black employees had the lowest performance ratings and Black and Asian employees had the lowest intentions to stay. Hispanic employees had the lowest belief about value of wellness programs and the lowest intention to participate in wellness. Black and Hispanic employees had the lowest levels of obtaining the full incentive and Black employees had the lowest level of participation overall. The study accounted for differences in gender, ethnicity and age as control variables.

Study Conclusions

The study found that beyond the financial return on investment for health improvement, companies also benefit from wellness programs in terms of retention and performance. Employees who participated in wellness programs had lower turnover rates and higher job performance. The employees' beliefs about value of the wellness and perceived organizational support for wellness also appear to influence the behavior to participate in the wellness program.

Study Implications

Many practical implications can be applied from the results of the study. One is to evaluate perceived support for a benefit prior to launch to help assess and plan for benefit usage; perceived support, value of the benefit and intention to participate were all linked to usage of the programming. As the study states, this can help determine the enrollment of a new program and also expected return on investment.

Another implication is that companies may want to participate in campaigns to increase levels of perceived organizational support or beliefs about the value of wellness. The study found that as education and promotion of the program dwindled over time, so did program participation. In order to maintain high levels of program participation, organizations need to extend communications beyond the initial launch.

The other main implication from the study is to make sure that communications and outreach are targeted to the specific subgroup populations that are less likely to participate in programs.

Reviewer Commentary

While the data relating to participation and performance can help drive the case for wellness programming, it is particularly interesting to understand some of the underlying socio-economic and diversity issues related to wellness programming. A constant challenge which many wellness programs face (as with any public health issue) are the social determinants surrounding delivery of wellness programming. As organizations evaluate how programming is delivered, it is important to think about the variety of educational, cultural, and technological abilities of employees to make sure there is an equitable delivery of the content. A variety of approaches are needed to engage subgroups of employees in wellness programming and influence beliefs on value and perceived organizational support; this could have a positive impact on retention and performance, which in turn can increase the value of investment of wellness programming.