

Factors affecting Success of worksite wellness programs in

Western New York.

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Introduction

It is expected that by 2007 national health expenses will reach \$2.1 trillion (1). There is a positive association between healthy lifestyle practices and chronic disease (2). Wellness programs can incorporate disease prevention and health promotion to help curb this trend. Since “130 million Americans are employed and spend one third of their time at work,” a logical place to implement wellness programs is at the worksite (3,4). Work life can affect family life, therefore healthy behaviors learned at work, can be brought home (5).

Worksite wellness programs encompass a range of activities including individual counseling, nutritional assessment, disease awareness programming, physical fitness classes, smoking cessations groups and many more (6). In the past few years many employers have begun to see the benefits of implementing a worksite wellness program (2). Some of the most noticeable changes have been in “non-medical” areas such as improvements in employee retention and job satisfaction, also increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and lowered healthcare costs (2,3). Worksite wellness programs have even been shown to have benefits lasting into retirement (7). Many employers however, are only interested in seeing the return on investment, which may take several years of having the program in place to be able to measure (Interview 6). Return on investment is oftentimes not even measured (8). Companies with limited budgets would rather spend funds on programs and services rather than gathering outcomes data (8).

While the benefits of worksite wellness programs are apparent, there are many factors that can contribute to the success or failure of the initiatives (3). Participation in wellness programs is a major problem (9). If program levels are too low, success is

difficult to quantify regardless of how beneficial it was to those who were participating (9).

This study will look at a sample of wellness employees in the western New York area identify as the most significant reasons, benefits, barriers and essential resources to worksite wellness programs. The researcher looked at the topic in relation to the Social Cognitive Theory (fig 1). The social cognitive theory attempts to explain human behavior as an interaction between the individual, their environment and the cognitive and emotional processes surrounding the behavior (10). The behavior (participating in worksite wellness programs) would depend on the individual as well as home and work environments specific to each individual.

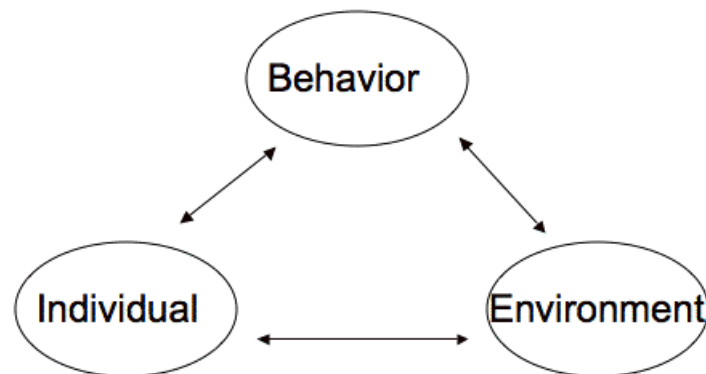


Figure 1 The Social Cognitive Theory

Studying the factors that most influence worksite wellness program success will help the nutrition program at Cornell Cooperative Extension expand their services. The information gathered from this study will be used to develop Worksite Wellness Presentations. The study will also aid in helping a team at Cooperative Extension further develop marketing materials that will advertise these presentations.

Methods

Conceptual Framework

This framework (fig 2) used to develop this study, partially based on the social-cognitive theory, assumes that a successful worksite wellness program would have to have employee participation (10, 9). Employee participation (the behavior) would depend on the person's (individual) needs and values as well as environmental factors both at work and at home.

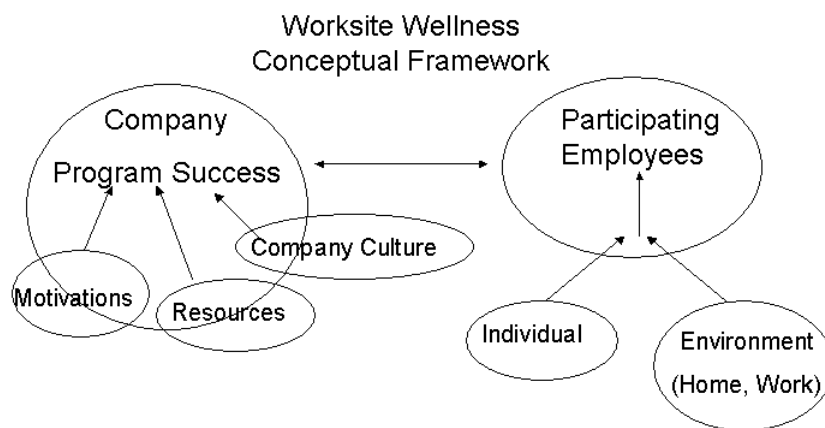


Figure 2- Initial Conceptual Framework

The theory was then expanded to look at how the social cognitive theory, as it might apply to the individual employee would be influenced and in turn influence the company's program. It seemed the most influencing factors to a worksite wellness program would be motivation such as return on investment, employee retention and increased productivity; resources like time and money; and the corporate culture.

Data Collection

This research followed Human Subjects Protocol and used qualitative and quantitative data collection. This approach attempts to provide a more descriptive view of worksite wellness in Western New York. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth,

open-ended interviews with 6 board members of the Worksite Health Alliance of Greater Rochester (WHAGR) lasting fifteen to thirty-five minutes in length (Appendix A). The participants worked with a range of companies from Health Care Providers to Employee Assistance programs and had a variety of roles in those companies. Most of the interviewed board members held a position of responsibility with worksite wellness. All interviewees signed a Human Subjects Consent Form (Appendix B). Interview questions were developed using current research regarding the creation, implementation and evaluation of wellness programs. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. From the transcripts of these detailed interviews, themes were identified.

Based on these themes and a membership survey distributed to members of the Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA), a short seven-question survey (Appendix C) was created and given to other community members interested in wellness (11). The surveys were distributed by the researcher to employees attending a “Well Workplace” wellness event. Of the 37 voluntary respondents, most seemed to be from the Human Relations Department of their companies. Respondent’s roles’ in the companies the represented was not measured.

Each of the first six questions were multiple choice. Questions one and two; “What is your organization’s primary business,” and “How long has your wellness program been in place,” requested one response to be checked. The other questions; “What are the top reasons your company has a wellness program,” “What are the top reasons employees participate in wellness programs,” “Which barriers affect the success of your wellness program the most,” and “What resources would be most helpful to your

company in implementing, improving or evaluating a wellness program,” requested that respondents choose the top two for each. Question seven asked for additional comments.

This survey obtained quantitative data on a range of questions related to worksite wellness including reasons for having a program, barriers and desired resources. The survey participants were primarily employees designated by their companies to be in charge of wellness, others were self-appointed. Many of them were part of their companies’ human resource department. Surveys were given out at a wellness event attended by community members. People at the event were asked to complete the survey about worksite wellness. The researcher was introduced as a Cornell University Student interested in worksite wellness. The surveys were coded and then entered into a data analysis program.

It was assumed that all interviewees and respondents to the survey were involved with worksite wellness to some extent. The survey did not measure the level or role that the respondents played in their companies’ wellness programs. The respondents participated voluntarily and were not randomly chosen.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interviews were analyzed using a read and reread technique. For example, interview one was read through and notes were made. Then interview two was read and notes were made. Next interview one was reread, then two was reread and next interview three was read each time new points were recognized. Themes were identified in each interview as well as unique information. As themes were identified they were placed into the context of the conceptual framework presented in the introduction. The

framework was modified as different ideas were isolated. These themes were used in part to help develop questions for the quantitative survey.

The coding for the survey was very simple as frequencies (in actual numbers and percentages) were the main descriptive that would be obtained. For each answer checked in the survey, the data code was 1, for each answer not checked the code was 0. Data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and analyzed.

Results

Qualitative Interviews

The results of the qualitative interview are presented in context of the modified conceptual framework presented below. Throughout the interviews it became obvious that the larger part of this study would be focusing on the companies and their programs while the employees' participation would be secondary.

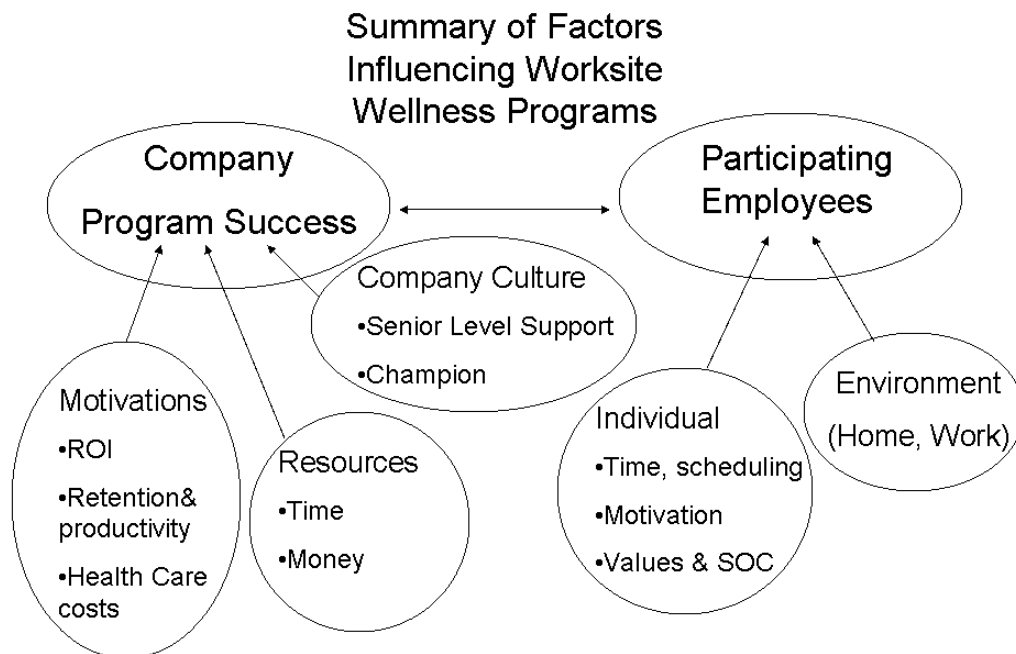


Figure 3- Finalized Conceptual Framework

Starting at the left of the schematic, the success of company programs was still thought to have 3 main influencing factors; motivation, resources and company culture. These three factors were then subdivided into more specific marks. Motivation of a company, or what drives a company to have a wellness program, is typically directly involved with employee health care costs. Companies want, above all, a return on investment (ROI). This will happen with decreased healthcare costs and increased employee retention and productivity.

Resources are also an essential part of having a successful wellness program. Time on the part of wellness staff to create, implement and evaluate a program is necessary but difficult to come by. Also monetary resources play a role, a program without financial support faces many more challenges than one with a large budget.

Thirdly the corporate culture at a company with influence the success of a program. Interviewees stated that commitment of a company was important as well as having senior level support. One participant also stated that a “champion for wellness” also affected the success of a program.

The success of a wellness program and participation of employees directly influence each other. The social-cognitive theory was still used to explain the factors influencing employees to participate.

From an individual level it became apparent that time and scheduling were major barriers to participation. Also the motivation (incentives, self-improvement, decreased health care costs etc) of the employee affected involvement. Values and stage of change (SOC) were a third factor. For example, if a person valued being in shape versus if they didn't think there was a need to improve their own health.

Environmental factors at both home and work also greatly influenced participation. Several participants mentioned that home environments are often too chaotic and full of responsibility to others to allow an employee time for participation. Also some employees are concerned with larger issues at home such as paying rent, buying groceries and paying utilities to be concerned with wellness. At work, if the environment was welcoming, and had a champion encouraging participation, employees were much more likely to do so. However, if they work environment was unfriendly, too stressful and busy, or if an employee was feeling dissatisfied with the place in a company, they were less likely to participate.

Surveys

The responses of the 37 survey respondents are presented in the table below.

Table 1

Responses to Survey Questions shown as Percent

Primary Business

Other	27.00%
Manufacturing	24.30%
Health Provider	24.30%
Service/Retail	10.80%
Public/Government	5.40%
Wellness Consulting	2.70%
Finance/Insurance	2.70%
Education	2.70%

Length Of Program

1-3 Years	32.40%
Planning Stages	29.70%
More than 10 Years	16.20%
4-7 Years	10.80%
Less Than 1 Year	8.10%
8-10 years	2.70%

Top Reasons Companies Have Wellness Programs

Employee Health	67.60%
Health Care Costs	62.20%
Employee Moral	32.40%
Productivity	16.20%
Quality of Work Life	10.80%

Other	2.70%
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Top Reasons Employees Participate in Wellness Program

Improved Health	73%
Incentives	35.10%
Increased Morale	27%
Participation is on Company Time	24.30%
Decreased Health Care Costs	13.50%
Other	2.70%

Barriers Affecting the Success If a Wellness Program

Inadequate Time Available	62.20%
Inadequate Budget Allocated	51.40%
Lack of Employee Interest	37.80%
Inability to Evaluate for Program Impact	13.50%
Lack of Wellness Staff	8.10%
Other	5.40%

Resources Helpful to Companies Implementing, Improving or Evaluating a Wellness Program

Incentive Campaigns	48.60%
Health Risk Appraisal	37.80%
Senior Level Support	37.80%
Presentation Material on Special Topics	27.00%
Needs and Interests Survey Tools	21.60%
Other	8.10%

Survey Data as it Supports Qualitative Data

Motivation

Interviewees identified return on investment (ROI) as being a major motivating factor that is sometimes difficult to monitor. Decreased health care costs and increased productivity and retention are main contributors. The survey identified health care costs as being one of the top reasons employers have wellness programs. One participant explained, “in the very beginning its very difficult to show ROI... its always we got to decrease our healthcare utilization instead of going you know it’s a benefit, you can increase productivity.” Another participant agrees saying, “Everybody thinks a wellness program is great for their company, they all want it. However [if] there’s really no return on investment its difficult to justify it to their superiors.”

Resources

Throughout each interview, time was identified as being a major barrier to the success of a program as well as to participation on the part of the employee. Within a company it is difficult for the staff to find time to prepare and implement a successful program. Often times the person assigned the task of “wellness” has many other responsibilities, in some cases to the human relations department, in other to another job altogether.

Time is a valuable thing for employees as well. Often a person is so busy at work that there isn't time to take a break even for lunch. One interviewee explained that as a person moves up in a company their time becomes more valuable and every moment is booked. Another interviewee said that hourly employees sometimes have more regimented schedules and don't feel they have the freedom to participate in programs. Time is also short at home. Many employees are balancing fulltime working with being parents or even caregivers for their own older relatives.

The interview findings of time being a major barrier were supported by the survey responses. 62% of responses indicated that inadequate time was a major barrier to the success of their wellness programs. Also interesting to look at is that 24% of respondents said a major reason to participate in wellness programs is that they happen during work hours.

Financial resources also present a major problem for some companies' programs, “If you don't have a budget of some sort, you either have to become extremely creative, or you don't really have a good program.” Some parts of wellness, such as walking can

be done without a budget, but others like having speakers cannot. About 51% of surveys identified inadequate budget as a barrier to their programs' success.

Company Culture

Company culture, time and time again, was mentioned as being one of the most influencing factors for a wellness program. As part of the culture it is essential that the company have senior level support. The survey identified this as being one of the resources most helpful to a program (38% response). One participant was insistent; "Mindset is probably the first thing getting part of the corporate culture, which is going to take a little while. Its not just you run a program for a month and that's your program. No, you got to think of long term and this is going to be a five-year plan. It's going to actually be ingrained within the mission statement hopefully, and the company culture, which will be forever.... A lot of companies just come in a throw it on the HR department and they don't get senior management support, or getting senior management out in front of the program so the employees see that they're actually involved." The leadership from the "higher ups" can strengthen a program greatly. As part of this, there also needs to be commitment on the part of the company. Financial commitment if the company has the budget and also staffing commitment to keep the program going.

As part of the culture in an organization it is also helpful to have a "champion for wellness." This is a person who will organize groups to get together to walk, or encourage participation in education of fitness classes. This person may be assigned, or it might even be a group of people who are constantly encouraging and inviting others to participate. Without a person or group inducing this kind of supportive environment it seems there would be less participation.

Employee Participation

Many things play a part in employee participation. Time and scheduling at work and at home perhaps are the most influential, if a person doesn't have the time, often they will not make room for something new in their schedule. This also depends on how motivated they are and if they see a need for behavior change.. The wellness program at their company may be targeted towards employees who are ready to take action and there for are not applicable to someone who is pre-contemplative. Though the survey identified the top reason for employee participation to be improved health, often times this is an end result and may not be enough to increase participation. This is why incentive campaigns are an important part of any program. Giving an employee a "carrot" or something tangible to gain can benefit participation levels. The survey found that 35% of respondents said employees participate because of incentives. Also incentive campaigns were the top resource identified by the survey as being helpful to a program.

Discussion

Strengths and Limitations

The purpose of this research was to identify factors that most influence the success or failure of a worksite wellness program in western New York. The data gathered does contribute to the understanding of the challenges companies face when developing and implementing a wellness program for their employees. The data collected also suggests several important features of a company or program that contributes to a successful program.

The methods used in the study were successful in obtaining information about the topic. One major limitation was that interviewees and survey respondents were both chosen by convenience. Because all participants and respondents were participating on a voluntary basis, both the interviews and surveys were short and not time consuming. Had this research project been done over a longer period of time, or had a larger budget to provide participants with incentive, the researcher would have been able to lengthen the interviews and the surveys to obtain more information.

One question that would have been beneficial to include in the survey was the role and involvement of the respondent in the company they represented. The interviewees seemed to think that many human relations departments were responsible for worksite wellness; a survey question could have proved or disproved this notion.

There is a lot more information that could have been gathered from participants on the subject of worksite wellness. However, despite the limitations of the study, data collected did further the understanding of worksite wellness in western New York. More studies should be done to better understand how to increase the use of worksite wellness programs as a way to improve health and prevent chronic disease.

Main Findings and Implications

The most outstanding finding from this study is supported in other relevant literature is the lack of time in most peoples' lives. There seems to be a consensus that there is often not enough time to develop, implement and evaluate a successful wellness program. There are however employees who are working diligently with the resources they have to do just that. They then may run in to another problem resulting from lack of time; employee participation.

It seems that more research in this area should be done to prove to employers and company executive that worksite wellness programs and an important step in improving the health of our society. If this became a priority with senior level management, companies could designate staff specifically to worksite wellness and also allow time in the workday for employees to participate.

Organizations like the Worksite Health Alliance of Greater Rochester and Cornell Cooperative Extension will benefit from this research and from future studies like it, as it contributes to their overall understanding of the western New York companies they are involved with. WHAGR and CCE can help in expanding and providing resources to companies interested in worksite wellness programs.

Conclusion

In order to have a successful worksite wellness program it is essential that a company dedicate adequate time, money and staff to the development implementation and evaluation of the program. The corporate culture must support a program and encourage involvement at every position in the company, from the hourly employees to the senior level management. There must be a commitment on the part of the company to improve not only the return on their investment but the health and wellbeing of their employees.

Employees must be allowed the flexibility in their schedules at work to have time to participate in such programs. If there are too many time constraints at home and at work, participation will most likely be affected. A supportive environment at work, with

a champion for wellness encouraging participation will also increase participation.

Incentive campaigns are a way to motivate employees.

Company wellness programs are hopefully something that will be expanding in the near future to combat the increases in chronic disease. One participant said is best; “Companies are going to have to do something, they’re going to be forced to, they may not want to, they’re going to have to.”

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