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## Wellness and Productivity: Maximizing the Impact

Employers are concerned about the health of their workers. Unhealthy workers are more frequently absent, have more work injuries, are less productive, and have higher healthcare costs. Many employers feel that wellness programs are the best available solution for these challenges, as they have been linked to lower healthcare costs, less absenteeism, and increased productivity in enrolled employees. As a result, workplace wellness has become an \$8 billion industry. To maximize program participation, most employers add financial incentives — for enrollment, participation, or achieving desired health outcomes. These incentives have become more popular since they were specifically encouraged by the Affordable Care Act.

How effective are these programs and associated incentives? A large, high-quality employee wellness study at the University of Illinois<sup>1</sup> demonstrated no effect on health-care spending, productivity, or absenteeism, and employees with higher health risks were less likely to participate. Another randomized trial of workplace weight loss interventions had similar negative results.<sup>2</sup>

Higher quality wellness studies (such as these randomized controlled trials) are less likely to find a significant result, suggesting that biases in enrollment and participation account for positive results in less rigorous studies. While financial incentives may increase enrollment, they generally do not lead to sustained behavior change.<sup>3,4</sup> And incentives may burden sicker employees

with higher premiums or other penalties, discourage their participation, and create stigma and potential discrimination.

But some wellness programs have succeeded in capturing more of those who most need the intervention, sustaining their participation over time, and improving long-term health outcomes. One example is an implementation of the Centers for Disease Control's Diabetes Prevention Program, reported in 2015. This randomized workplace research study achieved significant, sustained weight loss in a high-risk population.<sup>5</sup> The program was evidence based, facilitated by trained experts but codeveloped with employee input, and tailored to the work environment. Delivery was centered around employee groups that met regularly over the course of the intervention. These groups provided ongoing peer support and received management encouragement and involvement. Financial incentives were minimal and tied only to participation in the initial screening.

Based on this and other experience, the most effective workplace wellness programs incorporate the following elements:

- Evidence-based intervention
- Employee engagement and ownership
- Individualized approach using principles of coaching and motivational interviewing
- Strong management support and direct involvement

These programs are most effective when the company's culture and environment support worker health, and the company is

willing to adapt programs to the individual needs and preferences of employees. Success also may depend on effectively engaging community and technology resources.

It takes time and effort to build a program that incorporates all of these features. For many, the easiest route is to select something off the shelf, purchased from a vendor, and focus on the next corporate HR challenge. However, these strategies often fail to engage and retain those who need it the most. Figuring out how to best engage employees takes time — but in the end, it yields the results employers really want.

### References

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