



Awareness and acceptance: key challenges for workplace wellness success

BRODEUR PARTNERS RELEVANCE RESEARCH

SUMMARY:

The following are the findings from the latest relevance research conducted by Brodeur Partners. The study was based on a national online survey of 542 adults conducted June 3-5, 2015 from Toluna's QuickSurvey panel. Results were weighted to match U.S. Census data.

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Awareness and acceptance pose key challenges for workplace wellness success

When workplace wellness comes up in public discourse, debate typically centers on whether employer programs are worth the investment. Although that debate isn't settled, it really isn't progressing, either.

At Brodeur Partners, we sought to shed new light on workplace wellness and explore those challenges that contain the answers to true return on investment. What we found: Although access to workplace wellness programs has increased, employers and providers still face steep challenges around *awareness* and *acceptance*.

ACCESS IS A SHRINKING PROBLEM

When it comes to workplace wellness programs, there is no shortage of access for workers. In fact, approximately 70 percent of employers claim to have a workplace wellness program, up from 60 percent in 2011, according to a recent study by the [Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\)](#). Over 85 percent of companies with more than 1,000 employees offer a wellness program, says [Gallup](#).

Indeed, workplace wellness is now a \$6 billion industry, with an estimated 500 vendors selling programs either individually or as components of health insurance, according to [Reuters](#).¹

But access is just one of the three A's when it comes to the payoff for workplace wellness programs.

THE OTHER TWO A'S OF WORKPLACE WELLNESS

While access is being settled with the steady growth of workplace wellness programs, our new survey raises questions about how aware and accepting employees are of the wellness programs that already exist in their workplace.

While 70 percent to 80 percent of employers claim to have a workplace wellness program, barely 1 in 3 employed Americans in our survey, or 34 percent, said they have a health and wellness program at work.

¹ Munro, Dan. "RAND Corporation (Briefly) Publishes Sobering Report On Workplace Wellness Programs." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 28 May 2013. Web. 27 July 2015.

Lack of awareness may explain some of the discrepancy. Some employers may simply be poor at explaining programs that are in place. Another possible explanation is that of definition: What employers may consider a “workplace wellness” plan may differ from what employees think should constitute such a program.

“Clearly, there’s a disconnect,” said Brodeur Partners CEO Andrea Coville, author of [*Relevance: The Power to Change Minds and Behavior and Stay Ahead of the Competition*](#). “Either employees aren’t getting the memo about the programs that exist in their workplaces, or they don’t consider what their employers are offering to be true wellness programs.”

One problem might be that wellness programs aren’t distinguishable from health insurance. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation’s [2014 Employer Health Benefits Survey](#), 98 percent of all large companies (defined as at least 200 workers) and 73 percent of smaller ones that offer employee health benefits also offer at least one wellness program.²

In any case, while a lot of money and energy is being spent on workplace wellness, many of the employees who are supposed to benefit appear unaware of the programs or don’t consider them true health and wellness programs.

THE PROBLEM: ACCESS VS. PERCEIVED ACCESS

Nearly half (45 percent) of respondents in our survey said that while their employer does not offer a workplace wellness program, they would participate if one were available. Even discounting for the possible overstatement of good intentions, this finding suggests that there is a sizable number of employees who would participate in a workplace wellness program if a) one existed and b) they knew about it.

Disturbingly, this access or “perceived access” problem is unevenly distributed across age groups and is worst for the older employees who need workplace wellness the most. Only 24 percent of those aged 55 or older said they had a workplace wellness program, well shy of the 41 percent of millennials who have them.

Wellness programs may simply be following demand. Millennials reported the highest participation rates and the highest *intended* participation rates should their employer establish a program.

² *Employer Health Benefits 2014 Annual Survey*. Rep. Chicago, Illinois: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, California, and Health Research & Educational Trust, 2014. [Kff.org](#). Web. 24 July 2015.

THE OTHER CHALLENGE: ACCEPTANCE

The problem of program *acceptance* is just as complicated as access and awareness. As wonderful as workplace wellness programs sound, a substantial share of employees resist them. And the resistance rate rises with age.

While 39 percent of boomers said they would participate in a wellness program if it were offered, an equivalent rate (38 percent) said they would refuse.

So we asked those who either don't participate in an existing program or said they wouldn't participate if one were available ("resisters") why they didn't. Among the resisters, 31 percent said they don't think a program would be helpful for them. Another 19 percent said they didn't think their employer was well-qualified to run such a program. Half of the resisters cited privacy concerns around their health.

This resistance may help explain why spending on wellness incentives (such as gift cards for losing weight) has doubled since 2009 in medium-to-large companies to \$521 per employee per year, according to a survey by Fidelity Investments and the National Business Group on Health.

KEYS TO WORKPLACE WELLNESS: AWARENESS, DEFINITION, PRIVACY, COMPETENCY

So what's next? What are the keys to true return on investment for workplace wellness programs?

With the access problem steadily taking care of itself, the key challenges are chipping away at the problems of awareness and acceptance.

First, employers and providers need to clearly, aggressively and creatively trumpet the availability and value of workplace wellness programs. Moreover, employers need to identify and frame these workplace wellness programs in terms that employees recognize as real and legitimate. It is not enough just to "say" that you have a workplace wellness plan; employers need define it in ways that are meaningful for workers.

Second, after these challenges are addressed, employers will need to show employees that these programs are effective and they won't violate privacy. This is particularly important for those who could most benefit – the older workers who are more resistant to the workplace wellness movement

Once these issues are addressed, it will be a good time to recalculate returns on investment. We're betting they will be higher.

