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Five Steps to a Successful Workplace Wellness Program

A RAND Toolkit

KRISTIN R. VAN BUSUM, HANGSHENG LIU, SOEREN MATTKE
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This toolkit is intended to help small and midsize employers build an effective workplace wellness program.

Well-designed, well-executed workplace wellness programs can reduce health risks (such as smoking and physical inactivity), lower health care costs, and improve productivity. Our research shows that wellness programs are becoming a standard component of benefits packages. But it also shows that not all wellness programs are created equal: Some generate cost savings, while others do not, and there are substantial differences in how programs are being designed and implemented. We synthesized the lessons learned and best practices from multiple projects and many years of research into this toolkit.

This toolkit offers a five-step guide toward planning, implementation, and evaluation of a successful workplace wellness program, even if you have limited resources:

- **Step 1: Define your objectives.**
- **Step 2: Determine your pain points.**
- **Step 3: Develop your plan of action.**
- **Step 4: Follow best practices in implementation.**
- **Step 5: Measure program impact.**

Each of the steps includes
- current evidence to explain the importance of each step
- specific lessons and examples
- tools and resources.
Whether you are just launching a workplace wellness program or hope to refine an existing one, identifying your objectives is crucial to maximizing your impact. Unless you define explicitly what you want to accomplish, it is hard to focus your mind and your organization’s actions. The most common objectives are

- Reduce the cost of health care coverage.
- Improve employee health behaviors, such as increasing exercise or decreasing smoking.
- Improve productivity by decreasing absence from work (absenteeism) and improving performance while at work (presenteeism).
- Recruit and retain talent as part of a competitive benefits package.
- Improve workplace culture and morale by promoting team-based activities and population-based wellness campaigns.
- Engage the majority of the workforce in activities (e.g., achieve high participation rates).

As you generate your objectives, keep in mind that your choices have substantial implications for your program design. Our research shows that lifestyle management interventions, which focus on decreasing risk factors, such as obesity or smoking, can improve employee health but will be cost-neutral at best. According to an analysis of a large employer’s programs, we found a return of $3.78 in health care costs saved for every $1 invested in the disease management program, while lifestyle-management programs produced just $0.25 in costs saved for each dollar spent. If you’re interested in reducing health care costs, it’s best to target high-risk employees who already have above-average medical costs, such as those with multiple risk factors or manifest chronic diseases.
If cost savings aren’t a top objective for your organization, you may prefer to think about health promotion activities. For example, you may provide classes on the importance of preventive screenings or provide discounts to fitness classes or facilities. If your employees primarily work in a team-based environment, you may be interested in improving work culture through friendly competitions.

On the following page, we provide a **Wellness Objectives Tool**. In Table 1.2, we provide fields where you can list some potential objectives of your wellness program. Before your objectives are established, you might want to identify some of your current organizational challenges that could be addressed through wellness programs. You should have at least one or two clear objectives that can be linked to such challenges. To help get you started, we list two examples in Table 1.1.
The CFO has challenged the benefits team to limit the growth in health insurance premiums. Reduce health care costs.

Leadership is worried about the long-term impact of poor dietary choices of our workforce. Improve employee diet

Table 1.2—Wellness Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Challenge</th>
<th>Wellness Objective</th>
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</table>
Now that you have defined your objectives, the next step is to analyze the drivers behind your challenges. To do this, you will need to quantify the health risks and disease burden, or “pain points,” of your employees (and their dependents).

Data on risk factors can be derived from health risk assessment questionnaires and biometric screenings (e.g., lipids, weight, blood pressure), and data on disease burden can be derived from medical claims. Your health plan, external consultants, or own internal analysts can accomplish this task.

Our research indicates that larger, self-insured employers tend to have such data routinely available, whereas small to midsized employers who are fully insured often lack the resources to access such data. But you can generate useful information on a shoestring budget by being creative and resourceful. For example, you can administer a survey or conduct employee focus groups to identify what employees perceive to be their health issues and goals (e.g., better nutrition, weight management) and their preferences for workplace program activities. Though this approach is not as precise as quantitative data analysis, it can guide your decisions.

Our research indicates that understanding the pain points precisely is critical for the success of your program. For example, we examined the program of a manufacturing company that sought to address the high rate of obesity among its workforce. We learned that, while their blue-collar workforce accounted for most of the obesity burden, the program design was mainly driven by the preferences of white-collar employees and focused on such things as gym discounts and flexibility to exercise during the workday. The blue-collar workers, on the other hand, who
performed physically strenuous labor all day, were more interested in access to healthier food choices as a means of controlling their weight. Generating such insights will allow you to understand how to best address your specific pain points.

On the following page, we provide a Needs Assessment Tool that will help you identify your employees’ needs; you can add rows and columns to Table 2.2 as necessary. (We also provide examples in Table 2.1.)

1. In the leftmost column, list the wellness program objectives you identified in Step 1.
2. Next, determine how you will gather information to understand employees’ risk factors or health goals and proceed to collect that information.
3. In the third column, describe briefly what you learned from the data or information you gathered.
4. Finally, specify the employee needs that you have to address to achieve your specified program objectives.
Table 2.1—Examples of Employees’ Identified Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Program Objective</th>
<th>2. Where can I get information on employees’ risks?</th>
<th>3. What are the underlying health-related challenges or concerns of my employees?</th>
<th>4. What are my employees’ needs?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce health care costs</td>
<td>Contact representative at health plan to examine utilization trends and employee health risks</td>
<td>Diabetes-related claims are driving up costs.</td>
<td>Diabetes management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve employee health behaviors</td>
<td>Hold round table discussions with employees during lunch hour</td>
<td>Hourly workers self-report they would like to lose weight and have access to healthier foods in the workplace.</td>
<td>Weight management; improved nutrition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2—Employees’ Identified Needs
What is my action plan?
Now it is time to begin developing an action plan. Broadly, we recommend that your plan include the following:

- wellness objectives and pain points (as defined by Steps 1 and 2)
- targeted interventions
- partners and resources
- budget and timeline
- evaluation plan (which we will discuss in Step 5).

Begin by identifying the specific interventions that will allow you to reach the wellness objectives you identified in Step 1 and the employee needs you identified in Step 2. Our research suggests that the following interventions are commonly offered as part of wellness programs:

- fitness and exercise promotion (e.g., providing access to pedometers, fitness campaigns, discounted gym membership)
- smoking cessation programs
- promotion of healthy eating (e.g., modifications to cafeteria menus, access to digital nutrition tracking tools).

Chronic disease management programs, such as medication adherence programs or personalized coaching for employees with heart disease, are less common. As we mentioned, disease management programs that are executed well are more likely to result in cost-savings in the short term because they target employees with higher medical costs.

Once you have your “wish list” of interventions, decide how to put them in place within your budget. Remember to give yourself ample time to design and launch a
program, and keep in mind that it takes time for your objectives to be realized. Our research points to two lessons that may seem obvious but are commonly overlooked. First, your ability to achieve an adequate return on your investment depends in part on how efficient you are. Basically, you should leverage free and low-cost resources for your programs and watch costs like a hawk. Second, your ability to achieve your objectives depends on the program’s impact, not on its appearance. Do not let vendors sell you complex technologies and elaborate programs just because they look impressive. Always ask for documentation of results.

You can tap into a wealth of existing resources, such as communication materials offered through existing health campaigns, informational resources for employees with chronic conditions, and step-by-step instructions for implementing a fitness program. At the end of this section, we list a sample of wellness resources that can help you implement your program at little to no cost.

In addition, find out what your existing partners, such as your health plan and local providers, can offer. Our research suggests that health plans often have predesigned or customizable online wellness tools or communication materials. They can coordinate biometric screenings, provide various educational programs (including disease management or coaching programs), and help you identify common health risk factors in your employee population by examining medical claims data. Health plan representatives, brokers, or benefits consultants may also play an advisory role by (1) suggesting strategies to increase employee participation; (2) offering suggestions about program design, such as including dependents or offering incentives; or (3) serving as an evaluator by examining health outcomes and changes in health care utilization. (Evaluation strategies are described in Step 5.) Community hospitals and physician groups might offer health education classes; governmental organizations, such as the public health department, and nongovernmental organizations, such as the YMCA, also might help you with low-cost solutions.

In this phase, you may also want to consult with partners or advisers to determine if incentives are appropriate for your employee population.

On the following page, we provide a Wellness Action Plan Tool to help you link your wellness program objectives and employee needs to interventions. Table 3.2 also allows you to
Table 3.1—Wellness Action Plan: Examples of Interventions, Partners, and Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Employee Needs</th>
<th>Targeted Intervention(s)</th>
<th>Partners/Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce health care costs</td>
<td>Diabetes management</td>
<td>Implement on-site biometric screenings coupled with telephonic diabetes management program.</td>
<td>Health plan; local hospital; benefits consultant; online educational materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve employee health behaviors</td>
<td>Improved nutrition</td>
<td>Swap out unhealthy items in the vending machine; begin a weekly fruit and vegetable delivery program.</td>
<td>Employee wellness committee; cafeteria vendor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 3.2—Wellness Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
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list the individuals or organizations that will help you design and implement the interventions. (Examples are provided in Table 3.1.)

Just as you did in Step 2, use the tool to help you develop appropriate interventions and refer to our example to guide you through the process. Identify interventions by linking them with your objectives and employee needs. Once you have developed a list of interventions, write down potential partners or resources you can use to help you execute your intervention. Remember—be specific!
Free Online Wellness Resources

A variety of evidenced-based health resources compiled by the National Institutes of Health to assist employers with program development or to distribute to employees participating in programs:

http://www.nih.gov/health/wellness/

Educational and awareness campaign materials on a variety of topics ranging from maternal health to weight loss and diabetes management:

http://www.nih.gov/icd/od/ocpl/resources/campaigns/

A wellness guide developed by the Federal Workplace Health Collaborative with links to informational resources, guidelines, and toolkits ranging from preventive screening and healthy aging to substance abuse:


Informational resources, flyers, and brief reports on a variety of wellness topics—including physical activity, nutrition, and stress management—as well as guides for employers on implementation strategies:


Free audio files to facilitate mindfulness, better sleep, and stress reduction, as well as a variety of ready-to-hang posters with advice for stress management:

http://medweb.mit.edu/wellness/resources/downloads.html

Strategies for incorporating healthy food options and physical activity into work-related meetings; links to recipes:


Walking tools and calorie and activity trackers; available in both English and Spanish:

http://www.iwalksonoma.org/iWALKEmployer

Customizable and ready-made signage and toolkits to encourage employees to take the stairs:

http://www.eatplaylivebetter.org/fetchPage_Take_Stairs.asp?id=19

Tips to improve stairwell appearance and fun challenge ideas for employees:

http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/hwi/toolkits/stairwell/
After the planning phases are complete, you want to implement your program utilizing best practices that can help you achieve your objectives with minimal cost.

Obtain wholehearted buy-in from managers: Our research suggests that, for programs to gain traction, managers at all levels of the organization need to be engaged.

Organizational leaders need to be visibly supportive of wellness initiatives. Their messages, such as letters of support for wellness activities and ongoing communiqués, set the tone for the entire wellness program. Senior leaders who “practice what they preach” by taking the initiative to improve their own health and fitness help cultivate a work culture of wellness. By attending health fairs or on-site classes (such as stress management or yoga) and participating in clinical screenings, senior managers can demonstrate the value of adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Direct supervisors and line managers need to understand the role and importance of the program for your organization, because they interact with employees on a day-to-day basis. They relay organizational priorities to employees. They can generate excitement, connect employees to resources, and promote employee engagement. They are also your eyes and ears and can provide important feedback on employees’ attitudes and perceptions, as well as opportunities to improve the program.

Conversely, line managers who do not support wellness or do not participate in such programs themselves can create an environment in which participation in wellness activities is viewed as a distraction that impedes productivity, rather than improves it.
Employees will be more inclined to participate in wellness programs and, more importantly, stay engaged in the programs over the long term if they are convenient and relevant.

**Communicate creatively and consistently:** In the implementation phase, employing both broad and targeted messages will be crucial for the success of your program.

If you choose to implement a wellness campaign, broad outreach efforts through diverse communication channels are most effective, especially where you have a large, geographically dispersed workforce. Monthly newsletters distributed via email and in print can provide timely, relevant, health-related information or reminders of upcoming wellness activities that reach your employees efficiently. Targeted messaging, such as signage encouraging employees to take the stairs or to choose healthier food options in vending machines/cafeterias, can improve point-of-decision behaviors. Call-outs on email, text, or mobile applications can be integrated into wellness programs to remind tech-savvy employees to exercise or take medication.

**Promote engagement:** Employees will be more inclined to participate in wellness programs and, more importantly, stay engaged in the programs over the long term if they are convenient and relevant, meaning they address the underlying needs of the population (Step 2).

Our research indicates that low participation rates are one of the major factors that limit program impact. Informational interviews or roundtable discussions with employees can help you identify potential roadblocks to participation and engagement, such as scheduling constraints. To make activities more convenient for your employees, be cognizant of work schedules.
and think creatively about how to integrate wellness activities seamlessly into the workplace environment. Biometric screenings and personal coaching, massage therapy, and guided mediation sessions can be scheduled during lunches or breaks so they are convenient to participants. Health coaching can also be done over the phone in the privacy of the home, and healthy foods at meetings can replace high-calorie snacks. Similarly, the convenience of on-site fitness facilities, bike rooms, yoga classes, or walking groups scheduled before or after work can encourage some employees to exercise regularly. For employees who travel often or have flexible schedules, offering online seminars and providing access to digital health tools may increase engagement.

You should make programs relevant to the employee population you are targeting. Our research highlighted the importance of tailoring programs so they align with work culture—or for larger employers, subcultures within the organization. For example, employees who work in a competitive sales environment may be more likely to engage in fitness or healthy-eating competitions. Manufacturing employees may not be able to participate in walking clubs offered during set hours due to their rigid schedule. Further, the fact they are on their feet eight hours a day may make fitness activities less appealing. Employees with flexible schedules and sedentary jobs may be

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**A note on incentives:** Incentives are becoming increasingly popular among employers as a way of encouraging employees’ engagement in programs. Our research shows that small incentive amounts, ranging from $20–$100, increase participation in health screenings and interventions. Our case studies suggest that employees view incentives favorably and that incentives help “catch their attention” when communication from wellness leaders is clear and consistent. There is very little research available on the impact of incentives on health outcomes and how large incentives affect employee behavior.
more likely to participate in fitness activities offered on site or during lunch breaks. Similarly, older employees may be less likely to utilize digital health tools or attend on-site exercise programs, whereas younger employees may find these activities desirable.

**Develop a culture of wellness:** Programs that promote social support and a "culture of wellness" can improve participation rates and help sustain long-term engagement among employees.

Developing team-based activities, such as walking or weight-loss challenges, can help individuals feel accountable to their peers and foster relationship-building among employees. To launch team-based efforts, you can identify a handful of motivated employees to be designated “wellness champions” to generate enthusiasm, encourage participation, and communicate health-related messages to employees. Strategies that promote a culture of wellness are particularly useful for employees who work on teams and employees who are otherwise difficult to reach through communications like newsletters or email blasts.

On the following page, we provide a **Potential Barriers Tool** you can use to identify some potential barriers to engagement and to generate solutions. You may not know what the solutions are now, but you will be able to come back to Table 4.2 and update it. (Examples are provided in Table 4.1.)
Table 4.1—Example of Barriers to Employee Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Barriers to Engagement</th>
<th>Potential Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-site biometric screenings</td>
<td>Scheduling conflicts</td>
<td>Offer screenings at multiple times throughout the day.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4.2—Barriers to Employee Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Barriers to Engagement</th>
<th>Potential Solutions</th>
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The final step in implementing a successful workplace wellness program requires you to evaluate and document program outcomes.

Implement, and measure success against, key performance indicators (KPIs): Your KPIs capture how well a program achieves its intended objectives and allow you to monitor outcomes and improve the program. Indicators may be process oriented, such as participation rates, eating behaviors, or number of preventive screenings, or outcomes oriented, such as changes in blood pressure, weight, or health care costs.

Develop a plan for how to collect data on your KPIs. Program participation data are typically collected by the entity that runs the program, such as a vendor or your own staff. Your health plan, benefits consultant, or broker might have data on health care costs. Data on health risks and behaviors have to be collected through surveys and screening.

Maintain a continuous quality improvement attitude: In addition to your KPIs, obtain formal and informal feedback from employees through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Such data can help you assess morale, self-reported changes in behavior, or participation rates at little cost.

Do expect that things will not go as planned initially and that it will take a few iterations to settle on your final program design. Use KPI data and feedback constructively to improve the program and resist the temptation to discount problems and emphasize successes. Obtaining an outside perspective can help you interpret the data and react appropriately.
On the following page, we provide a **Performance Indicators Tool** to help you identify KPIs. To fill out Table 5.2, start by revisiting the objectives you defined in Step 1 and enter the specific interventions you are implementing as determined by Step 3. (Examples are provided in Table 5.1.) This will guide what you should plan to assess. You may choose more than one KPI for each of your interventions. We also recommend that you identify resources or individuals who can help you with collection and interpretation of the data.
### Table 5.1—Example of Performance Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Objective</th>
<th>Targeted Intervention(s)</th>
<th>Key Performance Indicators</th>
<th>Evaluation Partners/ Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce health care costs</td>
<td>On-site biometric screenings</td>
<td>Cost savings; changes in utilization patterns</td>
<td>Health plan; neutral evaluator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve employee health behaviors</td>
<td>Swap out unhealthy items in the vending machine and begin weekly fruit delivery</td>
<td>Self-reported snacking habits and changes in fruit consumption</td>
<td>Benefits manager; develop an in-house paper or web-based survey</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5.2—Performance Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Workplace Wellness Program Checklist

The following checklist can help you monitor your progress as you develop a comprehensive and cost-effective workplace wellness program:

**Step 1: Identify Objectives.**
- ✓ Write a list of the overarching goals for the wellness program.

**Step 2: Determine Pain Points.**
- ✓ Contact your health plan provider, benefits consultant, or benefits manager to determine if they can help you identify risk factors through anonymized claims data.
- ✓ Conduct an assessment of employee needs through a formal analysis or in-house survey.
- ✓ Conduct an informal employee assessment through informational interviews or roundtable discussions.

**Step 3: Develop Your Plan of Action.**
- ✓ Write an action plan that includes the following items:
  - organizational objectives and employee needs
  - interventions
  - budget
  - timeline
  - future goals.
- ✓ Contact your health plan to determine if they offer support or resources for worksite wellness programs.
- ✓ Find resources to help you support your program.
- ✓ Identify volunteers and staff who can help you execute programs.

**Step 4: Implement.**
- ✓ Discuss wellness programs with other direct supervisors to gain their support.
- ✓ Share your plan of action with leadership to get buy-in.
- ✓ Identify employees who can serve as champions.
- ✓ Plan how you will communicate programs or policies to different employee populations.
- ✓ Identify the ways in which you will motivate different types of employees to participate.
- ✓ Identify strategies for generating excitement among different types of employees.

**Step 5: Evaluate.**
- ✓ Determine key performance indicators that align with your objectives.
- ✓ Determine whether your health plan can assist you with analysis of claims data.
- ✓ Identify a neutral third-party evaluator that can assess program impact.
- ✓ Revise the program based on employee feedback and outcomes.
The RAND Toolkit is meant to support you in developing, implementing, and evaluating your workplace wellness program. Your efforts and creativity can help improve the health and well-being of your employees and may even reduce your organization's health care costs. Congratulations and good luck with your new or improved program!

For More Information
Those interested in the data can refer to RAND’s Workplace Wellness Programs Study, available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR254.html
Well-designed, well-executed workplace wellness programs can reduce health risks (such as smoking and physical inactivity), lower health care costs, and improve productivity. RAND researchers determined that these programs are becoming a standard component of benefits packages but that not all of them are created equal: Some generate cost savings whereas others do not, and there are substantial differences in how programs are being designed and implemented. This toolkit synthesizes the lessons learned and best practices from multiple projects and many years of research into a five-step guide for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a successful workplace wellness program.