

The importance of promoting healthy lifestyles in the workplace: an Optum™ research study



Background

Companies institute wellness programs in the workplace based on their belief that such programs will improve employee health, reduce medical costs, increase productivity, and raise retention rates. But the program design has been largely based on untested assumptions about employee attitudes regarding health and the workplace, the challenges they face in following healthy lifestyles, and the program options most likely to engender positive change.

In this study, we quantified current and emerging trends in workplace wellness programs. We also looked at the attitudes of employees about these programs, examining the differences between those who work for companies that place an importance on employee health and those that do not. The results strongly support the premise that well-designed workplace wellness programs can be highly effective in helping employees adopt and sustain healthy lifestyle change, with significant benefits for employee and employer alike.

Research objectives

Optum™ commissioned research with GfK Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communications to:

- Understand how employees rate employers on prioritizing health and wellness
- Identify employee views on their own health and productivity as a result of wellness programs
- Learn what employees see as the primary challenges to living a healthy lifestyle in the workplace
- Assess the types of programs employees view as most helpful
- Understand the differences between companies that have a culture of health versus those that do not

Study methodology

The survey was conducted online from March 24 to April 7, 2010. Completed surveys were obtained from 1,444 adults living in the U.S. The survey population included a base sample of 1,003 respondents from the general population as well as an oversampling of:

- 302 people who weighed 200 pounds or more before losing weight, lost at least 20 pounds, and kept the weight off for at least one year.
- 330 people who smoked 10 cigarettes or more daily before quitting, and who have been smoke-free for at least one year.

Respondents' demographics covered a wide range of ages, races, marital statuses, income levels, and education. The base sample included an approximately equal ratio of men to women and those with children to those without.

Because this study's focus was on health and wellness associated with the workplace, it is important to note the employment details of survey respondents:

- The majority of respondents were full-time or part-time employees. For those not employed, top categories for respondents were either retired, temporarily unemployed, or homemakers.
- Workplace questions focused on those employed full time.
- Occupations among employed respondents were split fairly equally between white collar and blue collar.
- Only 16 percent of the general population sample belonged to a union.

The sample included respondents from both large and small organizations. Approximately one-quarter were employed in a company with over 3,000 employees, and about one-third worked in a small business.

A large majority of respondents had been with their employers for several years. More than one-quarter reported tenure of 10 years or longer.

Most employees (about 86 percent) reported being very or somewhat satisfied with their current employer.

Key findings

- Close to nine in 10 employees (87 percent) considered it appropriate for employers to encourage workers to take steps to be healthy.
- More than eight in 10 (84 percent) believed that workplace wellness programs showed that an employer cared about its employees and that it would increase their productivity (73 percent).
- Eight in 10 employees (82 percent) who worked at companies with health and wellness programs said such programs would encourage them to stay longer at a company.
- Those who worked in companies that emphasized health felt that they had more control over maintaining a healthy lifestyle at work than those who did not (92 percent versus 79 percent).
- Six in ten people surveyed — who had successfully lost weight or quit smoking — reported that a workplace program was very helpful to their success.

Wellness programs in the workplace

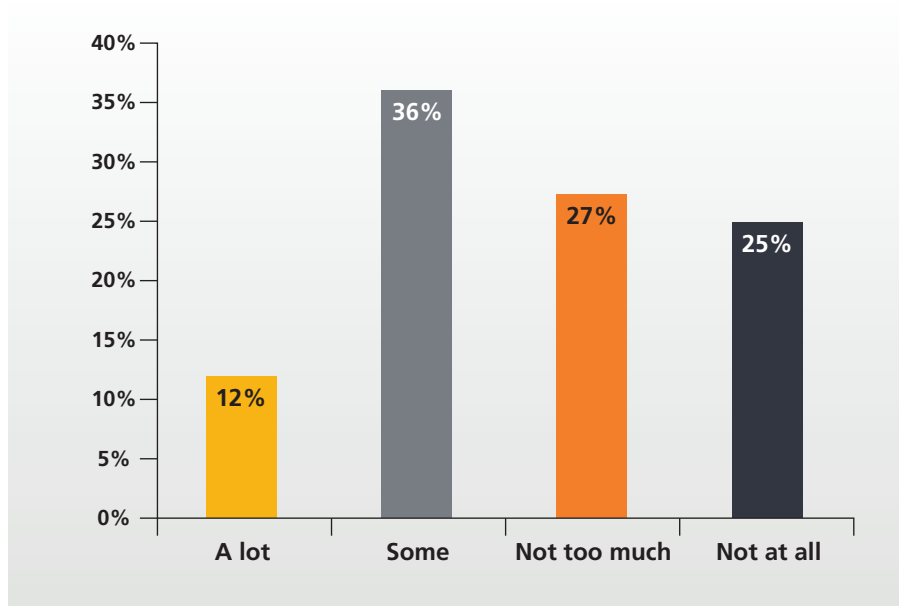
Employees approve of employer efforts to Encourage healthy lifestyles

Close to nine in 10 employed respondents (87 percent) believed it was appropriate for employers to encourage their workers to take steps to be healthy. In fact, more than eight in 10 (84 percent) believed that workplace health and wellness programs showed that an employer cared about its employees.

When reflecting on the culture and atmosphere at their workplaces, almost half of employees (48 percent) said their employers placed at least some emphasis on employees being healthy — eating right, exercising, quitting smoking, and knowing their health metrics. Some 12 percent even felt their employers focused a lot on this issue (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Importance employers place on health

Question: Thinking about the culture and atmosphere at your workplace, how much importance does the organization place on employees taking steps to be healthy?



Responses also show significant improvement in employer attitudes and program availability. Almost one-quarter of employees (24 percent) perceived their employers to be placing more importance today on employees taking steps to be healthy than they had in the past. And approximately two-thirds said their company placed the same amount of emphasis as in the past.

It is also clear from the response data that employees place a high value on health and wellness programs, both for their own welfare and for their value to the business. A large percentage of employees (73 percent) felt that the availability of a gym or exercise program at work would help them work better and be more productive (see Figure 2). The same percentage (again, 73 percent) viewed good health and wellness programs as an important benefit that would encourage them to stay longer with an employer.

Figure 2: Employees link wellness programs to increased productivity

Question: How much do you agree with this statement?

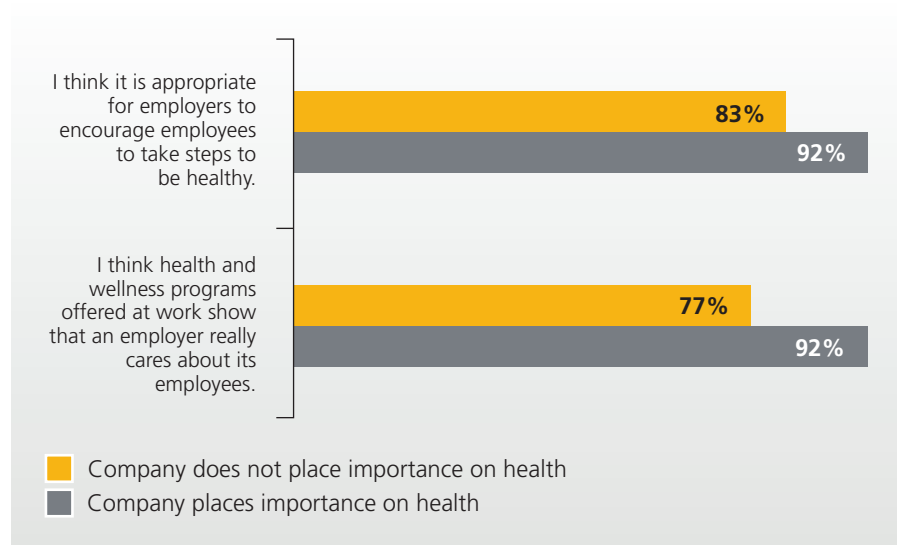


Employees also view workplace health and wellness programs as an appropriate demonstration of employer interest in employee welfare. Nine in 10 employees (92 percent) who worked with companies that place importance on health believed that health and wellness programs offered at work were appropriate and showed that an employer really cared about its employees (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Employee feedback on employers promoting healthy lifestyles

Question: How much do you agree with each statement?

% Top 2 Box — (A lot/Some)



Summary of findings

- Some 87 percent of employees approved of companies' efforts to encourage workers to adopt healthy lifestyles.
- Almost half of employees said their employers emphasized taking steps to be healthy in the workplace.
- Almost one-quarter (24 percent) of employees perceived their employers to be placing more emphasis on health than in the past.
- Employees linked wellness programs to increased productivity and retention.
- Employees who had experience with workplace wellness programs were strong endorsers of such programs.

Employee Challenges**Control over a healthy lifestyle at work is a challenge for most**

An area of significant concern — and opportunity — is apparent in the wide range of attitudes expressed by survey respondents with regard to their ability to pursue a healthy lifestyle within the workplace environment. Only about one-third (36 percent) of employed respondents indicated that they have a lot of control over maintaining a healthy lifestyle at work.

The good news for companies that have invested in wellness programs is that a significantly higher proportion of respondents working at companies that placed importance on employee health reported feeling greater control over maintaining a healthy lifestyle at work. Some 92 percent felt they had a lot or at least some control versus 79 percent of those whose companies were not concerned with employee health.

The work environment can pose a real challenge to maintaining employee health — especially when it comes to stress. Almost half of employed respondents said the top obstacle they faced was having too little time (see Figure 4, next page). More than one-third said that they had too much stress at work. And one in five believed that their job was too demanding for them to focus on making healthful choices.

Personal discipline in the workplace also figured in here. A lack of discipline emerged as a top reason that people cited. Four in 10, to be exact. One-third also said there were too many unhealthy foods around.

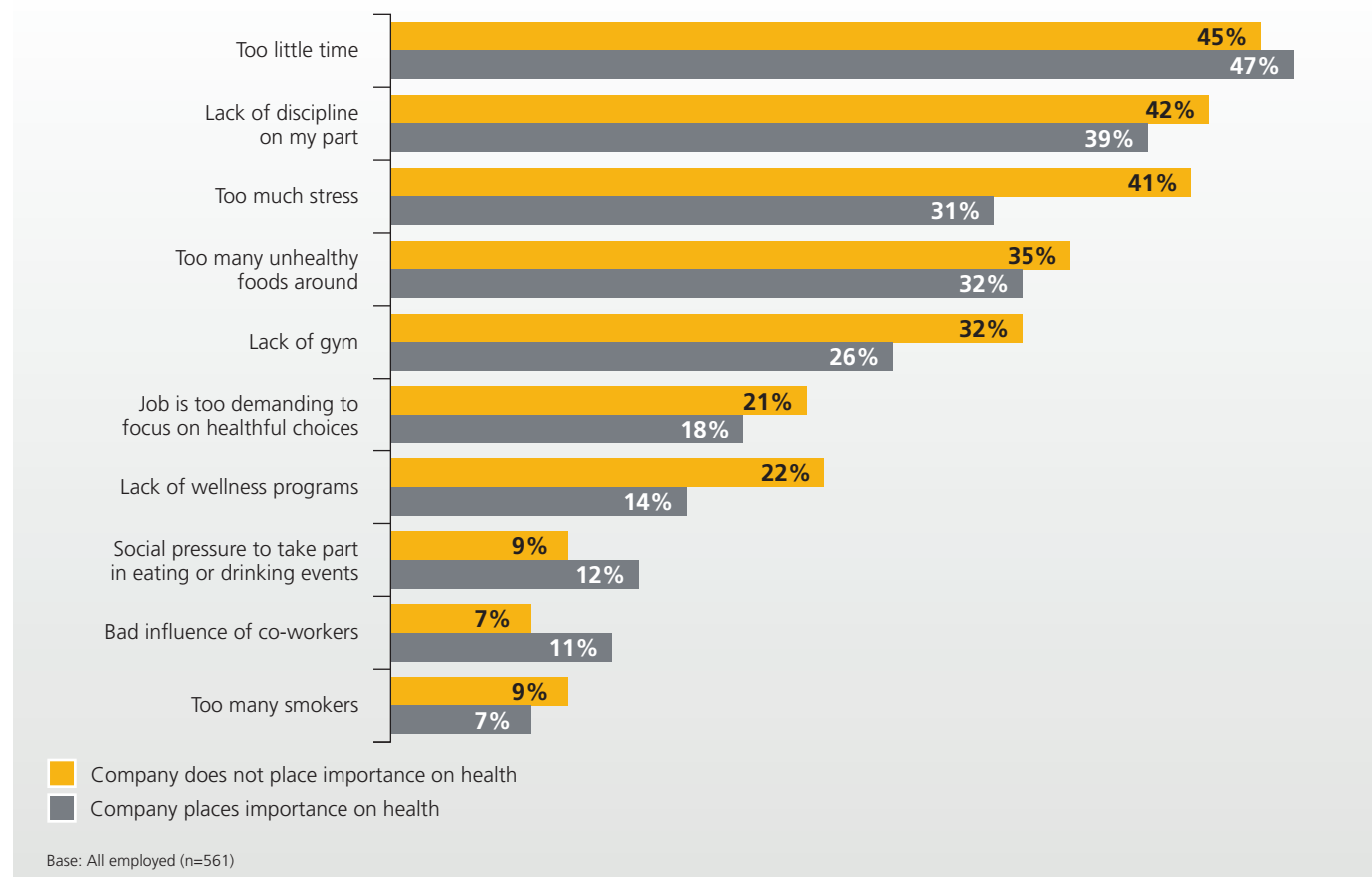
Organizations that seek to encourage employee adoption of healthier lifestyles need to be sure their wellness programs effectively address the types of barriers that survey respondents describe in the workplace, in ways that enable and support positive, long-term behavior change.

Stress and lack of programs are less a factor for those in health-conscious companies

Respondents whose companies placed an importance on health were somewhat less likely than others (31 percent versus 41 percent) to say that too much stress prevented them from maintaining a more healthful lifestyle at work. They were also less likely (14 percent versus 22 percent) to attribute unhealthy habits on the job to a lack of wellness programs.

Figure 4: Factors preventing employees from maintaining healthier lifestyles at work

Question: Which three of the following most prevent you from maintaining a more healthful lifestyle at work?



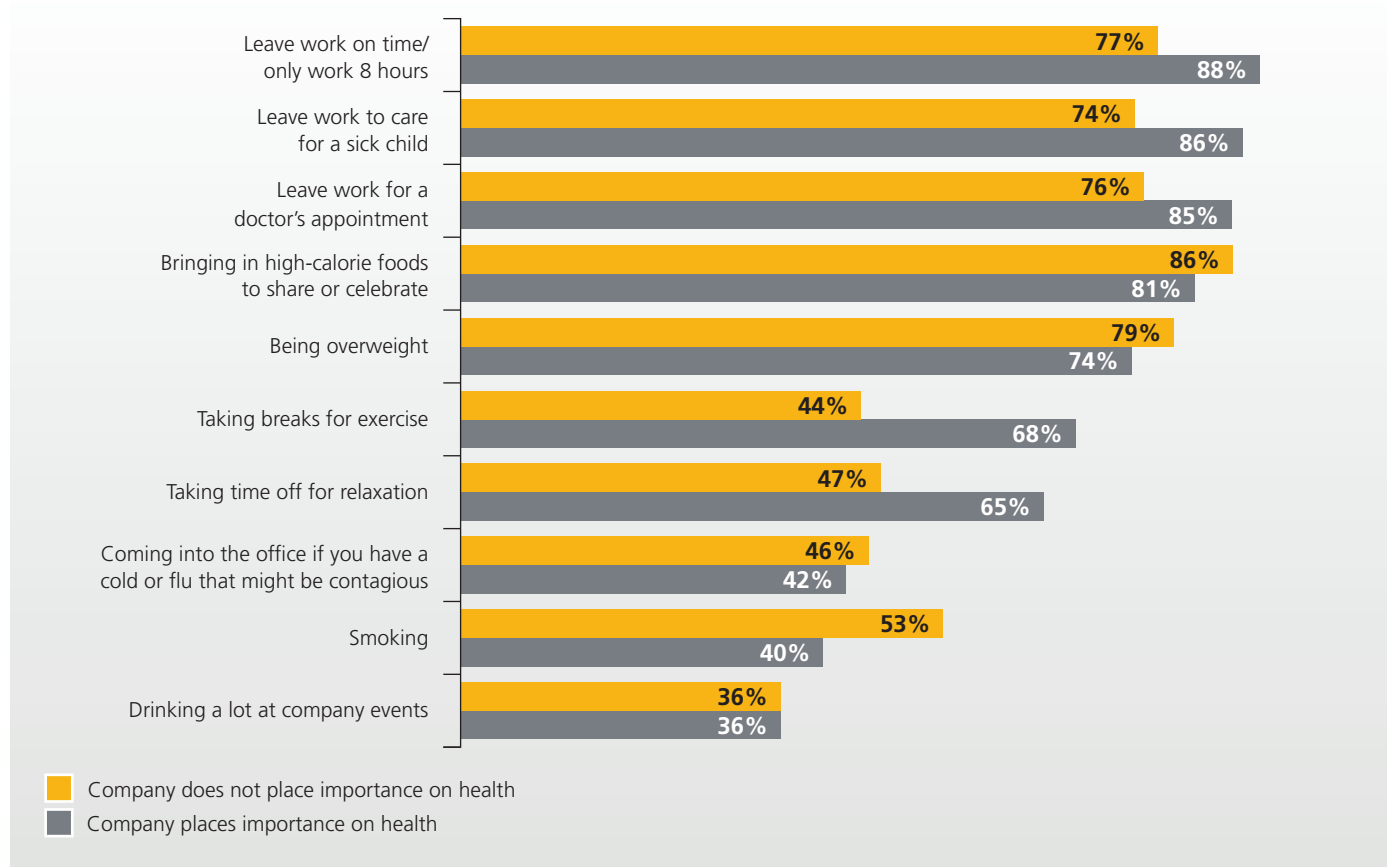
People in the weight-loss sample felt that too many unhealthy foods and the bad influences of co-workers created a challenge for them at work. Those in the smoking-cessation group were also more likely than the general population and weight-loss group (25 percent versus 18 percent and 11 percent) to cite a lack of wellness programs at their companies.

Only about four in 10 employees (42 to 44 percent) found that the culture of their workplace deemed it “very acceptable” to leave work on time or for a doctor’s appointment. And fewer than one in five said the atmosphere at their work deemed it “very acceptable” to take breaks for exercise or time off for relaxation. Those who worked at companies where health was considered a priority registered significantly higher acceptance of various scenarios, such as leaving work on time, leaving work to care for a sick child, or going to doctor’s appointment during work hours (see Figure 5). These employees were also much more likely to say it was acceptable at their workplace to take breaks for exercise or take time off for relaxation.

Figure 5: Acceptable behavior at different companies

Question: Thinking about the culture and atmosphere at your workplace — how acceptable are each of the following at your company?

% Top 2 Box — (A lot/Some)



Summary of findings

- Control over a healthy lifestyle at work is a challenge for most. Only about one-third (36 percent) indicated they had a lot of control at work in this respect.
- Employees working at companies that focused on health felt they had more control in maintaining a healthy lifestyle at work compared to those whose companies did not (92 percent versus 72 percent).
- Stress, time pressure and temptations at work were challenges to employees.
- Employees whose companies placed an importance on health were less likely to report that too much stress (31 percent versus 41 percent) and a lack of wellness programs (14 percent versus 22 percent) prevented them from maintaining a healthy lifestyle at work.
- Only about four in 10 found it acceptable to leave work on time or go to a doctor's appointment during work hours. Even fewer deemed it acceptable to take a break for exercise or relaxation.

Program results

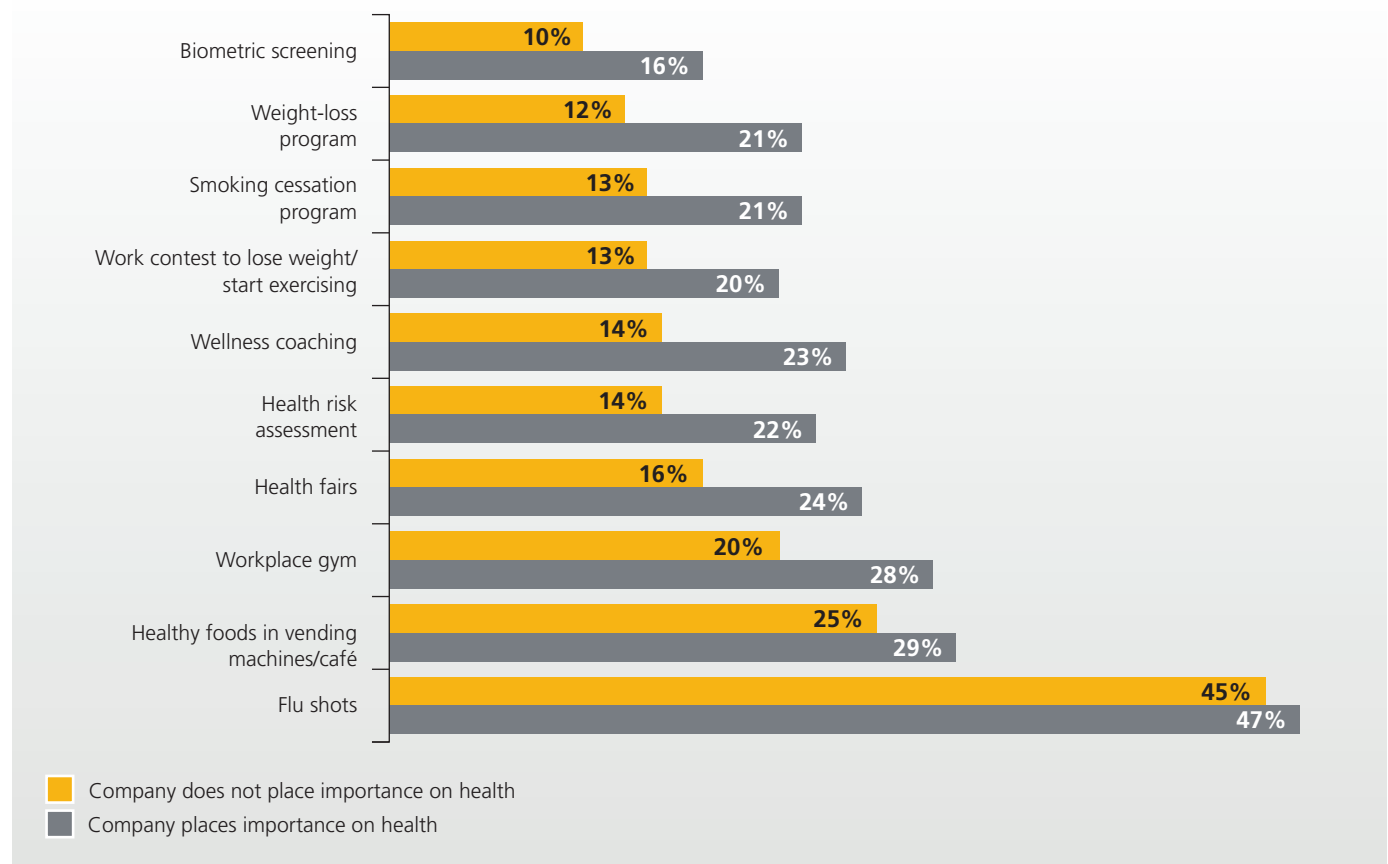
Employees in large companies tend to have greater access to wellness programs

Survey results showed that a greater variety of wellness programs were more likely to be offered at larger companies. The exception seemed to be programs such as work contests, which were seen in equal amounts across both large and small organizations.

Respondents who worked at companies with an employee health focus indicated that their companies were more likely to offer a variety of different wellness programs (see Figure 6). These programs included smoking cessation, weight loss, fitness centers, health fairs, wellness coaching, work contests, and health risk assessments. The differences in program access between these respondents and those who worked for companies without a health focus were significant — with the exception of flu shots.

Figure 6: Prevalence of health and wellness programs in the workplace

Question: Various health and wellness programs are sometimes offered in the workplace. Which of the following does your current employer currently offer?



Among those who indicated having wellness programs available, on-site wellness programs such as flu shots and biometric screening were used by more than four in 10. In addition, 38 percent of respondents mentioned incentives — such as giveaways, gift cards, discounts, cash and premium reductions — were used to encourage participation in wellness programs.

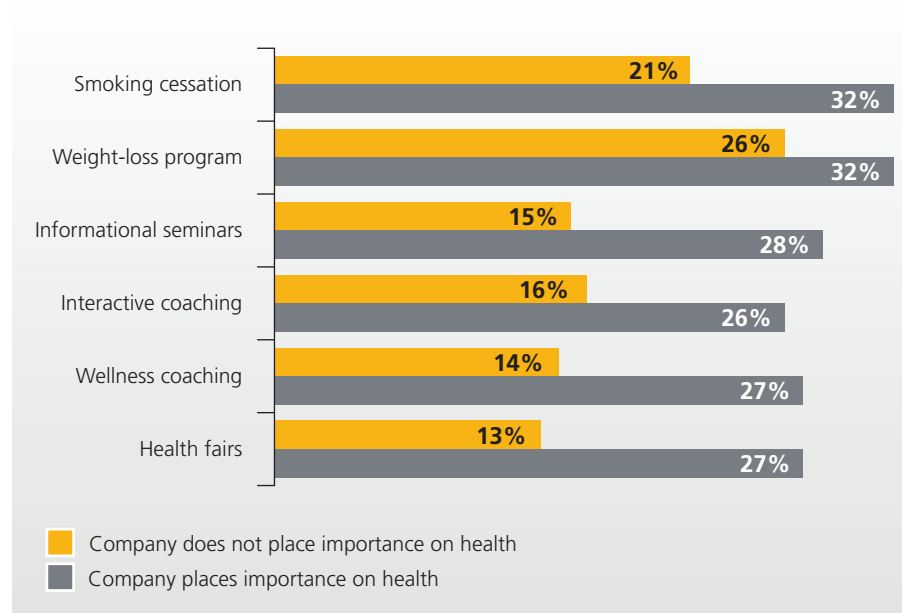
Organizations not yet using incentives should consider taking a staged approach to introduce the incentives. Such an approach can start with easy-to-implement options based on participation or one-time events, and eventually move to more complex strategies as appropriate to meet organizational needs. Of course, organizations should base their incentive strategies on employee feedback, as some organizations do not need sophisticated incentive strategies to motivate employee participation.

Among those respondents who did not currently have workplace wellness offerings or who had them available but did not currently use them, these types of programs were seen as being helpful in taking steps to increase employee health. In fact, some four in 10 were interested in workplace gyms (42 percent), incentives for outcomes and participation in counseling or coaching (about 40 percent), and healthier foods being placed in vending machines or at cafeterias.

In addition, employees working in companies that emphasized health appeared to have more interest in informational seminars and wellness coaching or counseling programs to help them improve health (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Employee perceptions of program helpfulness

Question: How helpful do you think this type of program would be in helping you take steps to be healthier?



The idea of rewarding employees who participate in wellness programs with a reduction in their health insurance premiums was well-received by half, who said this would have very likely increased their participation rate. Another 36 percent said it would have been somewhat likely to affect their participation.

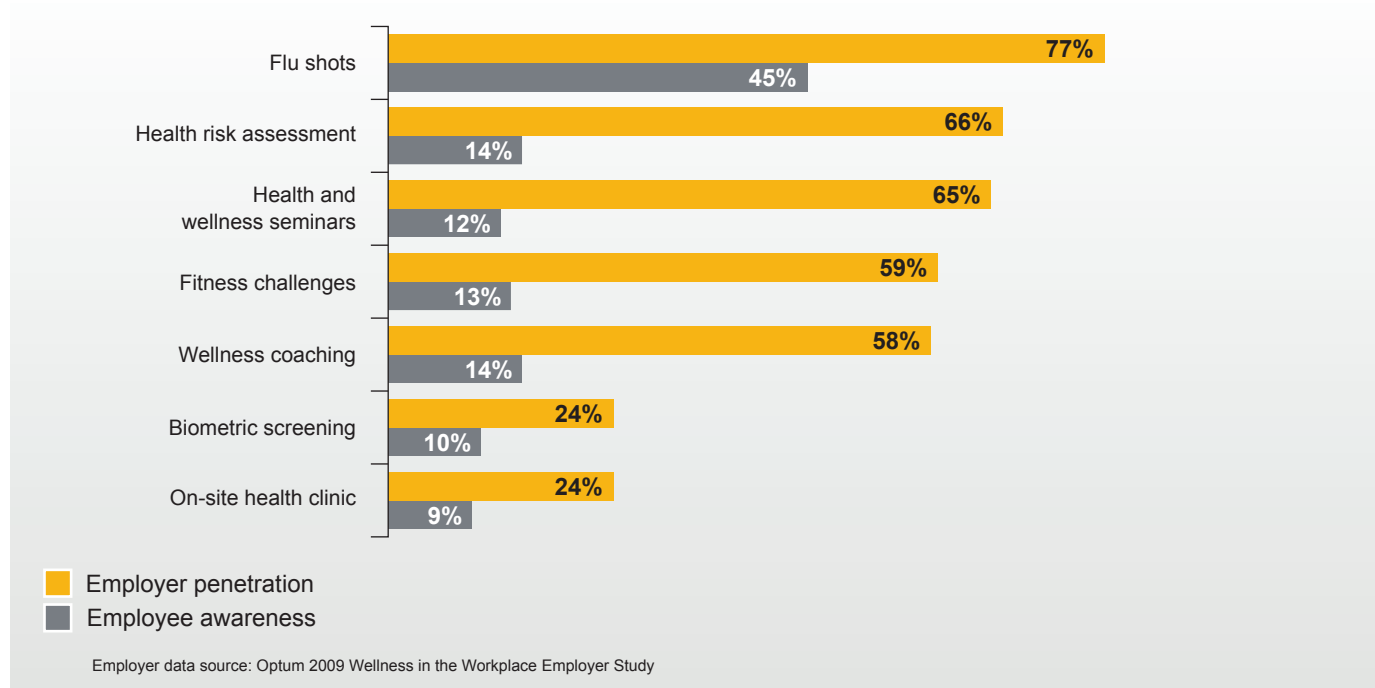
Less popular, but still showing an effect, was the idea of linking the lack of participation with increased premiums. More than four in 10 said that if this were the case, they would have been very likely to participate in the wellness offering.

Results may have been impacted by low program availability or employee awareness of programs at the workplace. For example, in the Optum 2009 Wellness in the Workplace Employer Study, when employers were asked what programs they offered, the numbers were much higher than those given by employees (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Employee awareness vs. employer penetration of wellness programs

Employee question: Various health and wellness programs are sometimes offered in the workplace. Which if any of the following does your current employer currently offer?

Employer question: Which of the following types of wellness programs do you currently offer?



Effectively promoting wellness programs to employees through strategic communications is clearly essential to build awareness throughout the organization. Companies should leverage senior management support, and should consider innovative approaches to identifying and enrolling at-risk employees.

Summary of findings

- Employees working in large companies tended to have access to more health and wellness programs.
- Employees who worked at companies with a health focus were also more likely to have access to more programs, with the exception of flu shots.
- On-site wellness and incentives were the most often used offering, according to employees.
- Employees viewed most wellness programs as very helpful.
- Employees believed linking health insurance premiums to wellness program involvement would increase participation.

Final thoughts

Wellness programs appear to be highly valued by employees. In large percentages, employees reported that these programs increased their productivity and retention rates as well as bolstered their control over healthy behaviors at work. Enabling employees to live healthier lifestyles can also lead to significant medical cost savings, and employers can play a key role in making all these achievements possible.

There are distinct differences between those companies that place an importance on employee health and those that do not. Employees from companies that promote health indicated more control in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, were less likely to see stress as a barrier, and appeared to have fewer work-life balance issues.

To create a culture of health, organizations should continually evaluate their mix of wellness programs, workplace policies, and environmental considerations to create an atmosphere that holistically encourages employee health. They should measure and track year-over-year participation growth, achievement against wellness plan objectives, employee satisfaction and program perception, and employee movement from high- to low-risk.

Many different types of programs are being used to help employees successfully manage health risks and live happier, healthier and more productive lives. By engaging them comprehensively across the entire continuum of care, organizations large and small can increase retention while helping their employees become healthier and more productive. It's an investment that benefits the entire organization and all its stakeholders.

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