

Most Wellness Programs Are Missing the Mark and Not Getting a Positive Return on Their Investment

by Jack Seitzinger, Ph.D.

Wellness is the buzz today and many companies are making enormous investments trying to change employees' unhealthy behaviors—unfortunately without much success. Most of us are under the assumption that we can require everyone to achieve certain BMI goals or waist measurements simply by providing reading materials and healthy eating programs, or by hosting lunch-and-learns. And, while providing a gym or workout facility at your company is a really nice feature, you may find the only employees using it are healthy, fit employees.

If you have not been shocked by the lack of significant results yet, it is just a matter of time before management will ask: what are we getting for the resources spent on these efforts? The answer is usually the same—not much that can be attributed directly to the wellness program. To get a real, significant ROI, or at least to get recognizable changes in the health of an employee population, we have to go beyond the traditional to understand what drives behavior change. The results that we have been able to achieve with our clients conclude that there *are* strategies to engage employees and improve participation in wellness programs while creating a healthier, more productive employee population. It can work.

So what can be done to get the return on investment without breaking the bank or having a backlash from your employees? The answers are complex, but here is insight into what works.

It appears that corporate health initiatives are focused on the wrong programs. Instead of investing in gyms, treadmills and a host of other individual programs, the biggest payoff may come from wellness programs that incent and promote the following four (relatively “easy”) behaviors first:

1. Get appropriate age-related screenings. Some people do not ever get their screenings—until it is too late.
2. Fill any required prescriptions (20% never do).
3. Take prescriptions (in some cases, the dropout after the first fill of a medication is higher than 70%).
4. Follow through and get treatment for any medical conditions that are identified.

Then the added value for a company's investment will come with a program that provides and incents exercise and healthy eating. We know that small changes are more likely to be tried and maintained, and will have a more permanent effect on one's overall health.

This combination of efforts will achieve the largest ROI and has the highest probability of success in sustaining healthy behavior.

Consider this: changing eating habits is as hard to accomplish as quitting smoking or stopping a drug habit.

Why do people work so hard to stay the same?

The simple answer is, because it's easy. But there is a little more to it...

First, it is important to recognize that many people probably don't know what to do. They may never have tried eating healthy, or never tried to start exercising—or maybe they tried but weren't good at it.

Here's an example: Many people don't exercise simply because they never did. Let's face it—traditional exercise programs are not appealing to everyone, and in some cases exercise is against cultural norms and values. To get people to exercise in a gym is difficult. The fear of looking bad to other people in a gym environment can be debilitating. And, if you've ever worked out in a gym, you know it is not always the friendliest place to be. Everyone is in their own space, the machines are complicated, and if you want help you have to pay some muscled-up gym rat extra. Few gyms offer a friendly, social and teaching environment that helps those who are new to the scene learn the basics. So we caution you against suggesting everyone join a gym, or focusing your wellness program on fitness. Instead, nudge people to try simple programs (that do not require athletic skills) that can start to build confidence and show some results. This approach can work, but it does require a sustained effort—one attempt won't work.

Second, getting people to change their physical activity or eating habits (lifestyle) is based on much more than telling them it will improve their health. Knowing the facts isn't enough to get people to act. You must also consider:

- **Attitude** or mood. Some people believe the food they are eating is perfectly fine and they are not going to change it—it is what they know, and learning a new way may be too tiring or overwhelming. Learning to eat a new way requires a new way of shopping, cooking and persuading their family to try it! Others may believe the medicine they have been prescribed costs too much, is really not needed, or makes them feel worse—and they choose not to fill the prescription.

The bottom line is your attitude needs to shift—or at least be open to change—before movement will happen. If the attitude (about exercise, or taking medication, or cooking healthier meals) does not change, facts about health will not be heard and new behaviors will not be tried. There are strategies to influence people to try new behaviors, and as a result start to change their attitude. This requires a unique effort, one that we have been successful implementing, to invite this population to try the new behaviors.

- **Mental wellness.** People who are coping with a mental condition (like depression, obsessive compulsive behavior, or anxiety attacks) need to solve these issues before trying any additional challenges or changes in behavior. Moreover, 70% of some populations are over stressed or burned out with life, and getting stressed people to change will require special care. Professional help is often required to impact this population. Encouraging an Employee Assistance Program to get engaged and reach out to the employee population may be one avenue to help people who are struggling but uncomfortable in seeking help.

- **Values** of partners and close peer/family groups are often the strongest influence that keeps us from changing. A new research study recently revealed that if your partner is overweight your chances are 54% or higher that you will *also* be overweight. This influence extends to other relationships like our children, close friends and coworkers. In other words, if you are heavy, most likely the people around you are heavy.

That also applies to moods or a shared outlook on life—attitude and values are contagious. Have you ever walked into a store where everyone is walking in slow motion, makes no eye contact and their appearance looks like they have not checked a mirror in weeks? Compare that to the feeling you get when you walk into a different store where the staff is cheerful, has pep in their step, are social and look neat.

So back to the bottom line: The most value for your company's investment is to encourage employees to get their appropriate screenings and follow their doctor's orders, and incent the right behaviors. Then, the bonus is to incorporate exercise and healthy eating programs in your wellness initiative and get people to make small changes in their health behaviors. If at all possible, get the family involved; employees will need support and encouragement at home to make any significant changes in a family's lifestyle.

Small things lead to big results. Touchpoints Wellness has been successful in working with our clients to increase participation in these key behavioral areas. Over time, this has resulted in an increase in the overall state of wellness. The ROI of an effective wellness program is now evident to management—people are talking about the wellness program and are generating their own wellness-focused team events. There is a buzz about wellness throughout the organization. Employees are engaged at the ground level. Leaders are walking the talk. Employees are feeling energized, looking good and treating their customers with care.

This success is based on a different approach to implementing a traditional Wellness Program than you will find in most mainstream offerings—it is getting the critical mass of the employee population engaged in wellness over time. We call it a “culture of health.” When this happens, the results can be staggering. Contact us when you are ready to create similar results for your company.

Jack Seitzinger, PhD

Touchpoints Wellness is working to create a sustainable culture of health within organizations today. We offer both the strategy and technology platform to ensure you have the tools to implement and measure the success of your wellness program. For more information, please contact us at www.touchpointswellness.com.