

Are You Following These 6 Best Practices for Workplace Wellness?

HR executive | February 13, 2023 | Steven Van Yoder

Workplace wellness is a multi-billion-dollar industry. In 2019, over 84% of large employers (with 200 or more workers) who provided health benefits offered a workplace wellness program, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, and research shows that employers plan to increase investments in workplace wellness in the coming years.

Yet, most employers are not following best practices when designing and implementing their workplace wellness efforts.

Between 2019-22, Return on Wellbeing Institute's Workplace Wellness: Best Practices Study 2022 (sponsored by the Wellness Council of America) examined best practices in workplace wellness by identifying data from recognized authorities in the business, health and workplace wellness sectors. This resulted in the following set of practices for designing and implementing effective employee wellness initiatives.

- Strategic approach
- Culture as a priority
- Whole-person approach
- Leadership support
- Purpose as a priority
- Returns are measured

Next, researchers interviewed senior-level HR professionals at 18 companies that had been certified or won awards for their employee-centric business practices. The interviews were structured to explore how reputable wellness programs aligned their efforts with the six best practices.

Key Finding 1: Whole-person approach

Our research into best practices showed that many wellness programs prioritize physical health by encouraging employees to exercise, reduce body mass index and lower their blood pressure. Yet, research shows that wellness programs can achieve better outcomes when they take a more inclusive approach to wellbeing that goes beyond physical fitness.

Our interviews with leading wellness programs found that most took a whole-person approach that addressed physical, mental and financial wellbeing.

Many companies encouraged physical fitness as part of daily life, with one employer encouraging employees to use stairways and walking paths around its campuses. Most companies also included healthy eating education programs and affordable, healthy food options at work. However, participants also prioritized mental health with convenient and affordable access to mental health services through Employee Assistance Programs, on-site

mental health counseling and time off to attend outside counseling. Most addressed stigma through company podcasts, videos and newsletters.

Key Finding 2: Leadership support

“Leadership commitment” is a top success element of wellness programs that contributes to a culture of health and greater buy-in across an organization, as well as cultivates a supportive work environment. The Centers for Disease Control recommends that senior executives lead workplace wellness programs.

Given the critical role of executive leadership, more than half of the companies we interviewed said their CEOs spoke about workplace wellness in employee communications, participated in company events and shared personal stories about their own wellbeing challenges.

At one company, the CEO sent daily all-associate emails announcing upcoming wellness initiatives, offering help to employees in need and sharing his personal wellness journey. Some executives talked with managers about minimizing employee stress and fostering greater work/life balance by encouraging employees to unplug on weekends, take vacations and take time off to address mental health issues.

Key Finding 3: Prioritize workplace culture

Studies show that workplace culture contributes to employee wellbeing by fostering belonging and meaningful relationships among co-workers and management, which is critical to job and life satisfaction.

In our interviews, most participants said that employee wellbeing was central to their cultures. One participant said: “We talk about culture in meetings four to five times a week to reaffirm our company values.”

Most interviewees conducted annual employee wellbeing surveys to ensure employee feedback informs cultures, with half using more frequent pulse-type surveys and listening tours. One participant conducted annual surveys around engagement, mental health, work/life balance, manager support, learning and development, belonging and recognition.

Opportunities and recommendations

This study offers insights to effectively design and implement wellness initiatives by aligning wellness programs with best practices. While a majority of the companies we studied followed best practices, we found areas for improvement that can help employers everywhere adapt their wellness initiatives to better achieve employee health and generate business returns. For instance:

Strategic planning and measurement: The CDC recommends that workplace health programs take a coordinated, systematic and comprehensive approach that includes strategic planning. Yet, research shows that many organizations do not have a formal plan for their employee wellbeing programs, and only a few of the companies we studied measured employee health outcomes and business returns. Wellness programs should include written, formal plans that assign accountabilities for employee wellbeing outcomes and target business returns that matter to the C-suite.

Financial wellbeing and living wages: In our interviews, we found that many leading employers, while appearing to offer above-average pay and benefits, had not systematically ensured that all employees were paid living wages or designed their benefits packages to ensure that all workers could meet their basic financial needs. Financial stress hurts employees' mental and physical health and job performance. And given that 72% of employees are stressed about their personal finances, employers should conduct wage assessments to ensure that employees can meet basic living expenses, pay for emergencies and save for the future.

Corporate purpose: Almost half of Americans say it is very important for companies to "make the world a better place," according to a recent Aflac study. What's more, a JUST Capital survey found that 89% of Americans say the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for large companies to focus on doing right by their workers, customers, communities and the environment. Purpose should be part of employee wellbeing initiatives, and employers should take steps to help employees live their purpose at work. When employees feel that their personal purpose is aligned with their employer's purpose, it can boost employee engagement and loyalty and foster a greater willingness to recommend the company to others.

Elevating HR and workplace wellbeing: HR must persuade CEOs to expand their roles in leading workplace wellness. Because wellness overlaps with several company functions, wellness leaders require a broader span of influence to avoid organizational siloing. This study suggests that HR requires more authority for making sweeping changes in designing company cultures, collaborating with customer service, and boosting a company's reputation as a great place to work. For this to happen, HR must convince CEOs and boards to elevate employee wellbeing as a top business priority, building on evidence that whole-person employee wellbeing can help advance business objectives, such as lowering turnover and enhancing employee engagement.

We believe these findings are a first step in reframing workplace wellness from stand-alone programs to organizational initiatives. This can ensure that wellness initiatives deliver what employees need while delivering both quick wins and long-term returns that help employers become more competitive.