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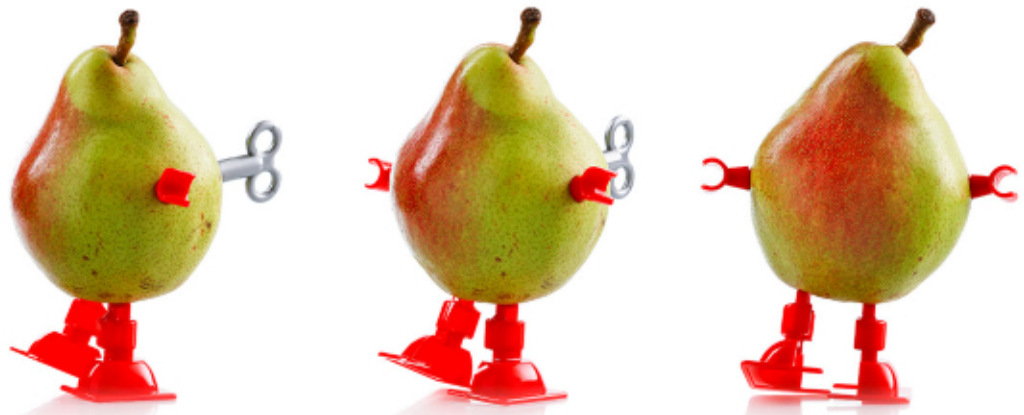
Why People Do — and Don't — Participate in Wellness Programs

by Sean McManamy

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Employers want healthy, happy and productive employees, and they often turn to wellness program as the answer. But getting employees to take action — to actually participate in these programs — well, that's another story.

We [recently surveyed](#) 465 full-time employees from companies that currently offer a health, wellness, and fitness program, as part of our ongoing efforts to understand the rapidly changing

needs of both wellness program participants and those who don't take part. Our findings point to ways employers can maximize the significant potential of their wellness programs by focusing on some of the more elusive drivers that move employees to participate.

First, when people reported participating in a wellness program, they noted greater satisfaction with the activities offered, they perceived themselves as healthier and more productive at work, and they had a more positive attitude toward their employer. Perhaps not surprising, 79% percent of employee participants say they are extremely satisfied with their wellness program, compared to 41% of employee nonparticipants. They also indicated they were more likely than nonparticipants to stay with their employer and to refer someone to the company.

Yet nearly 60% of nonparticipants indicated that they would be open to participating in wellness programs but for a variety of reasons don't. Topping the list were a lack of information or awareness inconvenience, unsupportive company culture, and trust and privacy concerns with their employer. Of all the barriers named, 69% of nonparticipants cited the former — employees saying they simply weren't aware their workplace had a wellness program to begin with.

Fortunately, our research offered insight on ways employers can overcome some of these barriers to participation. Nonparticipants specifically said that they want to interact with their coworkers who share similar interests and health risks; however, 53% of them still feel there are cultural barriers preventing them from fully engaging, including inconvenience and their employers' lack of support for their participation. In other words, everyone from the CEO to individual managers need to explicitly tell their employees that it's OK to take a break during the day to use the gym, go for a walk, or attend an aerobics class — and it's important that these facilities and activities are readily accessible.

Both participants and nonparticipants agreed that wellness programs need to incorporate a personalized, customized approach; in fact, almost 75% of the former said this an important part of a health, wellness, and fitness program. It could come from knowledgeable “live” experts — coaches and specialists — who are credible, easy to access, and provide one-on-one support for their specific needs.

This emphasis on personalization is also reflected in another one of our findings: 70% of employee participants reported that their company's offering is an indicator that their employer cares about them. The real differentiator between successful and failed wellness programs may be whether they deliver on the emotional level as well as the physical. It's an important distinction.

In order to make this goal a reality at your organization, you need to take a strategic approach, beginning with the end in mind. Remember that lasting change takes time and requires people, tools, and processes to work in concert. This means engaging individuals where they want support — whether it's physical, social, emotional, financial, or environmental — and then developing a personalized programs with appropriate support. Provide hands-on help and establish an authentic

connection at the individual level to guide employees to the right health and well-being choices — don't just give everyone a Fitbit.

It also means being selective when assigning on-site staff (to ensure the right fit for a client's culture), educating employees on a program's effectiveness, and providing examples of, as our survey respondents requested, participants who are "people like me." It involves using multiple approaches and communication methods to reach workers, regardless of their geographical location. Employees within an organization can also serve as wellness champions, supporting and modeling program efforts along with providing valuable insights and connections to reach their peers.

The power of wellness programs is that companies can help improve how employees go about their lives. But leaders first need to gain a sense of where the employees want to go, so they can help them find the most effective way to get there.

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