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## Before You Say “Wellness Doesn’t Work,” Consider Best Practices

By Cory Panning, SHRM-CP

Does participation in a company’s wellness program lead to improved health behaviors and outcomes? A recent study provides insight, while leaving some questions unanswered.

Earlier this week, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) published the findings from a study evaluating 32,000 employees at a large warehouse retail company. Researchers sought links between participation in the company’s wellness program and improved health behaviors and outcomes. They compared those participating in a wellness program to control groups where no such programs were offered.



The findings were mixed. After 18 months, compared to the control group:

- Participants self-reported significantly greater rates of healthy behaviors
- There were no significant differences in clinical measures of health, health care spending and utilization, and employment outcomes

While initial findings are disappointing, the study did not address other key factors. For example, many health outcomes and claims impact require longer than 18 months of behavior change to improve. In addition, the study did not report the way in which the program was designed and implemented. Based on findings from the Health Enhancement Research Organization, we know

that certain best practices determine effectiveness, such as: communications, size and design of incentives, leader support, and use of champions. Without evaluating whether the program was designed effectively, concluding that “wellness programs don’t work” is oversimplification.

It’s old news that traditional wellness approaches may not be effective. What does work is a carefully designed program with clear objectives and an approach that uses the appropriate levers to achieve these objectives. When evaluating the success of a strategic wellness program, it’s important to know what you are going to measure, how you are going to measure it, and what you intend to do with the data. Individual health behavior is complex, so creating a one-size-fits-all approach can be expected to deliver disappointing results.

Employers of all sizes must think strategically about what they wish to accomplish through wellness, and offer a variety of approaches that meet participants where they are on their personal well-being journey. Employers should design programs that connect employees to a variety of benefits, with a broad array of access points. It’s also important to consider the environment and people supporting the initiative to ensure it is easy to be healthy at work. An approach based on these broader best practices is far more likely to inform and engage participants in a way that enhances total well-being.

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