



ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Engagement Gap: What Employees Really Want from Their Employer's Physical Activity Programs

Four Actions Employers Can Take to Get Employees Moving

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Suggested citation for this article: Picarella, R., Martin Rauch, S., Edwards, C. Plumer, J. *The Engagement Gap: What Employees Really Want from Their Employer's Physical Activity Programs.* WELCOA's On the Move. December 2015.

Introduction

America has stopped moving. We sit in front of computers and tablets, we sit in front of televisions, we sit at school, we sit at home, and we are moving less and less every year. According to the American Heart Association, sedentary jobs have increased 83% in the last 70 years. The average work week is about 400 hours longer a year, meaning a person who spends the majority of his or her day at a desk experiences around 18 hours of daily physical inactivity.

While regular physical activity may be the closest thing we have to a “magic bullet” when it comes to our health, the most recent data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that more than half of all adults fail to meet the recommended weekly guidelines of 150+ minutes of moderate activity like brisk walking and 2+ sessions of strength training.

Scientific research and data conclusively find that people who are physically active tend to live longer and have a lower risk for developing chronic conditions—heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression and some cancers—plaguing our nation. Physical activity can also help with weight control, improved memory and cognitive performance.

Employers recognize the correlation between overall health and physical activity and know a healthy and motivated workforce is happier and therefore better equipped to help achieve company goals and ensure customer satisfaction. A healthy employee also equates to an employee who is sick less. According to Gallup, the cost of employee absenteeism related to chronic conditions or obesity is expected to reach \$153.4 billion this year alone.¹

As a result, and within a relatively short amount of time, many American businesses have become increasingly interested in offering workplace wellness initiatives to help employees lead healthier and more active lifestyles. According to the *Workplace Wellness Programs Study* published by RAND Health,² approximately half of U.S. employers offer wellness promotion initiatives at the workplace, including health screenings, smoking cessation resources, nutrition classes and fitness programs. That's the good news.

When it comes to employee participation in these programs, however, the results are less encouraging. According to a RAND employer survey, employer-provided physical activity programs see participation rates of only 21% among targeted employees, and half of employers report participation rates of 10% or less.

Increasing Physical Activity at Work

To better tap into the physical activity landscape among corporate America, The Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) along with Validic, a healthcare technology company, commissioned a

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nationwide survey, *Increasing Employee Physical Activity at Work*,³ which surveyed both employers and employees. More than 725 total responses were received in October and November 2015, including 327 employers from industries such as health systems, payers, consumer goods, manufacturing, school systems and non-profits. The sampling represented corporations both large and small, including Welltok, United Healthcare, Mayo Clinic, Kohler, Northwestern Mutual, MillerCoors, SC Johnson, Lands' End and Humana.

The survey sought to determine if there was a gap between what resources and support employees find motivating and want from their employers and what employers currently provide. It also sought to determine whether organizations were implementing the latest wearable device technologies to motivate employees. Could the newest fitness tracking wearables and online physical activity platforms make a difference in employee physical activity, and what is the opportunity for employers if they can leverage them?

For employers that are interested in ensuring their physical activity programs and social support offerings align with what truly motivates employees to lead healthy and active lifestyles (and therefore increase engagement rates and long-term behavior change), the results of the survey shed new light on potential best practices. What follows is an exploration of survey results along with four specific recommendations for leveraging these new findings to help employees move more and sit less.

Less than half of all adults meet recommended activity guidelines.

1 Provide the programs your employees really care about.

When asked, "What are you doing to encourage participation in your company's physical activity program?" the vast majority (77%) of employers stated they were coordinating walking challenges. Providing incentives, onsite walking trails and fitness facilities were also top strategies cited to encourage participation. However, when employees were asked what they wanted their employer to provide to encourage physical activity

at work, only 7% said basic walking challenges. Instead, the majority (66%) of employees responded they would be more physically active at work if their employer implemented policies to allow work time for being physically active. To further underscore this gap in engagement strategy and what employees want, only 25% of employers implement policies to help their employees move more.

A person who spends the majority of their day at a desk experiences around 18 hours a day of physical inactivity.

This preference is in line with the significant body of research showing intermittent movement throughout the day is beneficial to employee productivity and health. In fact, this intermittent movement could be key to employee well-being. Evidence for the potential impact of intermittent movement can also be found in studies that measure the effect when employees are *not* moving throughout their day. A study from the UT Southwestern Medical Center revealed that sitting down for two straight hours can negate the benefits of a daily 20-minute exercise routine.⁴

So how can companies remove barriers to physical activity in the workplace? "It's not necessarily that employees don't want to be active and work out," said Ryan Picarella, President of WELCOA. "What we're finding is that people face a number of barriers to leading a physically active lifestyle; a lack of time to be active being one of them." According to Picarella, to successfully combat sedentary behavior resulting in "sitting disease," employers must create policies that make it widely known that it's ok to get up and move. He continued, "So many employees today are hesitant to take a walk or do some exercises at their desk because they're scared. They're fearful of looking weird, of getting in trouble or being viewed as a slacker."

Employees with sedentary desk jobs have many barriers to working out. The survey results suggest that the number one thing they want from their employer is to reduce these barriers in a way that allows them time to move more during their day. Strategies for reducing barriers to physical activity include policy change, tips, video demonstrations and inspiration for

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being more physically active in a way that does not require trips to the gym or long breaks for workouts. Implementing these policies does not have to require massive resources, as there are products and services available to help companies do this, including electronic challenges and platforms from WELCOA designed to build more movement into the culture of an organization. For most businesses, the biggest step is just realizing and acknowledging that this must be done.

66% of employees said they'd be more likely to be physically active at work if their employer implemented policies to allow work time for physical activity.

2 Encourage the use of wearable fitness devices.

The second finding from the survey established there is a gap between how interested employees are in using wearable fitness devices and what employers believe that interest to be. While 46% of employees said they currently own a wearable fitness device, most employers said they believed less than 25% of their employees currently own a device. One reason for employees' interest in wearable fitness devices is because they provide social support and can be a culture change agent for physical activity. "Wearable devices and online health strategies drive awareness and personal empowerment," said Chris Edwards, Chief Marketing Officer at Validic. "We now live in a sharing, social culture, and wearable devices enable individuals to take control of their life; they can share and monitor their progress. Fitness trackers and in-home clinical devices are tools to empower people to take action for healthier living."

The wearable fitness device industry has become multi-billion dollar. According to Edwards, it has grown 17% year-over-year, and more and more consumers are getting comfortable using these devices by the minute.

According to experts, wearable fitness devices also help address the top reason adults state they don't exercise: lack of time. "There's a misconception that you have to be an athlete to be

healthy, or you have to be in the gym for an hour to see health benefits from exercise," says internationally renowned author, exercise physiologist and speaker, Sean Foy, MA.

Science is now indicating that all movement counts. Even one minute is better than nothing at all—any movement can improve your health. "Fitness devices help drive the message that everything counts," says Foy. "You can see how much you're moving in real time. You can see how much you're progressing."

Wearable devices and online strategies can help increase employee participation and help companies run their wellness challenges more effectively. Employers agree. In fact, 90% said they believe wearable fitness devices encourage employees to be more physically active. When asked whether providing a wearable would encourage their physical activity, 45% of employees said that it would. Further, 70% of employees said they'd be more likely to use a wearable fitness device if their employer provided or reimbursed them for a wearable fitness device. Despite this belief that is backed by employee interest, only 12% of employers surveyed provide or reimburse employees for wearable fitness devices.

So if half of employees surveyed believe a wearable fitness device would help them move more, and the majority of employees are interested in wearing a device if it was provided to them by their employer, how can employers begin taking steps to get devices in the hands of employees? Specific recommendations as evidenced in the survey include providing wearable fitness devices or reimbursing employees for purchasing their own. There are wellness companies providing programs, powered by Validic's digital health platform, with the capability of integrating data from a variety of wearable fitness devices. This allows employers to implement a BYOD (bring your own device) policy, which is ideal for employees as they can choose the wearable fitness device that best fits their needs and, as a result, increases the likelihood of long-term use and engagement.

Sitting down for two straight hours and doing nothing can negate the benefits of a daily 20-minute exercise routine.

3 Provide the right kind of incentives.

Incentives have long been considered a best practice for increasing participation, at least in the short term, in activity-based wellness programs. Survey responses highlighted incentives for physical activity as a preferred practice among respondents with nearly 70% of employers providing incentives to encourage employee participation in their physical activity programs. And majority of employees find incentives motivating, with more than 80% of surveyed employees stating incentives encourage their physical activity.

In addition, when asked, “What have you found is the most successful way to encourage physical activity in your company’s physical activity programs?” employers’ top answer was providing incentives (followed by coordinating walking challenges and providing an onsite gym or fitness equipment). But what kinds of incentives are most meaningful? While employees and employers both responded that incentives have value, the discrepancy between employee and employer responses was found when participants were asked about what *types* of incentives were motivational.

The most desired incentive (62%)
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The survey asked employees what kind of incentive would be most motivating and included many of the traditional incentive forms like gifts cards, cash incentives or giveaways for non-cash prizes as answer choices. When asked to choose all that apply, the most desired offering (62%) according to employees is more PTO or vacation days, an incentive that contributes to employees’ holistic well-being.

In contrast, when employers were asked to choose the incentive type they rely on most, the top results were cash or cash equivalents (24%) and gift cards (28%). This gap serves as an important reminder that the best way to determine what really encourages employees to get moving and participate in wellness resources for physical activity is to simply ask them.

An employee may enroll in a physical activity program to receive an incentive, but the hope of any health promotion practitioner is that they will continue with the healthy behavior because of the way it makes them feel and the meaning they find in doing it. “We need to start focusing on the mental and psychological components of movement,” says Foy. “So many people don’t see the physical benefits like losing weight right away, so they immediately give up. So we need to start tapping into their emotional well-being as an incentive—you’ll feel better if you get up and move around. Even if it’s for two minutes.”

4 Provide the right social support programs.

Strong social support programs are essential when it comes to helping employees adopt, and more importantly, maintain healthier habits. They provide the comfort of knowing that peers and friends are experiencing the same challenges and success and can be beneficial to establishing grassroots cultures for health. As companies embark on the journey to get their employees moving, it’s critical to recognize the value of cultivating social support programs.

In fact, social support programs are highly desired. 90% of employees surveyed said they wanted their employer to provide opportunities for social support for being more active. When asked to choose from a wide range of support program elements including buddy systems, onsite education and executive-lead walks, the number one choice (48%) from employees was an electronic support structure that includes device-related support and challenges. Although 82% of employers responded that they currently have some sort of social support programming in place, only 15% of employers said they currently provide this type of electronic social support program that employees want.

“Health and wellness is now becoming a team sport,” said Edwards. “We live in a social and sharing culture and the healthcare and wellness industries can benefit from this.”

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Social support programs that couple devices and an online strategy enable employees to view their progress and share their achievements. It ultimately provides a platform with many psychological triggers for health behavior change.

“We have to change the way we think about movement. We need to drive the message that every little bit counts,” said Foy. “There is a cognitive and social element to physical activity that we often miss. We need to help employees discover the deeper ‘why’ as to why they should move more. Social support programs with device integration can help employees learn and stick with healthy habits.”

The number one social support opportunity desired by employees (48%) was electronic support structures including device-related support and challenges.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

The *Increasing Employee Physical Activity at Work* survey sought to explore how employers can help employees move more and sit less. It identified gaps between the current industry efforts and what employees find meaningful. Based on survey results, four recommendations were offered in this paper.

First, it is recommended that employers provide more than simple walking challenges to motivate their employees to move more. Evidence was found that employees want resources that build more movement into the work day. If policy change is not an option, there are programs designed to support employees in moving more while at work without needing long breaks for organized fitness including WELCOA's *On the Move* initiative platform.

Second, get more devices in the hands of employees; it was found that employees are using devices to track their activity more than employers think. Employees find them motivating and they

would be more likely to use them if they were provided at little or no cost by their employer. The third major finding suggests it is a good strategy to provide incentives like more PTO or vacation days so employees attribute physical activity to a meaningful outcome that contributes to holistic well-being.

Finally, it was found that employees want their employer to provide social support programs for health improvement. The most impactful social support offering according to the survey was online or electronic platforms that provide social support through challenges and that integrate devices for tracking.

Leveraging even just one of these four recommendations can help employers to get their employees moving. Incorporating all four recommendations can yield outstanding results for employee health, company culture and the overall bottom line. When employers offer the programs their employees desire, provide the right technology and devices and provide the right incentives and social support, they are likely to see employees who are intrinsically motivated to get active and become healthier. These recommendations ultimately spawn a culture of movement and wellness that is inherent throughout not only your wellness programs, but the organization itself.

About On the Move

The Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) is launching an exciting national challenge to get employees *On the Move*. The *On the Move* competition is focused on fueling national corporate health initiatives to combat physical inactivity and initiate behavior change. *On the Move* is a completely turnkey, 12-week challenge designed to engage employees in physical activity, help better manage their stress levels, and make long-term behavior changes. The *On the Move* Challenge provides a corporate wellness platform for all employees to access complete with educational resources, behavior change incentives, physical activity tracking and social support functionality. A big differentiator for the program is it allows employees to move when they want, how they want and how much they want taking into account metrics like intensity and activity type. Not only will challenge winners receive Top 100 Most Active Companies designation, the challenge has been shown to cut sedentary behavior in half and revolutionize worksites for physical activity—over 80% of employees who complete the challenge say they will continue to be active in the long term. To learn more about *On the Move*, visit onthemove.welcoa.org or contact us at onthemove@welcoa.org.

About WELCOA

The Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) was established as a national not-for-profit organization in the mid-1980s through the efforts of a number of forward-thinking business and health leaders. Drawing on the vision originally set forth by William Kizer, Sr., Chairman Emeritus of Central States Indemnity, and WELCOA founding Directors that included Dr. Louis Sullivan, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Warren Buffett, Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, WELCOA has helped influence the face of workplace wellness in the U.S.

Today, WELCOA has become one of the most respected resources for workplace wellness in America. With a membership in excess of 5,000 organizations, WELCOA is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of all working Americans. Located in America's heartland, WELCOA makes its national headquarters in one of America's healthiest business communities—Omaha, NE.

About Validic

Validic is the healthcare industry's leading cloud-based, digital health platform. Validic provides convenient and quick access to patient data from mobile health and in-home clinical devices, fitness wearables and wellness applications. By connecting its growing base of customers—that includes providers, pharmaceutical companies, payers, wellness companies and health IT vendors—to the continuously expanding list of digital health technologies, Validic enables healthcare companies to better coordinate care across their communities, improve their patient engagement strategies, and more efficiently manage their patient populations. Validic's innovative, scalable and FDA Class I MDDS technology delivers actionable, standardized and HIPAA-compliant health data from the best in-class digital health devices and applications. Validic was recognized for healthcare innovation by Gartner, and received Frost & Sullivan's Best Practices and Best Value in Healthcare Information Interoperability award and Top Ten Innovator Disrupting Healthcare award. Validic's leading global digital health ecosystem reaches over 160 million lives in 47 countries and continues to grow daily. To learn more about Validic, visit www.validic.com or contact us at hello@validic.com.

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