Using Workplace Wellness to Strengthen Your Sales Organization
By Ann M. Mirabito, PhD, William B. Baun, and Leonard L. Berry, PhD

Joe is a highly successful broker in northern Virginia. Until a month ago, his life seemed ideal. He enjoyed a professional reputation for integrity and insight. Scores of agents and clients traced their real estate accomplishments to his guidance. He was surrounded by loving family and friends and collegial coworkers. He built an enviable personal financial portfolio. That success was shattered when Joe suffered two surprising and debilitating strokes.

Joe’s priorities had been his clients, coworkers, and friends and family. Over the years, he neglected his physical health. Like many busy professionals, quick service restaurants proved more convenient for him than home-cooked meals. Regular exercise was difficult to fit in, and fell by the wayside as he became busier.

Joe’s story is not uncommon. A third of Americans will become disabled before they retire, not from accidents but from preventable illnesses (Hunicutt and Jahn 2011). Heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other lifestyle-related chronic diseases are responsible for 70 percent of deaths in America and three-fourths of healthcare spending. While affected individuals and their families pay an enormous toll, the drain on society is threatening the American dream. Two-thirds of the increase in healthcare spending is traced back to unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, translating to higher insurance rates for all. Four out of five of us take at least one prescription medication every day, and the average prescription now costs $70.

Workplace Wellness Builds Productivity

Many progressive employers are taking a proactive stance against chronic diseases. Between 2005 and 2008, the number of Johnson & Johnson employees who smoke declined by half, the number with high blood pressure by one-third, and the number who are physically inactive by one quarter (Henke et al. 2011). In the late 1970’s Johnson & Johnson chairman James Burke established two health-related goals: encourage employees to become the healthiest in the world and reduce the cost of healthcare for the firm. The company’s wide-ranging employee wellness program includes nutrition education, weight management, tobacco cessation, stress management, onsite fitness, and other services. Johnson & Johnson’s commitment to being a “healthy company” is paying off. The company estimates that its health promotion program has saved $250 million on healthcare costs over the past decade (Berry, Mirabito, and Baun 2010).

Worksite wellness programs like those at Johnson & Johnson have often been considered an attractive fringe benefit offered by the most generous employers. We researched some of the best programs and learned that well-designed, well-run wellness programs can be strategically important to organizations of all sizes. The best programs improve the health and well-being of
employees which, in turn, contribute to lower health care spending, improved productivity, and improved morale. Wellness initiatives are good for employees and good for the organization.

Brokers, like other employers, are ideally situated to encourage healthier behaviors. Brokers have access and influence with agents and staff. And brokers have a big financial stake in employee health. Healthier workers are more engaged in their work. They’re likely to be more alert, have better concentration, and more energy.

**Creating a Winning Wellness Program**

Real estate is a challenging profession, demanding top performance from all. To be outstanding in this field, you need to be in top shape physically, mentally, and emotionally. If your workplace is like the typical real estate office, you and your coworkers may not be there. Negative health behaviors such as caffeine, poor nutrition, insufficient sleep, tobacco, alcohol and drug usage, and sedentary lifestyles can creep into work lives and become both personal and group-supported norms.

Creating a culture of health in your office does not have to be costly, but it must be intentional and comprehensive. We found six elements, or pillars, that are critical to creating a wellness initiative that gets and keeps employees involved in making healthier lifestyle decisions.

1. **Encourage multilevel leadership.** Creating a culture of health takes passionate, persistent, and persuasive leadership at all levels – from the C-suite to team leaders to coworkers. Executives heading up companies with a culture of health showed a generosity of spirit. The CEO of software designer SAS believes, “Good health is the best gift we can give to employees.” Managers must model healthy behaviors. The wellness manager at educational finance firm Nelnet observed, “If employees see the boss starting the day with donuts and Coke, they won’t take wellness seriously.”

2. **Align with the agency’s core values and priorities.** A wellness initiative risks being the business fad du jour unless everyone sees how it helps the organization meet its goals. Safety is paramount at Chevron, where two out of three jobs are considered safety-sensitive in that employees put themselves or others at risk. Evidence that healthy workers are safe workers has helped embed wellness programming into the corporate culture. Real estate agencies that emphasize the link between healthy behaviors and higher productivity are likely to sustain a culture of health. Encourage agents to create wellness goals just as they create prospecting goals.
3. **Provide scope, relevance, and quality.** While gym passes may be an element of a wellness program, they are only an element. Wellness programs must be comprehensive to ensure they meet employees’ needs, otherwise they won’t participate. Effective programs emphasize whole-person wellness -- wellness that extends beyond physical health to include emotional and spiritual health, too. Some employees may be ready to work on managing their stress, others on improving their activity level or managing a complex disease. An employee at health information publisher Healthwise started her wellness journey by getting stylish haircuts and manicures before undertaking a major weight loss program. Personal health is sensitive and important. Mediocre programming will not engage employees and will produce disappointing results.

4. **Ensure accessibility.** Low- or no-cost services and onsite availability reduce barriers to participation. Agencies may not be able to offer onsite fitness centers but progressive agencies can create a wellness-friendly office. Discourage or ban onsite smoking. Replace the coffee maker with a water cooler. Encourage fruit instead of donuts at office meetings. Place an elliptical trainer in the office and encourage employees to take a 5-minute fitness break a couple of times during the day. Entering a work team in a charity 5K can help build healthier habits as well as polish your brand. Team up with others realtors to offer health screenings, as the Chicago area Mainstreet Organization of Realtors did (ChicagoAgent Magazine 2011).

5. **Create partnerships.** Your program can pick up expertise and infrastructure quickly by collaborating with internal and external partners. Comporium, a South Carolina-based telecommunications company, teamed up with the local YMCA to offer a metabolic makeover program for interested at-risk employees. Consider subscribing to a health newsletter for each staff member.

6. **Communicate effectively.** Delivering your wellness message with sensitivity and creativity is critical. You’re dealing with personal issues! Talk about wellness every chance you get. Include a brief presentation on a wellness topic at monthly meetings. You can build connections and fun by inviting everyone to share their healthiest recipe.

**Reap the Rewards of Wellness**

Wellness is a strategic priority. As such, your wellness initiative must be evaluated periodically to ensure it’s on track. Are your coworkers taking advantage of program offerings? Are they adopting healthier behaviors? Create a wellness performance dashboard to give all stakeholders – managers, agents, and staff – insight into the effectiveness of your wellness program. The most useful dashboards measure employees’ participation, satisfaction and well-being and the organization’s health care spending, safety record, productivity, and culture.
Appendix – How We Researched Workplace Wellness Programs

Workplace wellness is an organized employer-sponsored program designed to engage and support employees (and often family members) in adopting and sustaining behaviors that reduce health risks, improve quality of life, enhance personal effectiveness, and benefit the organization financially.

We conducted primary field research at 10 employers varying in size and in industry, but having in common a reputation for top-notch worksite wellness programs. Our sample companies included Biltmore (hospitality and tourism), Chevron (energy), Comporium (communications), Healthwise (health information publishing), Johnson & Johnson (healthcare products manufacturing), H-E-B (grocery retailing), Lowe’s (home improvement retail), MD Anderson Cancer Center (health care), Nelnet (education finance), and SAS Institute (software). At each organization, we conducted in-depth personal interviews with senior executives (including the CEO and CFO in most cases), wellness managers and staff, and managers of related staff functions such as benefits administration, occupational health, employee assistance services, onsite medical clinics, fitness centers, safety, and food service. We also conducted focus group interviews with middle managers, with employees who participated in the wellness program, and with employees who did not participate. In addition, we reviewed and summarized existing published research on worksite wellness.


References


About The Authors

Ann Mirabito, PhD
Assistant Professor of Marketing, Baylor University
Ann Mirabito is Assistant Professor of Marketing at Baylor University. She researches how consumers make complex decisions related to value (quality evaluations, price fairness, and risk perception). Her service marketing research is in the context of health care, where she has explored ways stakeholders can act to improve outcomes and value. Her work has appeared in Harvard Business Review, MIT Sloan Management Review, and medical journals including Annals of Internal Medicine and Mayo Clinic Proceedings.

She holds a PhD from Texas A&M University, MBA from Stanford University and BA in Economics from Duke University. She has 15 years executive responsibility in large (Frito-Lay, Time Warner) and small organizations; in consumer and B2B; and nonprofit (Chamber of Commerce) and government (Federal Reserve Board).

William B. Baun
Manager of Wellness Programs, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center
William B. Baun has more than 32 years experience in worksite wellness management/programming and directs the Employee Wellness program at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. Prior to joining M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, he managed the Tenneco wellness program for 16 years where he implemented 25 different programs for the 101,000 worldwide employees. The Tenneco program received the Washington Business Group on Health's "Worksite Wellness Award," Forbes' "Healthiest Company" recognition and the "C. Everett Koop Health Project Award." In 2006, M.D. Anderson was recognized as the first healthcare system and NCI institute to be accredited by the CEO Cancer Gold Standard organization for their wellness efforts.

Leonard L. Berry, PhD
Distinguished Professor of Marketing, Texas A&M University
Dr. Leonard L. Berry is Distinguished Professor of Marketing, and holds the M.B. Zale Chair in Retailing and Marketing Leadership in the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University. He is also Professor of Humanities in Medicine in the College of Medicine at The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center. During the 2001-2002 academic term he served as a Visiting Scientist at Mayo Clinic studying healthcare service. He is the founder of Texas A&M’s Center for Retailing Studies and served as its director from 1982 through June 2000. He is a former national president of the American Marketing Association. He is author of “Management Lessons from Mayo Clinic” (McGraw Hill, 2008).