Systematic review of employer-sponsored wellness strategies and their economic and health-related outcomes

Executive Summary
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Abstract
In response to health care costs, a rising number of companies are sponsoring wellness programs to improve employee health and lower health care expenditures. Cerner performed a review of academic and real-world literature to identify the characteristics and outcomes of employer-sponsored wellness programs. They found that companies that implemented and maintained wellness programs demonstrated improved employee health and cost savings. These companies tended to have strong support and participation from highly-motivated senior leadership, management and the rest of the employees; a culture based on the idea that healthy employees are the most productive; and an environment that encouraged participation. While the need to cut costs was a strong motivator for implementing and updating wellness programs, companies were also concerned with the health and well-being of their workforce.

Background and Aims
This review of academic and real-world literature sought to identify the characteristics and outcomes of employer-sponsored wellness programs. Understanding the factors that contribute to a successful wellness program could empower employers with the information needed to implement a successful wellness program.

Methods
A comprehensive search was performed of PubMed, ABI Inform, and Business Source® Premier databases, and Corporate Wellness Magazine. Articles that reported an economic outcome of a wellness program published between 2005 and 2011 were included. Wellness programs were then classified into three categories: health risk assessments, lifestyle management, and behavioral health programs.

Results
Twenty publications met the inclusion criteria and were included in the analysis. Health risk assessments were reported for 14 of 20 identified companies, lifestyle management strategies for 18, and behavioral health for 11; all were also reported in a survey of 22 unidentified companies. Reported lifestyle management strategies included health education and/or coaching, weight loss, smoking cessation, nutrition, fitness programs, and competitions/challenges. Several companies offered financial incentives (e.g. cash, prizes, reduced health insurance premiums) for participation and achieving health goals. Employee participation rates were favorable, ranging from 54 to 95 percent.

Economic and health-related outcomes improved at companies with wellness programs.

- Returns on investment ranged from 1.6 to 3.9 in dollars saved versus spent on the wellness programs, with Johnson & Johnson’s being the highest.
- Health care direct costs either increased less or decreased over time (i.e. total health care costs, health insurance premiums, and workers’ compensation claims). The costs compared favorably to those of U.S. employers, the general U.S. population, and the health care industry.
- Wellness programs were also associated with fewer absences and higher productivity.
- Decreases were reported in high blood pressure, high cholesterol, poor nutrition, obesity, physical inactivity, and tobacco use.

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Companies with successful wellness programs had the following characteristics:

- A central tenet of the company culture comprised of improving and maintaining the physical and emotional health, well being and productivity of employees (and in some cases, their families).
- CEOs and senior leadership were not only concerned about rising healthcare costs, but they also considered taking care of their employees’ health to be the right thing to do.
- Friendly competition and encouragement among employees, CEOs and senior management provided motivation, as did financial incentives. Finally, employees were simply concerned about improving their health.
- Wellness offerings were convenient: they were available on-site and had flexible hours.
- Wellness programs were updated to address changes in employee health risks.
- Community health organizations provided support, education and treatment.

Some wellness offerings took advantage of computer technology, for example internet- and telecommunications-based education and health data tracking.

Limitations
This report has some limitations that should be noted. The quality of publications was low: only 3 out of 20 were from peer-reviewed journals, with no randomized trials or systematic reviews, and only one article compared participants versus non-participants at the same company. It was also difficult to assess the success of any individual intervention because a wide variety of reported outcomes and wellness interventions were described across the reviewed articles.

In addition, successful wellness programs appeared to be reported more frequently than those that fail, a publication bias that may cause misrepresentation of factors associated with success and failure of the programs. Similarly, unreported factors may limit the conclusions of published results. For example, participants could have had lower health care costs because they were more motivated and therefore healthier than the non-participants. On the other hand, participants’ costs may increase due to their motivation to receive more preventive care and screenings, possibly leading to treatment of otherwise-undiscovered disease. Also, the return on investment (ROI) could be lowered if non-participants are involved in non-employer-affiliated wellness programs.

Decreases were reported in high blood pressure, high cholesterol, poor nutrition, obesity, physical inactivity and tobacco use.

Strategic recommendations
There is a need to communicate the long-term value of wellness programs to the senior leadership of potential clients to help them establish a corporate culture that encourages healthy activities. One possible approach involves publishing the results of this report as a manuscript. Another involves analyzing the personal health assessments, biometrics, and cost data from employees participating in Cerner-sponsored wellness programs. That is, a study could be conducted to identify associations between participation, decreases in risk factors, and health care costs. These results could then be published as a manuscript to show potential clients the value of wellness solutions.

Conclusion
Companies that implemented and maintained wellness programs demonstrated improved employee health and cost savings. These companies tended to have strong support and participation from highly motivated senior leadership, management and the rest of the employees; a culture based on the idea that healthy employees are the most productive; and an environment that encouraged participation. While the need to cut costs was a strong motivator for implementing and updating wellness programs, companies were also concerned with the health and well being of their workforce.

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