

Wellness programs provide high returns, research reveals

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Employee wellness programs have often been viewed as a nice extra, not a strategic imperative. But the data demonstrate otherwise, according to a team of researchers led by Leonard L. Berry of Texas A&M University, Ann M. Mirabito of Baylor University and William B. Baun of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Their research shows that the return on investment on comprehensive, well-run employee wellness programs is impressive — sometimes as high as six to one.

The findings are compiled in a comprehensive piece in the December issue of Harvard Business Review titled "What's the Hard Return on Employee Wellness Programs?" The subhead reads, "The ROI data will surprise you, and the softer evidence may inspire you."

To achieve those kinds of results, employers cannot merely offer workers a few passes to a fitness center and nutrition information in the cafeteria, the team reports. The most successful wellness programs are supported by six essential pillars: engaged leadership at multiple levels; strategic alignment with the company's identity and aspirations; a design that is broad in scope and high in relevance and quality; broad accessibility; internal and external partnerships; and effective communications, Berry says.

The team studied 10 organizations that have financially sound workplace wellness programs. They conducted interviews with senior executives,

managers of health-related functions and focus groups of middle managers and employees — in all, about 300 people.

The team found companies in a variety of industries — including Johnson & Johnson, Lowe's, H-E-B and Healthwise — have built their employee wellness programs on all six pillars and have reaped big rewards in the form of lower costs, greater productivity and higher morale. Those benefits are not easy to achieve, and verifiable paybacks are never a certainty, but the track record inspires emulation, especially when the numbers are studied, the report states.

Behind the research are Berry, the Presidential Professor for Teaching Excellence who also holds the rank of Distinguished Professor of Marketing as well as the M.B. Zale Chair in Retailing and Marketing Leadership at Mays Business School, Texas A&M University; Mirabito, an assistant professor of marketing at the Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University; and Baun, manager of the wellness program at the MD Anderson Cancer Center, a director of the National Wellness Institute and a director of the International Association for Worksite Health Promotion.

Berry has spent more than 30 years studying corporate service quality, and conducted an in-depth service study of the Mayo Clinic to uncover fresh and innovative approaches to serving patients. He also serves as a Professor of Humanities in Medicine in the College of Medicine at The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center.

More information: <http://hbr.org/2010/12/whats-the-hard-return-on-employee-wellness-programs/ar/1>

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