

Human Resource Management

How to Get Employees to (Actually) Participate in Well- Being Programs

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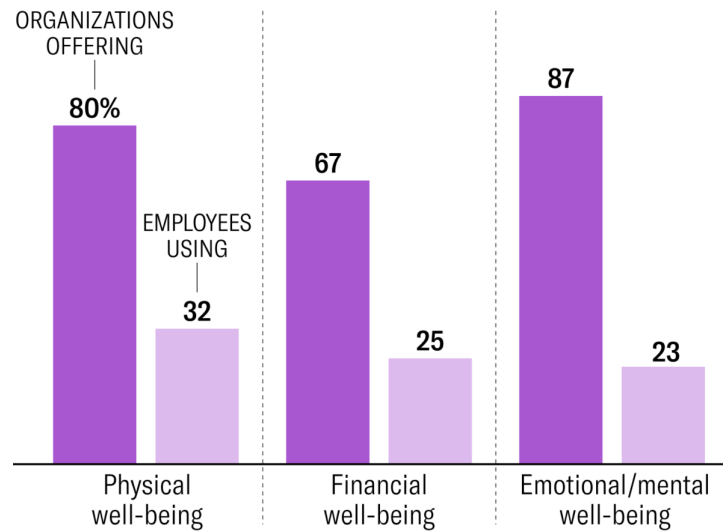
Summary. New research from Gartner reveals that although 87% of employees have access to mental and emotional well-being offerings, only 23% of employees use them. The author suggests three strategies to boost employee participation in these programs and... [more](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching and long-lasting implications for individuals across all aspects of life – health, family, work, and more. Given the impact the pandemic has had on employees, many organizations were prompted to examine the support they provide to them. According to Gartner’s 2020 Well-Being Benchmarking Survey, over three quarters of the 77 U.S. organizations surveyed reported that supporting employee well-being increased in importance in 2020. In fact, despite the fact that most organizations implemented cost-saving measures last year, the same survey revealed that 46% of organizations increased their 2020 well-being budgets relative to 2019, while 64% of organizations introduced a new well-being offering in 2020.

Despite increased investment in well-being programs, many employees who stand to benefit aren’t participating in them. Gartner’s 2021 EVP Benchmarking Survey revealed that although 87% of employees have access to mental and emotional well-being offerings, only 23% of employees use them. This pattern also applies to physical and financial well-being programs.

Organizations Offering vs. Employees Using Well-Being Programs

Of organizations offering various well-being programs, only about a third of HR leaders and employees report using them.



Source: Gartner 2021 EVP Benchmarking Survey;
Gartner 2021 EVP Employee Survey



Gartner has identified three strategies organizations can implement to maximize the investments made in employee well-being by boosting employee participation in offered programs:

1. Increase employee understanding of well-being needs and offerings.
2. Reduce well-being stigma and apathy.
3. Reduce the time and effort needed to participate in well-being programs.

Succeeding in this effort is good for employees and the business: 48% of employees who utilize well-being programs report being highly engaged, compared to 30% of employees who do not. Further, at organizations that provide holistic well-being programs employees' physical, financial and mental wellness improves, on average, by 7-percentage points.

1. Increase employee understanding of well-being needs and offerings.

While nearly all organizations (92%) communicated with their employees about well-being more in 2020 than in 2019, many employees still don't know about the programs that their organizations offer. As an example, Gartner's 2020 Well-Being Benchmarking Survey found that almost all organizations (96%) offered mental well-being programs, while Gartner's 2020 Well-Being Employee Survey revealed that less than half of employees (42%) thought their organizations offered them.

Not only do employees have an incomplete understanding of the well-being offerings available to them; many are also unsure about their own well-being needs. Therefore, the first step is foundational – HR must increase employees' awareness and knowledge of employer-provided well-being efforts. To reach all employees, the Total Rewards function (the part of HR that is typically responsible for compensation, benefits, and well-being programs) should partner and maximize the strength of other communicators, such as leaders, managers, and peers.

Progressive organizations are tapping senior leaders to share their own experiences with personal well-being and how the organization's offerings have helped them. Managers are often overlooked, but given their proximity to their direct reports, they are best positioned to regularly check with employees about their well-being needs and to help personalize available offerings. Last, but not least, peer-to-peer employee relationships are critical to lending credibility to participating in well-being programs.

Employees are often bombarded with information from their employer, and benefits information is often overlooked. To capture employees' attention in today's information-rich world, communications must be credible and appealing in order to stand out. Communications need to be believable; for instance, it can not overestimate the positive impact of a particular well-being program. One successful example is a short video of a senior

leader talking candidly about his experience with mental health issues and how he utilized the organization's resources to address the situation.

Employees will often fall into the cognitive trap of believing that available well-being support is for someone else. Leading organizations are personalizing well-being programs to make the relevance of well-being offerings clear to employees. Mashreq, one of the United Arab Emirates' best performing banks and a leading financial institution in the Middle East, encourages employees to self-assess their well-being across six dimensions, such as family well-being and financial well-being, and to make their goals explicit. The results inform a personal well-being action plan that employees are asked to hold themselves accountable to by using the organization's well-being resources. This two-part exercise helps employees understand what support is relevant to their needs and what steps they can take to utilize it to the fullest.

2. Reduce well-being stigma and apathy.

Many employees don't seek well-being support due to fear of being stigmatized, particularly when it comes to mental and emotional health. Additionally, employee apathy stymies participation by reducing motivation to act.

One tactic that progressive organizations are employing is empowering trusted employees to communicate the importance and normalcy of seeking support. Genentech, a leading biotechnology company, realized that offering robust and comprehensive mental health support wasn't enough to make employees feel comfortable seeking help. The company launched a campaign to reduce the prevailing stigma. Six leaders recorded videos of themselves sharing personal stories about their mental health with the goal of giving employees permission to share, showing the importance of seeking support, and highlighting the commonality of this challenge. Genentech also built a network of over 300 mental health champions – employees who are

passionate about mental health who volunteer to educate, encourage, and provide assistance to other employees who could benefit from utilizing mental and emotional well-being offerings.

The importance of managers in conjunction with employee well-being cannot be overstated, yet Gartner's 2020 Well-Being Employee Survey finds that only 49% of employees say their manager understands their problems and needs. It is critical that managers feel empowered to discuss personal well-being topics with their team – to let employees know that it is okay to not be okay.

Managers have different levels of experience with providing well-being support to their direct reports. Australia's biggest customer owner bank, Great Southern Bank, combats this by equipping managers with training and easy-to-understand tools that guide them on how to support direct reports on mental health and well-being issues. These tools include conversation guides for how to broach topics with team members, as well as actions they could take (e.g., identify early warning signs of distress) in order to provide support without being under- or over-involved.

Moreover, Great Southern Bank encourages managers to proactively initiate these conversations. This effectively gives employees that “permission” to share their mental health and well-being concerns – minimizing stigma, and taking a proactive, early intervention approach.

HR leaders can make the benefits of seeking support more tangible by encouraging employees to share their well-being success stories. Employees are more likely to act when they hear multiple ways in which their colleagues utilized specific offerings (e.g., a dietary plan or a financial planning tool) to their benefit.

3. Reduce the time and effort needed to participate in well-being programs.

Among all employees who indicated they could have participated in a physical well-being program in 2020 but didn't, 38% said it

was because they were too busy. This is particularly concerning, as those most in need of well-being support often have the least time or energy.

To reach time- or energy-constrained employees, progressive organizations have adopted default enrollment in certain offerings to prevent inertia. HR leaders should design opt-out well-being programs rather than opt-in. In this scenario, all employees are enrolled in certain benefits, such as virtual exercise sessions or sessions with a financial advisor, by default with the option to opt out.

One company that has experimented with this approach is AMD, a U.S.-based semiconductors company. Recognizing that employees were either not taking vacation days or working while on vacation, AMD created a new kind of benefit: global recharge days. The Global Recharge Days Program encourages employees to use a few of their vacation days simultaneously. AMD's goal is to enable more employees to fully disconnect from work and recharge jointly by having entire teams take vacation at once. HR marked the recharge days as vacation days for all eligible employees to make it easier for employees to take this time off; employees that wanted to work could easily opt out.

Other leading organizations are using nudges to provide indirect suggestions and positive reinforcement to employees, encouraging participation without restricting personal decision-making. Nudges may take the form of an ongoing well-being competition — such as a steps challenge — in which employees can see their progress compared to their peers in real time and are rewarded for reaching certain milestones. On the other end of the spectrum are organizations that are integrating well-being activities into processes and everyday work to avoid the burden of adding one more item in employees' long to-do lists. One example: encouraging managers and direct reports to discuss emotional health as part of their regular catch ups.

Offering holistic well-being programs is a great start, but it is not enough. HR leaders must proactively address the challenges preventing participation in well-being programs to realize investments made into well-being programs that support people and make the business thrive.

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