Chapter 17
Wellness Programs in Higher Education:
An Australian Case

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ABSTRACT

Employee wellness has become a growing concern for many organisations, which are now allocating increased resources to provide Wellness Programs (WPs) with the intention of positive outcomes for both stakeholders. Nonetheless, not all employees actively participate in these programs. In order to develop greater qualitative insights into employees' awareness of WPs and their reasons for (non)participation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and employees from two non-teaching divisions in a higher education institution. Interviews revealed that many employees were unaware of the programs available to them, and that awareness, participation, and the positive outcomes were confounded by a lack of effective communication between managers and employees. The findings of this study will assist managers to acknowledge the needs of their staff in constructing appropriate and effective WPs and in utilising the communication methods most likely to be effective in facilitating employee awareness and encouraging their participation in WPs.

INTRODUCTION

Aim of Study

The aim of this exploratory study was to identify the extent of awareness of Wellness Programs (WPs) amongst employees at an Australian university. This university employs more than 2,600 full-time and fractional staff and is recognised as Australia's fastest growing research institution. Qualitative data had been used to develop insights into the wellness coping strategies of educational leaders within one recent study, which also called for reviews of WPs in order to assist in developing WPs which could help educational leaders to improve their health and deal with workplace stress (Hawk & Martin, 2011). However, the WP research to date has predominantly been conducted within the health discipline using quantitative methodology (Keller, Lehmann & Milligan, 2009; Rifkin & Kangere, 2002). The objectives of the current study were two-fold: (1) to identify the employees' awareness of WPs and reasons for (non)participation; and (2) to identify the communication channels used by managers to increase employee awareness of, and participation in, available WPs. The qualitative findings of this study, therefore, make a valuable contribution to the literature by providing in-depth insights into the perceptions and experiences of employees and their managers within the context of higher education.

BACKGROUND

Wellness Programs: History, Purpose, Definitions, and Characteristics

From the early 1920's concerns over employees' safety and health grew along with industrialization to improve unhealthy and dangerous work conditions (Ho, 2001; Bertera, 1990). These concerns led to the development of a broad range of occupational health and safety initiatives. These initiatives took three broad stages: Occupational Alcoholism, Broadbush Employee Assistance Program and the Occupational Health Promotion (DeGroot & Kiker, 2003), which can be traced to current wellness programs (WPs). The first stage was introduced in the early 1939 to help employees who were dependent on drugs and alcohol. The second stage was called Broadbush Employee Assistance Program, which still operates today as Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (see also McShane & Travaglione, 2007). The third stage, Occupational Health Promotion, focused on changing behaviours both in and outside the workplace for employee fitness and wellness.

Over the years, not only has the name of workplace WPs changed but the content of the programs has also broadened in scope (Ho, 2001; Kizer, Folkers, Felten & Neimeyer, 1992). It was not until the late 1970s that health promotion initiatives in the workplace gained a new lease of life and the original aim of rehabilitating workers broadened to a more preventive role (DeGroot & Kiker, 2003). In 1986 Elias and Murphy observed health promotion as encompassing all health services and activities such as health promotion, health maintenance and health restoration (cited in Kizer, Folkers, Felten & Neimeyer, 1992). Three years later Katzman & Smith (1989, cited in Kizer et al., 1992: 124) identified WPs as "various combinations of in-house activities initiated by a company with the intent of enhancing the overall physical and psychological health of its employee population". The concept of health promotion is becoming increasingly important and relevant as more private and public sector organisations recognise the need for success in an expanding globalised marketplace (Chu et al., 2000).

Employee wellness has become a major concern for business organisations (Parks & Steelman, 2008).

Consequently, WPs have been adopted by organisations for the past twenty-five years in an effort to improve the health and wellbeing of employees and their families (Kizer et al., 1992;

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