

Chapter 16

Employee Wellness Programs: An International Examination

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ABSTRACT

The chapter purpose is to examine Employee Wellness Programs (EWP) internationally. The review of previous literature and discovery of outcomes and recommendations for future research are explored. Additionally, developing culturally competent international EWPs and training the development team are presented. The importance of intercultural communication, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, and indigenous and cross-cultural psychology applications offer the foundation for the development of effective EWPs internationally. Issues, controversies, and problems, along with solutions and recommendations for the development of culturally competent EWPs are reviewed.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has been defined in many ways and evokes diverse responses across cultures. Stevens and Gielen (2007) asserted globalization is not a new phenomenon, rather it has been around for thousands of years and can be described in two ways: unilateral and enlightened globalization. Unilateral globalization refers to the belief in superiority of its own culture, values, and ideals and the imposition of a single standard on all cultures.

However, enlightened globalization is based on understanding, dialogue, respect, and integrating knowledge to foster cultural development. This involves the recognition that each culture has a different set of values, beliefs, and resources and integrates information to transform the world. Fox et al. (2009) posited critical writers describe globalization as a form of continuing colonialism or imperialism, calling it 're-colonization' or neo'colonialism', due to the pattern of present-day global relationships follows that of the former European colonial empires.

Technology has aided in connecting individuals around the globe but internet technology is largely a privilege experienced by the affluent (Klopf & McCroskey, 2007). However, globalization, when con-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0522-8.ch016

sidering general psychology, is considered an example of unilateral globalization that has been imposed in various parts of the world (Stevens & Gielen, 2007). There is a need for psychologists to move toward indigenous perspectives in order to prevent such criticism.

Indigenous psychologists are more focused on understanding each culture from its own frame of reference, including its own ecological, historical, philosophical, and religious or spiritual context (Stevens & Gielen, 2007). Further, Indigenous psychologists argue that general psychology ignores the wealth of both academic and cultural traditions of non-Western countries that may have enriched and advanced the field. Going beyond general psychology, scholars move past intra-individual processes and systematically analyze phenomena that are influenced by context, relationship, society, and culture. Gerstein et al. (2009) asserts indigenous psychology is based on knowledge which emerges from the target culture rather than either directly or indirectly from another location. There is an underlying premise which suggests psychological principles cannot be assumed to be universally similar. Typically, this knowledge stems from scholars located in the specific culture, has meaning within the specific culture, and is for the individuals within that culture.

Stevens and Gielen (2007) posit indigenous psychology advocates examining knowledge, skills, and beliefs individuals have about themselves and how they function in their cultural context. This is not restricted to the study of indigenous individuals or even the use of a particular method, rather indigenous psychology is in fact necessary for all cultural, indigenous, and ethnic groups, including economically developed countries. Moreover, some scholars argue that theories and strategies used in the United States are in fact indigenous to the U.S. cultures (Gerstein et al., 2009).

Multinational organizations employing international employee wellness programs (EWPs), however, may employ indigenous or cross-cultural perspectives. Multinational EWPs can be effective when a cross-cultural approach is engaged in the development and maintenance of the programs. Cross-cultural psychology encourages studying similarities and differences in individual psychological functioning in various cultural and ethnic groups and investigating variations in human behavior influenced by cultural context with data typically collected across many cultures (Vaughn 2010; Gerstein et al. 2009). In other words, the diversity of human behavior is explored and individual behavior is connected with the cultural environment in which it occurs, with a focus of the impact of culture on behavior.

What this means for international EWPs is that members of the EWP development team need to be mindful of the cultural context in which they are employing programs. Furthermore, there needs to be a great appreciation for the diversity which exists across locations and a desire to understand the distinct perspectives of wellness of the indigenous populations. Approaching EWP development with the idea that what works in one location, may not work in another location, and understanding, from the employee's perspective, what wellness involves in their culture is key.

The mission of this chapter is to explore how EWPs are defined, employed, and consider the individual within their cultural context. The concerns include the temptation of multinationals to export EWPs employed in Western settings without the consideration of the needs of indigenous employees across cultures and how these needs and wellness perspectives often vary widely. Approaches for employing EWPs internationally are provided. The international examination of employee wellness programs (EWPs) is limited in research and there is a need for the expansion of knowledge of sociocultural variances across and between nations, an important consideration for EWP research.

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