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Research Points to Elusive Drivers of Wellness Program Participation

Survey from HealthFitness and The Connell Group shows that to drive participation in wellness programs, employers must address both the emotional and functional needs of employees; include personalized, customized communications

MINNEAPOLIS September 8, 2016 To the participants go the spoils. A research survey conducted by HealthFitness between 2015 and 2016 in partnership with The Connell Group shows that wellness program participants have greater satisfaction with programs offered, perceived themselves as healthier and have a more positive attitude toward their employer. Yet, despite the myriad of available tools, technology and programs that have attracted employees, a significant number of non-participants—nearly 60 percent, according to the research—remain outside of the program looking in. They are those who indicate they are likely to start participating, but for some reason do not. Fortunately, the research findings point to ways employers can maximize the significant potential of their wellness programs by focusing on some of the more elusive drivers that move employees to take action.

“We initiated the research as part of our ongoing efforts to continue understanding the rapidly changing needs of wellness program participants,” said Paul Lotharius, HealthFitness president and CEO. “In particular, we wanted to know why some employees are participating in programs while others are not, and how we can get non-participants to fully engage. Our ultimate aim is to use this insight to chart the ideal path for employee engagement in ways that matter to them and determine how best to drive program participation and sustain higher levels of health and well-being.”

The survey highlights what employees and employers say they value most in a health, wellness and fitness program, compares their different perceptions, and pinpoints the key drivers that influence employees’ participation decisions. Key findings include:

- **Program participants have a favorable view of employers.** According to the survey 79 percent of employee participants (EEPs) say they are extremely satisfied with their employer's program offering compared to 41 percent of employee non-participants (EENPs). And EEPs also indicated they are likelier than EENPs to stay with their employer, refer someone to the company and be more productive.
- **Culture matters.** EENPs say specifically that they want to interact with their coworkers who share similar interests and health risks; however, 53 percent of them still feel that there are cultural barriers preventing them from fully engaging, including inconvenience and their employers' lack of support for their participation. A supportive culture lends credibility to and trust in the program by living the value. It leaves no gap between what an organization says and what it does.
- **Lack of information listed as key barrier to participation.** Of all the barriers named, 69 percent of EENPs say the biggest is lack of information. In some cases, the proportion of employees aware of programs' availability is 30% lower than the proportion of employers indicating they offer the program, thus indicating a lack of knowledge. Additional barriers include inconvenience, concerns about privacy and reluctance to participate. Leveraging provider expertise in effective, customized communications can help reduce these barriers.
- **A personalized, customized approach is needed.** The world's leading consumer brands know how to best connect with their customers and what drives them to purchase specific products. And survey results demonstrate the wellness industry needs to follow a similar approach. Almost 75 percent of EEPs say personal touch is important in their health, wellness and fitness program and can come from knowledgeable "live" experts – coaches and specialists – who are credible, engaging, easy to access and provide one-on-one support for their specific needs. EENPs and EEPs rate a customized program as crucial and say that the ability to meet their specific needs will influence their decisions to start and continue participating, respectively.
- **Employees' health choices and emotions are closely connected.** Survey findings indicated a successful health, wellness and fitness program requires strong emotional delivery and must establish a personal connection to actively engage employees at both a functional and emotional level. A clear majority (70%) of EEPs reported that their program offering means their employer cares about them.

“It’s clear we need to take our health, wellness and fitness programs to a new level to continue producing results that are meaningful and effective,” continues Lotharius. “Employees are seeking engagement that is purposeful and multi-dimensional and we as an industry must address these needs in our program strategy, people and delivery.”

Think piece provides overview of key findings, roadmap to higher employee participation rates

For greater insight on the research findings, [download our *Think piece, Engage Me: The critical role of culture and personal connections as drivers of employee participation in health, wellness and fitness programs*](#). The *Think* piece not only provides an overview of key findings but includes a specific roadmap to higher employee participation rates.

Methodology

The survey was conducted from 2015-2016 by HealthFitness in partnership with The Connell Group and comprised blinded surveys among employees (participants and non-participants) and employers currently offering a health, wellness and fitness program. Respondents were full-time employees (n= 465) of companies with at least 2,500 employees. Ninety-three percent of those surveyed worked for organizations with 5,000+ employees and represented a diverse industry mix, including healthcare, professional and financial services, industrial/manufacturing government, higher education and retail industries, among others.

About HealthFitness

HealthFitness, a Trustmark company, is an award-winning, URAC- and NCQA-accredited provider of health management, corporate fitness and condition management solutions. With nearly 40 years of experience, HealthFitness is a proven leader and partner for infusing a culture of health. We maximize client results through personalized interaction and a science-based approach to on-site program management, engagement and prevention. Parent company Trustmark provides a full spectrum of employee benefits to improve well-being through better health and greater financial security. For more information on HealthFitness, visit www.healthfitness.com.

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