



5 KEY TAKEAWAYS & NEXT STEPS FROM

THE IMPACT OF WORKPLACE WELLNESS STUDY

While past research led by Dr. Zirui Song has shown support that wellness programs can impact healthcare costs, the purpose of the current study is to use methodology that eliminates the impact of selection bias that has plagued past studies.

Key Theme #1: Research design matters.

Randomized controlled trials (RCT) provide one of the strongest scientific approaches to research design. It is difficult to always use RCT because of the complexity involved. It's amazing that this research was done at the organizational level, because it means that employees were treated differently across the organization. It's important to utilize scientific experimentation to conduct this type of research because there are things that we don't know and it can take time to accumulate enough evidence to see through the statistical noise and detect the trends. While it's unclear whether 18 months was long enough to monitor lifestyle behaviors and outcomes, or if more time will help reveal results that are in line or different from the current findings, this research could help motivate a stronger or more rigorous bar for measuring the impact of wellness. Dr. Song stated that it's important to look at the entire body of research, and not just a few papers, to draw any conclusions about the impact. To understand the various intricacies of this study, stream the recording on your own time.

Suggested Resource // Watch the recording: A recent Harvard Medical School study showed that there is little experimental evidence on the effects of workplace wellness programs. Lead researcher, Dr. Zirui Song presents his timely research and personal perspective on the impact of his study.

WATCH NOW: <https://www.welcoa.org/resources/new-randomized-trial>

Key Theme #2: Behavior change is hard. Sustaining it is even harder.

Influencing the health behaviors of your employees can be difficult. The study exemplified the ways in which practitioners and vendors could look at health markers to determine the success of their initiatives. While it wasn't inherently clear at 18 months whether health behaviors were positively or negatively impacted, it is also hard to draw conclusions about how these behaviors might have been impacted at 6 or 9 or even 12 months.

Does this evaluation mean that average programs do not work? Not exactly. If you believe behaviors must change first before health outcomes, then 18 months might not be long enough. While participants might have had positive outcomes in the short-term, behavior change is sometimes difficult to sustain and participants might have reverted back to baseline by 18 months. Consider this resource for understanding your organizations needs for wellness and how you might best influence behavior change through your wellness program.

Suggested Resource: Use this quick guide to help you determine the needs of your employees. Each page outlines the themes and key mindsets at each of WELCOA's Seven Benchmarks. Complete these worksheets with leadership and/or your wellness team to help determine your strategic wellness goals.

DOWNLOAD NOW: <https://www.welcoa.org/resources/key-mindsets-mastering-checklist/>

Key Theme #3: Wellness program selection: proceed with caution.

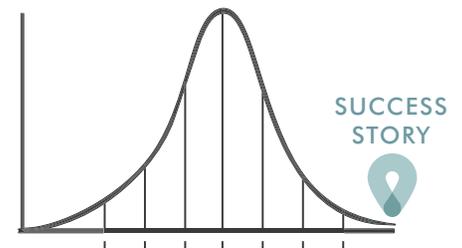
Prior to investing with a wellness vendor, it is worth asking if there is evidence that it provides initiatives/programs that are, if their findings in support of their program are influenced by selection bias, and to use caution when interpreting data. It is also worth asking the vendor for documentation of prior experience with success of past programs interpreting **their** data. Before implementing a wellness program or initiative, consider how measurement, design, and evaluation are connected for the future, allowing organizations to successfully evaluate their program post-implementation.

Suggested Resource: Learn why evaluation is an essential part of your worksite wellness initiatives, but is often overlooked for a variety of reasons.

DOWNLOAD NOW: <https://www.welcoa.org/resources/welcoas-5-reasons-why-people-dont-evaluate/>

Key Theme #4: Use data for program design and outcome evaluation.

This study evaluated one program, one population, at one point in time. When an employer implements a program it is important to think about how you will measure the impact before you roll it out. It has been shown that cost savings from wellness programs comes from the cost that was avoided as a result of an intervention, which may be hard to measure. As Dr. Song stated, “We could only see what was avoided if we can see an alternative version of the world that would have occurred without an intervention (a counterfactual).” Consider other parts of the workforce architecture that might benefit an employee. One can always walk to the tails of the distribution to find an inspiring success story.



Suggested Resource: Efforts to support employee wellness involve understanding employee populations and assessing the current state through confidential and secure data collection. Data collection should measure what matters most to both the organization and the employees.

DOWNLOAD NOW: <https://www.welcoa.org/resources/measures-that-matter/>

Key Theme #5: Wellness programs differ, just as employers differ.

The value of a wellness program is contingent upon what each unique employer cares about. There are various goals that a wellness program may be trying to achieve, and healthcare savings is just one of them. Lean on leadership to tell you what they are interested in measuring. Some leaders might care more about other intangible outcomes like motivation, achievement, or connection while others might care about changes in workplace culture or morale among employees. A workplace wellness program can be a great way to send prospective employees a message as a way to attract and retain top talent and that they care about their employees and their workforce.

Find out what your leadership team wants in terms of outcomes of your wellness initiatives. Complete the worksheet below to set your organization's vision for wellness.

Suggested Resource: Creating your wellness initiative for alignment within the organization requires some work on your vision and mission statements.

DOWNLOAD NOW: <https://www.welcoa.org/resources/developing-vision-mission-statements/>

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF WELLNESS FROM DR. SONG

“Workplace wellness programs would be helped by better evidence. And if a study like this could help motivate or inspire some thinking about how evidence could be gathered or how studies could be designed going into the future or if it could motivate vendors specifically prior to marketing their programs to employees to have stronger evidence with which to market and to help motivate employers to think about what kind of evidence we will need to see before making a decision to purchase a program, but I think it has done a little bit of good. If we can just help elevate the level of rigor in the conversation and help improve the evidence by establishing some lower bounds for what evidence ought to be or what employers should at least think about, then, I think, going forward this would have been a useful contribution.”