

Professional paper

IMPORTANCE OF WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMMES IN PROTECTION OF EMPLOYEE HEALTH¹

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Abstract: Every organization strives to have productive, creative, responsible employees, who constantly seek to acquire new knowledge and skills, who are motivated, loyal and engaged, and psycho-physically healthy. However, modern and dynamic business conditions, constantly growing demands and needs of consumers, setting new goals and tasks, increasing the level of responsibility and standards, and often setting expectations from employees too high are just some of the many pressures and sources of stress to which employees are permanently exposed in their workplace. Caring about employees, and safety and health protection at work is one of the important activities of the business function of human resource management. The priority task of experts in this field is to act preventively against stressors by creating various methods and techniques for their efficient and effective management. One of the techniques that is becoming increasingly popular in socially responsible organizations, are wellness programmes. By organizing and implementing these programmes, the management of the organization shows that it cares and acts preventively to maintain the safety and protection of the health of its employees, and the employees themselves acquire new knowledge and healthy life habits through these programmes. This paper points out the importance and role of wellness programmes, as important activities of strategic human resource management of modern organizations, which occupies a significant position in the protection and prevention of employee health. Also, the paper outlines all the important elements that management should keep in mind when designing and implementing wellness programmes in order for them to adequately influence the improvement of physical and mental health of employees.

Keywords: *safety and health of employees, wellness programmes, organizational behaviour, workplace stress, engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Having good health, and achieving a quality and long life is of immeasurable importance for every individual. But it is also important for employers to have mentally and physically healthy employees who are productive, who show a high degree of commitment and motivation and who are not absent from work much, which results in lower health insurance costs. However, the organizational stress that individuals, as employees, experience in their workplace is one of the most frequent forms of stress, because people spend most of their time at work. As long as

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stress does not exceed the limits of psycho-physical endurance, it can be a good motivator for employees. However, in modern and dynamic business conditions, there are numerous factors that breach this boundary. Constant setting of new goals, tasks and higher standards, increased level of employee responsibility, changes in the content and nature of work, growing demands for permanent acquisition of new skills and knowledge, often too high expectations of employees, longer working hours, work-personal life imbalance (Lukić & Lazarević, 2018), unethical forms of behaviour (discrimination, mobbing) and numerous other pressures are the most common sources of workplace stress. In order to reduce the negative effects of stress, and the consequences of the "burnout" syndrome at work, health insurance costs, absences and fluctuation of employees, organizations systematically approach the process of protecting the health of their employees (Lukić & Lazarević, 2019). One of the most important functions of strategic human resource management is the protection of the health and safety of employees at work. Experts in this field predict and analyse the factors, from the internal and external environment, that cause stress in the work environment, they plan activities and create various methods and techniques for managing these stressors (Ivancevich et al., 1990). Workplace stress negatively affects the organization and employees through their performance, productivity levels (Dailey & Zhu, 2016), degree of engagement, motivation and job satisfaction, absenteeism and fluctuation, but also affects the state through health insurance costs (Robbins & Judge, 2011; Mequilibrium, 2013; Balkan & Serin, 2014; Jetha et al., 2017).

The aim of this paper is to point out the importance of the process of managing wellness programmes, as an important activity of strategic human resource management of modern organizations, which occupies a significant place in the prevention and protection of employee health. Increasingly popular wellness programmes (fitness programmes, recreation, specialized training on healthy eating and supplementation, etc.) which are intended for all employees, especially the elderly, are effective methods in promoting health and healthy lifestyles. These health programmes, funded and organized by the company management, are important in the prevention of many (occupational) diseases and are aimed at improving the physical and mental health of employees.

Elements of organizational behaviour and human resource management that have led to the growing need for wellness programmes

Organizations have become aware that employees, as a superior organizational resource, represent a key competitive advantage and a factor necessary for long-term success. Therefore, the management of organizations is increasingly investing in the health and well-being of employees and is significantly turning to the implementation of measures and activities aimed at preserving the health and safety of its employees. One of the forms by which they can achieve this goal is to plan, design and implement various corporate wellness programmes. In recent decades, with the development of strategic human resource management, many forms of wellness programmes have been applied in many organizations, which aim to improve and preserve the health of employees.

Corbin and Pangrazi proposed a general definition of wellness. According to these authors, wellness is a multidimensional (physical, mental, spiritual, intellectual, and social) state of being that describes the existence of an individual's health based on quality of life and a sense of general well-being (Corbin & Pangrazi, 2001). On the other hand, in the literature on organization and organizational behaviour, there are different definitions of workplace wellness programmes. This only indicates the diversified way of managing and implementing these programmes in practice, as well as the need for them to be aligned with the vision, mission, goals and culture of the organization (Mujtaba & Cavico, 2013). According to Aldan, wellness programmes represent an employer's effort to raise awareness of changing employee behaviour and create a work environment in which good health care practice will be implemented (Aldana, 2001). Berry et al. define a wellness programme in organizations as a programme organized, designed, and funded by the employer to support employees and sometimes their families, which accepts and maintains behaviours that reduce health risks, increase personal efficiency, improve quality of life, and basically provide benefit to the entire organization (Berry et al., 2010).

In practice, wellness programmes often include only annual basic systematic examinations (internist examination, laboratory analysis, ECG, cardiovascular ultrasound) and gym membership. However, wellness programmes are much more than that, and in addition to physical health (workout programmes), they include care for the mental and emotional state of employees (advanced screening tests), education programmes on healthy eating, supplementation, diet programmes, training on protection and improvement of health. As a result, wellness programmes are becoming increasingly important in today's organizations.

One of the reasons for the growth of relevance and importance of wellness programmes for employees stems from the change in the nature of work presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Change in nature of work*

Dimensions of work	Past	Present and future
Employer-employee relationship	Long-term relationship, commitment, loyalty, security	Short-term relationship, frequent changes of employers
Nature of work	Structured and defined work, great opportunities for control, narrow specialization	Cooperation, multidisciplinary, learning through work, broad specialization
Leadership	Formally defined	Informal, rotating - anyone can be a leader
Desirable qualities of employees	Discipline, respecting rules, specialized knowledge and skills	Creativity, curiosity, independence in decision-making, self-direction, constant learning
Organization of work	Hierarchy, control of working processes	Autonomy, temporary teams, product liability
Rewards	Financial rewards, promotions	Performance-based earnings (fair earnings) and intrinsic motivation
Defined working conditions (time and place)	Both time and place are defined	Remote work, from any place
Coordination between private life and work	Clear boundaries	Integration, imbalance
Role of work	Money, status, prestige	Personal satisfaction, self-actualization

Source: Adapted from Global Wellness Institute, 2016

Compared to the previous period, the nature of work has become such that it requires a high degree of independence, responsibility, motivation, energy, creativity and engagement of employees. Employees are expected to be in good physical, mental and emotional well-being so that they can make the maximum contribution to the performance of their work tasks. Careers themselves have changed significantly compared to the previous period - lifelong employment, job security, hierarchical promotion, office work, gradual increase in wages have been replaced by frequent changes of employer, job insecurity, horizontal promotion, work from home, salaries in accordance with the achieved results. Employees want to enjoy work privately, to achieve exceptional results in everything they do, to do work that they truly care about and on which they can leave a mark (Johnson, 2004).

By implementing wellness programmes in organizations, a win-win situation is achieved for all participants (Abdullah & Leeb, 2012). The employer, through constant investments in the field of safety and health care of employees, shows that they care about the health of employees, which directly affects the reduction of increased labour costs due to increased treatment costs (due to injuries, diseases, disabilities, obesity, diabetes, etc.) and absenteeism, as well as employee performance. On the other hand, employees benefit from these programmes because they learn how to change their life habits and how to lead a healthy life, which results in a higher degree of satisfaction, loyalty, motivation and commitment in the workplace, but also improved employer branding.

The importance of the segment of organizing and implementing wellness programmes and activities in modern organizations is indicated by the fact that their relevance and need for their implementation is particularly notable in crisis situations, especially when employees are exposed to increased stress over a long period of time. One of those is the crisis situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that the whole world faced during 2020 and 2021. This global crisis has significantly endangered the health and safety of employees, and organizations have faced numerous challenges in how to effectively organize their functioning in the changed business conditions. Organizations were forced to reorganize and redesign jobs and their work processes by introducing flexible working hours, shift work and the ability to work from home, all in order to reduce physical and social contacts and thus reduce the risks of virus transmission among employees. On the other hand, employees were exposed to a permanently increased degree of stress due to the large amount of information they had to generate and process in real time and the decisions they had to make in complex and constantly changing circumstances (Lukić et al., 2020).

The process of designing wellness programmes

Designing wellness programmes is an important task because only well-designed programmes can provide positive effects and results. In the process of designing a wellness programme, it is necessary to apply several steps, i.e. stages:

1) Identifying the needs and desires for wellness programmes

The first step is to analyse the current situation and identify the needs for wellness programmes. In this step, surveys are conducted in order to find out what employees need and what their preferences are, i.e. what types of wellness programmes employees want. Also, in this step, it is important to conduct an analysis of potential risks to the health of employees within each workplace and to design a wellness programme accordingly in order to act preventively and preserve the health of employees.

2) Providing management support and forming a wellness programme team

For wellness programmes to be successful, it is essential that they have the support of management. Managers at all levels, and especially first-line managers, can help in the process of encouraging and motivating employees to get involved in wellness programmes as much as possible.

After conducting a detailed analysis and identifying which wellness programmes are needed in the organization and after the management gives their support, many organizations form teams that aim to build and promote a wellness culture. The key tasks of a wellness programme team are:

- Evaluating the existing wellness programmes, activities, services and policies;
- Analysing employees' needs and preferences regarding wellness programmes;
- Developing an operation plan to preserve and improve employee health;
- Participating in the implementation and evaluation of wellness programmes.

Wellness team members are selected on a voluntary basis, with an aim to involve employees from different parts of the organization and from different hierarchical levels in order for the team to apply a holistic approach during its functioning and decision-making. It is recommended that the team includes top managers, employees from the HR sector, employees from the IT sector, marketing sector, union representatives and all employees who really care about their health.

3) Defining aims and budgets for wellness programmes

The primary goal of a wellness programme is to preserve and improve the health of employees, and reduce health costs. Other goals are aimed at: reducing absenteeism, greater employee satisfaction and engagement, increasing labour productivity, lower fluctuation and long-term employee retention in the organization. When defining goals, several important criteria should be met: to be clear to all employees, quantified, time-defined, and to be ambitious but achievable in order to motivate employees.

Examples of wellness goals:

- Reducing the number of employees who smoke by 10% in 2021.
- Reducing the number of overweight employees by 10% in 2021.

After defining the goals, it is necessary to determine the budget. When determining the budget, one should keep in mind the costs of incentives, marketing and the wellness programmes and activities themselves.

4) Designing wellness programmes and activities

There is no pre-prescribed set of wellness programmes and activities that will yield results in every organization. Each organization is specific, has different needs, goals and budgets. For this reason, wellness programmes vary significantly from organization to organization. These can be simple programmes focused on one activity, but they can also be quite diversified programmes that cover several areas and disciplines. Some of the most common wellness programmes in practice are:

- Stress management programmes;
- Weight loss programmes;
- Smoking cessation programmes;
- Health risk assessment programmes and screening programmes;
- Healthy eating programmes.

Table 2 shows the different forms of wellness programmes that are applied in practice, and which belong to fitness, overall health of employees and diet and lifestyle.

Table 2. *Implementation of different wellness programmes in practice*

Fitness	Overall health	Diet and lifestyles
Free or discounted gym membership	Screening programmes and diagnostics/risk assessment	Free training on healthy lifestyles/visit to dietician
Meetings on the move / Dance workshops	Smoking cessation programmes	Stress management courses
10,000 step pedometer programme	Systematic examinations - a package for employees and their family members	Healthy eating and supplementation education programmes
Morning yoga classes	Assistance programmes and advising employees within the organizational unit for human resources	Introduction of flexible working hours (in order to reduce stress and reconcile business and private life)
Fitness programmes or using fitness equipment within the organization	Physiotherapy treatments – therapies and massage	Healthier diet in cafeterias
Incentives to get to work on foot or by a bicycle	Periodical (optional) physical exercise	Weight reduction or gaining programmes

Source: Adapted from Oyewole & Taylor, 2012, p. 208

Apart from these programmes, there are a number of different activities that can be implemented that will lead to the improvement and preservation of employee health. Constant sitting for several hours is considered to be a greater threat to health than obesity or smoking (Beta, 2016). Studies have shown that prolonged sitting leads to various cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, increased risk of colon, breast or endometrial cancer, obesity, poor posture, crooked spine, destruction of lumbar discs, muscle degeneration and poor eyesight. These problems can be solved relatively easily with the help of specially designed tables whose height can be changed (increased to a certain height so that employees can stand while working). For employees who work in an office, it is important that their keyboard and mouse are designed to reduce the risk of carpal tunnel formation, that screens are adjusted to minimize eye damage, and that chairs do not cause curved spines and pain.

Some of the wellness approaches are very simple and do not require additional financial resources. One such approach is on-the-go meetings during which employees walk (inside the organization or outside). In addition to the fact that movement (walking) has a positive effect on the health of employees, it is considered to have a positive impact on creativity (Lukić Nikolić, 2021).

Also, many promotional slogans and messages can motivate employees to use stairs instead of elevators (e.g. putting up a poster on the elevator door with the slogan "Consume calories, not electricity! Take the stairs!") which would result both in improved employee health and a greener organization (saving energy) (Mittal, 2017).

It is recommended that employees themselves be involved in the process of designing and designing wellness programmes, because they will give suggestions of those programmes that are important to them and will be more motivated to participate in those programmes (Dessler, 2020).

5) Building and encouraging wellness culture

Organizational culture as a set of assumptions, beliefs and values that shape employee behaviour has a great impact on the success of organizing and implementing wellness programmes. Every culture acts on the conscious, but also on the subconscious level and includes specific procedures such as smoking cessation policy, but also numerous other forms of behaviour, including, for example, frequent short breaks and / or physical exercises while working in a sedentary position.

Wellness culture refers to the promotion of values related to healthy living habits, healthy meals, encouraging physical activity during the working day and encouraging the application of various stress management techniques. A healthy organizational culture implies that healthy employees are a prerequisite for a healthy organization and healthy long-term performance.

In the process of branding themselves as an ideal employer, many organizations point out their various wellness programmes, in an attempt to attract the best possible candidates from the labour market and to keep the existing employees in the long run (Lukić et al., 2019).

6) *Selection of incentives and rewards*

Incentives and rewards are what employees receive for their work, effort and commitment. Incentives and rewards can be used to influence employee behaviour. In order for employees to change their life habits and turn to a healthier lifestyle, it is considered that they also need to be motivated.

There are three key types of wellness rewards (Danielson, 2017):

- Rewards for participation in wellness programmes - awarded to all employees who participate in wellness programmes in the organization. This type of reward aims to encourage as many employees as possible to participate in wellness programmes.
- Rewards for good results in wellness programmes – awarded to employees who are well on their way to achieve the set goals. This type of reward aims to ensure the active participation of employees in wellness programmes.
- Rewards for the achieved goal – awarded to employees who have achieved the defined goal. This type of reward sends a message to all employees that the organization appreciates their efforts and achieved results.

Table 3 shows some examples of wellness rewards by budget.

Table 3. *Examples of wellness rewards by budget*

Small budget (max EUR100)	Medium budget (EUR100 to EUR300)	Bigger budget (over EUR300)
Sports water bottles	Running shoes	Bike
Pedometers	Workout lessons	Day off
Garden tools	Camping equipment	Table with height adjustment
Running caps / caps	Sports sunglasses	Kayak
Exercise clothes	Hiking equipment (shoes or backpack)	Home workout equipment
Paid registration fees for organized sports events (e.g. marathon)	Gym membership	Paid rafting
Exercise videos and books	Snow boots	Diving equipment
Kitchen appliances for smoothies and shakes	Portable devices	Paid hiking
Gym bag / backpack	Helmets and protective equipment	Skis
Cooking lessons	Kitchen utensils for preparing healthy food	Ice skates
Yoga mat	Voucher for SPA and Wellness	Golf equipment
		Car bike rack
		Paddle or surfboard

Source: Adapted from Danielson, 2017

7) *Communicating and promoting wellness programmes*

A well-designed and conceived wellness programme will not give results if employees are not familiar with it and if it is not clear to them what their goals are, how they can realize them and which rewards and incentives they might earn. The organization must make an effort and invest certain resources to promote wellness programmes in the right way and to continuously inform employees about the activities and results achieved.

Also, employees should constantly be informed and made aware of the significance of wellness programmes – by reporting positive practical examples.

The most common reasons why employees do not participate in wellness programmes and activities are: lack of time, family obligations, because they do not see benefits, do not like exercise, are insufficiently informed about programmes, feel that they do not have adequate managerial support, and many consider their health a personal matter in which the organization should not interfere.

8) *Evaluation of wellness programmes and taking corrective measures and activities*

After some time, it is necessary to evaluate wellness programmes and assess their success. The success of these programmes, above all, depends on the quality of the programme, its sustainability and the support of managers (Oyewole & Taylor, 2012). Some of the indicators of the success of the programmes used are: the percentage of employees who participate in wellness programmes, the percentage of employees who successfully

went through wellness programmes, the reduction of health care costs, the percentage of employees who stopped smoking, the percentage of employees who reduced their weight.

One of the positive effects of the wellness programme is the growth of employee engagement. Employees want to feel as part of the organization and appreciate all its efforts made for the benefit of their health. When the organization takes care of employees, organizes various wellness programmes and activities, employees are ready to "give" more to the organization and offer their maximum. During a wellness programme, employees provide support to each other, encourage each other, which leads to better interpersonal relationships and work ethic, which positively affects the degree of employee engagement and their productivity (Lukić Nikolić, 2021). In addition, wellness programmes reduce employee stress, and stress is one of the key factors of disengagement, absenteeism, employee fluctuation and poor performance.

If the process of evaluation shows that the set goals have not been met, it is necessary to take corrective measures and activities.

CONCLUSION

Wellness programmes are one of the important factors that successful organizations apply in the process of branding in the market as a modern, socially responsible employer that cares about the health and safety of its employees, but also about their well-being. Theory and practice have shown a number of benefits due to the application of wellness programmes, including: reduction of stress, absenteeism rates, fluctuations, health care costs, increased motivation, loyalty, commitment, work ethic and employee productivity. Another significant effect, which is achieved through the application of wellness programmes, is the growth of employee engagement. For employees, wellness programmes are a clear signal that the employer cares about them, their health and well-being and they become willing to do their best in order to better perform their tasks and contribute to the growth and development of the organization.

However, despite the many benefits of implementing wellness programmes, the process of designing and implementing these programmes is not simple and easy. In practice, it often happens that regular annual systematic check-ups and gym / fitness centre memberships are considered the main and the only wellness programmes in organizations. This paper shows that in practice the situation is different and that modern organizations that take care of their employees have a large number of different programmes and activities that have a positive impact on employees, but also on the organization's business operations and results.

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