Workplace Exercise Programmes - How organizational factors influence employee participation

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Workplace Exercise Programmes - How organizational factors influence employee participation.

Abstract

Purpose

Past research identifies many positive outcomes associated with workplace exercise initiatives. Realizing these outcomes is, however, dependent on securing sustained employee participation in the initiative. This study examines how organizational factors influence employee participation in workplace exercise initiatives.

Research Design/Methodology

The study utilizes data from 98 employees who were provided with the opportunity to participate in a workplace exercise initiative. Data were collected via an online survey as well as semi-structured interviews.

Findings

The paper shows that organizational, rather than individual-level, factors had the greatest impact on employee participation in workplace exercise initiatives. Leadership support for well-being was particularly important and had a significant effect on participation frequency. This relationship was moderated by employee perceptions of employer intentions, such that the more genuine and caring an employer’s intentions were perceived to be, the more likely employees were to participate. Our findings also show that perceived employer intentions have a significant direct effect on employee participation.

Research implications

We extend research on employee participation in well-being initiatives by considering the influence of organizational, rather than individual-level, factors.

Practical implications

This research is of practical significance as it highlights the importance of positive leadership in fostering physical well-being in the workplace. It reinforces that sustained participation in workplace exercise initiatives requires deliberate planning, promotion and support from organizational leaders.

Originality/Value
Most studies of workplace exercise and well-being initiatives focus on individual barriers to participation. Our study highlights the important role of leadership support and perceived intentions as organizational influences on employee participation.

Introduction

Employee-sponsored exercise initiatives are typically introduced into workplaces as a means to directly improve the physical and psychological well-being of employees, and reduce the negative impacts associated with sedentary work. Indirectly, they may also use exercise initiatives as a means to enhance the motivation and productive capacity of the workforce, with the ultimate goal of improving organizational performance. However, these outcomes are often not realised due to low employee participation rates or a lack of sustained participation in the exercise initiative (Spence, 2015). Substantial research attention has thus been afforded to identifying barriers to participation, particularly at the individual employee level (Robroek, van Lenthe, van Empelen, & Burdorf, 2009). Very few studies have considered how organizational factors might act as barriers or enablers to employee participation in workplace exercise initiatives. To address this gap, data was collected from 98 employees who had been given the opportunity to participate in employer-sponsored exercise initiatives in several New Zealand organizations (74% female with an average age of 42 and average tenure of 5 years). Responses were received from both participants (52.6%) and non-participants (47.4%) of the exercise initiative. Participation and frequency of participation in the exercise initiative were used as outcome measures. Data were also collected for several organizational and individual variables including culture, job demands, temporal flexibility and individual barriers to exercise. In this paper, however, we focus specifically on leadership support for well-being and perceived employer intentions as these factors were shown to have the most significant influence on employee participation. Readers are encouraged to contact the authors for the full results of the study should these be of interest.

Leadership support for well-being was measured using the Leading by Example scale, which measures the degree of leadership support for health promotion in the workplace (Della, DeJoy, Goetzel, Ozminkowski & Wilson, 2008). An example item is “Our organization’s goals and plans advocate for the improvement of employee health”. A six-item scale was developed to assess perceived employer intentions. An example item is “The programme was introduced
to demonstrate to employees that my organization cares about their well-being”. The survey was administered electronically and the data was analysed using regression analysis. Follow-up interviews were conducted with several of the study’s participants in order to explore their experiences more deeply.

**Key findings**

**Leadership Support for Well-being**

The study found leadership support for well-being to be a significant predictor of employee participation in workplace exercise initiatives. Higher levels of leadership support, promotion, and planning for improved employee well-being were associated with higher employee participation rates. This finding was also supported in the qualitative data, with interview participants explaining that both leader and co-worker support served to increase their motivation to participate in the exercise initiatives.

**Perceived Employer Intentions**

Previous research demonstrates that employee perceptions of managerial intentions have an impact on their response to, and engagement with, human resource initiatives. In this sense employees will discern between grandiose corporate statements such as ‘Our employees are our greatest assets’ or ‘We care deeply about every employee and their well-being’ and the reality of how these manifest in managerial behaviour. When espoused managerial intentions are not reflected in actual managerial action, employees are likely to disengage with a particular initiative. To date, most studies examining perceived managerial or leadership intentions have focused on outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions and job performance (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Our study extends this research to the well-being context, with the findings revealing a significant direct relationship between employee perceptions of managerial intentions and the extent of their participation in workplace exercise initiatives. When employees perceived their employer’s intentions to be driven by a genuine and caring attitude towards employees and their well-being, as opposed to maximising organizational interests, they were far more likely to participate in the initiative.

The study also found that perceived employer intentions moderated the relationship between leadership support for well-being and employee participation. When employees
perceived employer intentions as genuine and caring, while also experiencing high levels of leadership support for well-being, they were more likely to continue their participation in the exercise initiative. Furthermore, if participants perceived employer intentions as malevolent or non-authentic, participation likelihood was significantly lower, regardless of whether they reported a high level of leadership support for well-being. Our qualitative data help to explain cases where employer intentions were perceived as non-authentic. A strong theme to emerge from interviews with non-participants was a feeling that the initiative had been implemented with little strategic thought or consideration. These respondents described the initiatives as “a half-hearted attempts” or “box ticking”, rather than part of a well-conceived and integrated strategy to enhance employee well-being. Participants reported actively disengaging with an initiative when they felt that the intention was implemented solely to improve the organization’s reputation or to be portray the image of a responsible employer. Participation rates were also lower in organizations where exercise programmes had been initiated by individual employees, rather than the organization’s leadership, or ‘sold to the organization’ by an external provider or consultant. Our findings strongly affirm the importance of consistency between leadership rhetoric, managerial actions and employee behaviour (Boxall & Purcell, 2011).

**The importance of an integrated well-being strategy**

Our study indicates that participation in exercise initiatives increases when employees perceive the intervention to be well-intentioned and implemented with the full support of the organization’s leaders. Contrastingly, implementing workplace exercise initiatives simply for the sake of ‘doing something’, or to appear benevolent, results in employees perceiving managerial intentions as disingenuous. This impacts negatively on employee attitudes towards, and participation in, such initiatives. Workplace exercise initiatives should thus be implemented as part of an overall employee well-being strategy that is driven by senior leadership and clearly linked to the overall organisational strategy.

Proactive planning and leadership advocacy are required in order to embed employee well-being as part of organizational culture. Normalising exercise and other well-being behaviours in this way will also serve to reduce the fear and stigmatisation that some employees associate with these types of initiatives. Finally, our qualitative findings indicate that co-
worker support is also important for sustained participation in workplace exercise initiatives. Future studies might consider the combined impact of leadership, supervisor and co-worker support on employee well-being initiatives. Furthermore, our study was limited to the New Zealand context in service organisations. Additional research should be encouraged in sectors with potentially less time flexibility or different supervisory contexts, such as the manufacturing, tourism or healthcare sectors.

References


