



Workplace Exercise Programmes - How organizational factors influence employee participation

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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

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3 Most studies of workplace exercise and well-being initiatives focus on individual barriers to
4 participation. Our study highlights the important role of leadership support and perceived
5 intentions as organizational influences on employee participation.
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8 9 **Introduction**

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11 Employee sponsored exercises initiatives are typically introduced into workplaces as a means
12 to directly improve the physical and psychological well-being of employees, and reduce the
13 negative impacts associated with sedentary work. Indirectly, may also use exercise initiatives
14 as a means to enhance the motivation and productive capacity of the workforce, with the
15 ultimate goal of improving organizational performance. However, these outcomes are often
16 not realised due to low employee participation rates or a lack of sustained participation in the
17 exercise initiative (Spence, 2015). Substantial research attention has thus been afforded to
18 identifying barriers to participation, particularly at the individual employee level (Robroek,
19 van Lenthe, van Empelen, & Burdorf, 2009). Very few studies have considered how
20 organizational factors might act as barriers or enablers to employee participation in
21 workplace exercise initiatives. To address this gap, data was collected from 98 employees
22 who had been given the opportunity to participate in employer-sponsored exercise initiatives
23 in several New Zealand organizations (74% female with an average age of 42 and average
24 tenure of 5 years). Responses were received from both participants (52.6%) and non-
25 participants (47.4%) of the exercise initiative. Participation and frequency of participation in
26 the exercise initiative were used as outcome measures. Data were also collected for several
27 organizational and individual variables including culture, job demands, temporal flexibility
28 and individual barriers to exercise. In this paper, however, we focus specifically on leadership
29 support for well-being and perceived employer intentions as these factors were shown to
30 have the most significant influence on employee participation. Readers are encouraged to
31 contact the authors for the full results of the study should these be of interest.
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52 Leadership support for well-being was measured using the Leading by Example scale, which
53 measures the degree of leadership support for health promotion in the workplace (Della,
54 DeJoy, Goetzl, Ozminkowski & Wilson, 2008). An example item is "Our organization's goals
55 and plans advocate for the improvement of employee health". A six-item scale was developed
56 to assess perceived employer intentions. An example item is "The programme was introduced
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3 to demonstrate to employees that my organization cares about their well-being". The survey
4 was administered electronically and the data was analysed using regression analysis. Follow
5 up interviews were conducted with several of the study's participants in order to explore their
6 experiences more deeply.
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10 11 12 **Key findings**

13 *Leadership Support for Well-being*

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

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31 Previous research demonstrates that employee perceptions of managerial intentions have an
32 impact on their response to, and engagement with, human resource initiatives. In this sense
33 employees will discern between grandiose corporate statements such as 'Our employees are
34 our greatest assets' or 'We care deeply about every employee and their well-being' and the
35 reality of how these manifest in managerial behaviour. When espoused managerial intentions
36 are not reflected in actual managerial action, employees are likely to disengage with a
37 particular initiative. To date, most studies examining perceived managerial or leadership
38 intentions have focused on outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions and job
39 performance (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Our study extends this research to the well-being
40 context, with the findings revealing a significant direct relationship between employee
41 perceptions of managerial intentions and the extent of their participation in workplace
42 exercise initiatives. When employees perceived their employer's intentions to be driven by a
43 genuine and caring attitude towards employees and their well-being, as opposed to
44 maximising organizational interests, they were far more likely to participate in the initiative.
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58 The study also found that perceived employer intentions moderated the relationship
59 between leadership support for well-being and employee participation. When employees
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3 perceived employer intentions as genuine and caring, while also experiencing high levels of
4 leadership support for well-being, they were more likely to continue their participation in the
5 exercise initiative. Furthermore, if participants perceived employer intentions as malevolent
6 or non-authentic, participation likelihood was significantly lower, regardless of whether they
7 reported a high level of leadership support for well-being. Our qualitative data help to explain
8 cases where employer intentions were perceived as non-authentic. A strong theme to emerge
9 from interviews with non-participants was a feeling that the initiative had been implemented
10 with little strategic thought or consideration. These respondents described the initiatives as
11 “a half-hearted attempts” or “box ticking”, rather than part of a well-conceived and
12 integrated strategy to enhance employee well-being. Participants reported actively
13 disengaging with an initiative when they felt that the intention was implemented solely to
14 improve the organization’s reputation or to be portray the image of a responsible employer.
15 Participation rates were also lower in organizations where exercise programmes had been
16 initiated by individual employees, rather than the organization’s leadership, or ‘sold to the
17 organization’ by an external provider or consultant. Our findings strongly affirm the
18 importance of consistency between leadership rhetoric, managerial actions and employee
19 behaviour (Boxall & Purcell, 2011).
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36 **The importance of an integrated well-being strategy**

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38 Our study indicates that participation in exercise initiatives increases when employees
39 perceive the intervention to be well-intentioned and implemented with the full support of
40 the organization’s leaders. Contrastingly, implementing workplace exercise initiatives simply
41 for the sake of ‘doing something’, or to appear benevolent, results in employees perceiving
42 managerial intentions as disingenuous. This impacts negatively on employee attitudes
43 towards, and participation in, such initiatives. Workplace exercise initiatives should thus be
44 implemented as part of an overall employee well-being strategy that is driven by senior
45 leadership and clearly linked to the overall organisational strategy.
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54 Proactive planning and leadership advocacy are required in order to embed employee well-
55 being as part of organizational culture. Normalising exercise and other well-being behaviours
56 in this way will also serve to reduce the fear and stigmatisation that some employees
57 associate with these types of initiatives. Finally, our qualitative findings indicate that co-
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3 worker support is also important for sustained participation in workplace exercise initiatives.
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5 Future studies might consider the combined impact of leadership, supervisor and co-worker
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7 support on employee well-being initiatives. Furthermore, our study was limited to the New
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9 Zealand context in service organisations. Additional research should be encouraged in sectors
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11 with potentially less time flexibility or different supervisory contexts, such as the
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13 manufacturing, tourism or healthcare sectors.
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