



**Workplace Exercise Programmes - How organizational factors influence employee participation**

Journal:	<i>Development and Learning in Organizations</i>
Manuscript ID	DLO-10-2019-0252.R2
Manuscript Type:	Authored Paper
Keywords:	Development, Well-being, Leadership support

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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**

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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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## 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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51 Leadership support for well-being was measured using the Leading by Example scale, which  
52 measures the degree of leadership support for health promotion in the workplace (Della,  
53 DeJoy, Goetzl, Ozminkowski & Wilson, 2008). An example item is "Our organization's goals  
54 and plans advocate for the improvement of employee health". A six-item scale was developed  
55 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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