

Chapter 4: Overcoming Barriers



Overcoming Barriers

While implementing the objectives of your Health & Wellness plan, there will be barriers that the Health & Wellness Committee will need to overcome. This chapter highlights frequent barriers and suggests solutions to address them.

Increasing Employee Participation

Wellness coordinators and Health and Wellness Committees often struggle with getting employees to participate in healthy workplace initiatives. Common frustrations include:

- Employees say that they will participate through sign up sheets or surveys but don't commit
- Employees at risk do not appear interested in participating
- Initiatives appear to consistently attract people who are already healthy
- Participation rates drop on normally well-attended initiatives
- Certain types of employees participate more frequently than others (i.e. office staff show up more than assembly line workers)
- Communications (i.e. posters, e-mails, word of mouth) have been maximized to promote initiatives but people do not show
- Difficulties involving employees from satellite locations

Use the following rates to estimate how many employees will participate in healthy workplace initiatives offered by the health and wellness committee:

- 10 to 50% of employees will actively participate in on-site programs¹
- 10 to 25% of employees will participate in programs offered outside the workplace²
- Participation rates are higher for general orientation sessions (75 to 80%) and for completing health risk appraisals (65-75%)³

In North America, the following employee participation trends have been observed:

- Those with higher income and education levels are more likely to participate⁴

- Blue collar workers are less likely to participate than white-collar workers^{5,6}
- Persons in risk-related jobs (i.e. construction) may be less likely to participate⁷
- In one study, women were more likely to participate than men⁸
- Employees with more job flexibility are more likely to participate⁴
- Healthier people more likely to participate⁹
- Employees who are motivated or ready to change are more likely to participate⁹

There are a variety of reasons why employees do not participate in healthy workplace initiatives:

- Unaware of initiative(s)
- Lack of interest
- No time
- Lack of motivation
- Lack of social support
- Concerns about confidentiality
- Organizational characteristics (i.e. lack of commitment from management).

The following strategies can be used to increase employee participation:

1. Get active support and participation from management

Sloan & Grunman found that employees are more likely to participate if their supervisors are supportive⁹. To gain support from management for healthy workplace initiatives try:

- Finding a senior management champion who will visibly participate in healthy workplace initiatives and encourage others to get involved.
- Formally request management to address specific barriers to employee participation (i.e. offer flexible work arrangements to permit employees to participate, subsidize the cost of initiatives, and emphasize confidentiality).
- Asking management to clearly communicate their endorsement and support to employees in terms of getting involved with healthy workplace initiatives.

2. Change the culture of your workplace

Culture change is a slow process, but here are some ways to make your workplace culture a “culture of health”:

- Address safety issues, sources of stress, and work/life conflict problems if they are paramount to employees and have not been resolved. Employees may not be willing participate in other healthy workplace initiatives until progress has been made on other issues important to employees.
- Environmental supports are necessary to enable employees to participate in or practice healthy behaviours. On-site fitness classes or walking clubs, healthy food choices in the vending machines and cafeteria, and a smoking cessation program at work are all examples of supports in the workplace that make the healthy choices easier for employees.
- Policy is the key to sustaining healthy workplace programming. Policies establish ground rules and expectations with regards to a particular behaviour. Workplaces can create an overall written health policy or develop specific policies. As an example, for company events over three hours there could be a policy that requires a physical activity component and a healthy snack.
- Position healthy workplace initiatives as a joint partnership between management, employees, and the union (if applicable). Employees may not participate if they think initiatives are management driven and they are being monitored.
- Request and share testimonials of how specific healthy workplace initiatives have helped employees. These anecdotes from co-workers may encourage their co-workers to participate in the future.

3. Consider using incentives

Incentives can be a double-edge sword: they may increase employee participation, but may not change employee behaviour! Also, once started, incentives are difficult to remove. Incentives generally work best when they are kept small and strategically support your healthy workplace initiative. Some incentives to consider include:

- Allowing employees to participate on company time
- Offering prizes (i.e. pedometers, massage, healthy cookbooks)
- Running contests
- Providing fun awards

4. Involve employees in the planning and implementation

This ensures employees' needs will be met¹⁰, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will participate. Common ways to get employees involved include:

- Conducting a needs assessment. This process should reveal the actual needs, current practices and preferences of employees. Tools or techniques include surveys, focus groups, audits and human resource data analysis. For more information on tools available, see THCU's [Catalogue of Situational Assessment Tools](#)
- Involving employees on the Health & Wellness Committee. Make sure the health and wellness committee reflects the diversity of your workplace (i.e. gender, language, cultural background, job roles, etc.) in order to offer initiatives that will be attractive to employees. If representation of this nature is unrealistic, ensure you consult with employees who can help the committee.

5. Customize initiatives

Customizing initiatives increases employee participation because it caters to employee preferences. Employees will be attracted to different initiatives, so you will want to offer a variety that appeal to employees of different stages of readiness or motivation. For example, employees who are not physically active on a regular basis may prefer a one-month pedometer program that includes showing them how to use the pedometer and includes a progress sheet that helps them reach realistic goals, whereas employees who are regularly active may want to be in a physical activity competition. Making initiatives affordable, convenient, simple and easy to follow are important considerations as well.

6. Have a marketing and communication strategy

Rather than just promoting individual events to employees, consider developing a marketing and communication strategy. This may involve how you brand the Health and Wellness Committee initiatives, how management and employees stay informed of your activities, and how to promote initiatives and accomplishments. Channels of communication to use include: management, co-workers, meetings, company newsletter, and intranet. Do not forget that once is never enough to create awareness— employees need to hear the same message at least four times. Therefore you will likely want to make use of several channels of communication for each initiative you want to promote! For more information, see pages 9-11.

7. Maintain participant confidentiality

Many employees are apprehensive about participating in healthy workplace initiatives if they think that they will be monitored by others. Make it clear to employees that their individual

participation is confidential– only aggregate information is collected for reporting purposes (if that is the case).

Important Points to Remember:

When using participation to determine effectiveness, consider both the number of employees who sign-up and the ones who continue to participate. The Health & Wellness Committee is on the right track if high numbers of employees are involved. When assessing lifestyle behaviours or participation rates, remember that just because an employee stops participating in a healthy workplace initiative does not mean that he or she is discontinuing the behaviour. For example, an employee that drops out of a Pilates class offered at work may have joined another one in the community.

Participation rates are critical because the effectiveness of healthy workplace initiatives depends on employees getting involved. Don't be discouraged if participation rates are low – chances are the health and wellness committee can apply the strategies outlined above and increase participation. Furthermore, Serxner et al. (2004) suggest that workplaces can still achieve positive return-on-investment from "*surprisingly low participation rates*" because the cost of unhealthy employees is higher than the cost of programs to improve their health¹¹. Some workplaces are concerned if employees who are already "healthy" are the ones participating, but remember that it is imperative to keep them healthy and well. Some researchers argue that by ignoring low-risk employees, they will become high-risk and high-cost over time^{12,13}. Similarly, doing nothing to support high-risk employees will likewise result in increased risk⁵⁴. Therefore, healthy workplace initiatives should address all groups: high-risk, low-risk and healthy employees⁵⁵.

Reaching Employees Who Work Shifts

If you have employees who work shifts, try doing the following:

- Offer duplicate events so all shifts have an opportunity to participate.
- Give them access to health information in a useful way (i.e. bulletin board, video library).
- Provide education to shiftworkers and their managers specifically about issues related to working shifts.
- Promote services that are accessible to shiftworkers "after hours" such as Employee Assistance Programs, hotlines, websites, etc.



Shiftwork Resources

Shiftwork Like Clockwork Worksite Wellness Program Facilitator's Guide

The Shiftwork Like Clockwork facilitator's guide contains background notes, practical tools and ideas to offer up to 22 "Reach and Teach Modules". Each module addresses individual health issues and takes approximately 15-20 minutes to deliver. You can deliver one module in a series of 15-20 minute Health and Safety meetings or you can combine them to any desired length. This resource is available for loan through the [Workplace Resource Library](#).

[OSH Answers: Rotational Shiftwork](#)

(http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/work_schedules/shiftwrk.html)

On-line responses to questions related to shiftwork. Includes approaches workplaces can take to reduce the effects of shiftwork.

[Shiftwork: Health Effects & Solutions](#)

(<http://www.ohcow.on.ca/resources/handbooks/shiftwork/shiftwork.pdf>)

A seven page PDF that covers health effects and solutions.

Reaching Employees in a Workplace That Has Multiple-Office Locations

If your workplace has more than one office location, it can be challenging to offer consistent programs, especially if the locations vary significantly in size, facilities, and are spread out geographically. Here are some suggestions for reaching employees at multiple-office locations:

- If there is just one Health & Wellness Committee for the entire workplace, find "champions" at each office location. Even if they are not members of the Health & Wellness Committee, they can be a point person for employees to find out about upcoming initiatives and can provide the committee with valuable insight on which initiatives will be best for their respective locations.
- Run multiple sessions of the most popular activities at all locations.
- Decentralize programs as much as possible. In other words, choose initiatives that are "location-less". For example, run a contest in which employees keep track of their own participation through use of a scorecard, or give them access to health information

through the company intranet at home and work. This permits employees to participate without requiring them to travel to a mutual location.

- Rotate initiatives among the office locations so that one location does not host everything.

Offering Healthy Workplace Initiatives on a Limited Budget...Or Without a Budget

It doesn't matter if your workplace is large or small, public or private – all workplaces struggle with funding for health and wellness initiatives. The good news is that while a budget is certainly helpful, it does not mean you cannot move forward without one.

If the Health and Wellness Committee is just getting started, you may want to rely on free services in the community for things like displays for a health fair; presentations for employees; consultations; and resources. Check with your benefits and Employee Assistance Program providers – you may be able to access resources and presentations that are already covered by your workplace. Find out if employees are interested in volunteering their services – you may already have a yoga instructor or walking club leader who would be happy to help your committee by offering a yoga demonstration or organizing some walks.

When a budget is necessary, there are a few options the committee can consider:

- Making a presentation to senior management for funding (either for an annual budget or for a specific initiative).
- Collaborating with another business unit within your workplace that already has a budget on a joint initiative (i.e. perhaps you can team up with the Joint Occupational Health & Safety Committee and offer health and wellness activities during North American Occupational Safety & Health Week).
- Fundraising through 50/50 draws or other means to fund Health & Wellness Committee activities.
- Apply for community grants.
- Request free services/donations.
- Make use of in-house experts.
- Participate in community-wide events.

Budget Resources

[The Wellness Budget](http://www.welcoa.org/freeresources/pdf/wellness_budget.pdf?PHPSESSID=5920821ee325f17bc77da8f9511979e0)

(http://www.welcoa.org/freeresources/pdf/wellness_budget.pdf?PHPSESSID=5920821ee325f17bc77da8f9511979e0)

If you are looking to learn more about building a budget for health & wellness, this four page article will guide you through budget principles, budget justification, and budget sustainability.

[Healthy Doesn't Have to Mean Wealthy! IAPA's Approach to a Healthy Workplace](http://doitwell.ca/downloads/Excellence_article_(NQI).pdf)

([http://doitwell.ca/downloads/Excellence_article_\(NQI\).pdf](http://doitwell.ca/downloads/Excellence_article_(NQI).pdf))

This article highlights how the Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA) has successfully supported and encouraged employee health without spending excessively.

Communicating With Employees

Heirich et al (1989) list eight recommendations that can be used to develop effective health information communication in industrial settings. These recommendations have been adapted from:

Heirich, M., Cameron, V., Erfurt, J., Foote, A., & Gregg, W. (1989). Establishing communication networks for health promotion in industrial settings. American Journal of Health Promotion, 4(2); 116.

Eight Steps to Effective Worksite Communication of Health Information

1. Use existing formal communication channels

- Staff meetings
- Health & Safety training/meetings
- Pay slip
- Voice mail
- E-mail
- Company newsletter/ intranet
- TV monitors
- Word-of-mouth

2. Create new, official health communication channels

- Form a Health & Wellness Committee
- Request an e-mail address for the Health & Wellness Committee to send out e-mails and to receive e-mails from employees

- Create a Health & Wellness Committee section on the company intranet
 - Develop Health & Wellness Committee bulletin boards, newsletters, information kiosks, posters, surveys, etc.
- 3. Create direct-link, one-to-one outreach with employees**
 - Offer visible events to connect with employees directly (i.e. health fairs, screening/counseling sessions, presentations, training, etc.)
 - Have employees sign-up on the spot for future health and wellness activities
 - Send reminders to employees to attend
 - Follow up with no-shows
 - 4. Create informal health communication flow by targeting strategically-placed employees for early one-to-one outreach**
 - Include Health & Wellness Committee members
 - Include “bees” whose jobs have them moving throughout the worksite and able to talk with others
 - Include people at the hub of communication interaction (i.e. secretaries in key offices)
 - 5. Enlarge and reinforce short-link communication chains**
 - Invite people who want to make health changes to create their own buddy systems and support groups
 - 6. Create new health communication networks**
 - Invite people with common successes to have lunch together and plan ways to help others (i.e. former smokers, those who are regularly physically active)
 - 7. Organize special health events involving:**
 - Friendly competition
 - Humour
 - Incentives for successful behaviour change
 - Opportunities for social support
 - 8. Create attention for focused health messages**
 - Use posters, moving targets, sight and sound surprises (i.e. balloons)

Communication Resources

[Communicating Effectively with Employees](http://doitwell.ca/downloads/CommunicatingEffectively.pdf?PHPSESSID=3130c11b779a3af8d4475ec528a53e46)

(<http://doitwell.ca/downloads/CommunicatingEffectively.pdf?PHPSESSID=3130c11b779a3af8d4475ec528a53e46>)

A nine page Power-Point presentation by Tom Wallis, former Communications Officer with the City of Hamilton covers some of the most effective ways to communicate with staff and the need to have solid business objectives when creating your communication and marketing plan.

[Healthy Workplace Innovation Series: Small Group Discussion Summary on "Communication"](http://doitwell.ca/downloads/Communication.pdf?PHPSESSID=3130c11b779a3af8d4475ec528a53e46)

(<http://doitwell.ca/downloads/Communication.pdf?PHPSESSID=3130c11b779a3af8d4475ec528a53e46>)

This three page excerpt from the Small Group Discussion on May 11, 2005 highlights the various methods of communication and the strengths, weaknesses and possibilities for each.

[Want to Reach Staff? Tell Them a Story](http://resources.greatplacetowork.com/article/pdf/cnd_hr_reporter.pdf)

(http://resources.greatplacetowork.com/article/pdf/cnd_hr_reporter.pdf)

A two page article by Graham Lowe highlights workplaces that have a corporate culture of open and honest communication.

This chapter suggested tips to overcoming barriers. The purpose of the next chapter is to highlight resources that might make your journey easier.

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- ¹ Wilson, M. (1990). Factors associated with, issues related to, and suggestions for increasing participation in workplace health promotion programs. Health Values, 14(4): 29-36.
- ² Fielding, J. as cited in Lovato, C. & Green, L. (1990). Maintaining employee participation in workplace health promotion programs. Health Education Quarterly, 17(1): 73-88.
- ³ Parkinson, R. as cited in Lovato, C. & Green, L. (1990). Maintaining employee participation in workplace health promotion programs. Health Education Quarterly, 17(1): 73-88.
- ⁴ Palank as cited in Baker, E., Israel, B., & Schurman, S. (1994). A participatory approach to worksite health promotion. J Ambulatory Care Manager, 17(2); 68-81.
- ⁵ Glasgow et al as cited in Peltomaki et al., (2003). Social context for workplace health promotion: Feasibility considerations in Costa Rica, Finland, Germany, Spain and Sweden. Health Promotion International, 18 (2): 115-126.
- ⁶ Morris et al. (1999). Do blue-collar workers perceive the worksite health climate differently than white-collar workers? Am J Health Promotion, 13(6): 319-324.
- ⁷ Stange et al. as cited in Baker, E., Israel, B., & Schurman, S. (1994). A participatory approach to worksite health promotion. J Ambulatory Care Manager, 17(2); 68-81.
- ⁸ Berkman and Kawachi as cited in Peltomaki et al., (2003). Social context for workplace health promotion: Feasibility considerations in Costa Rica, Finland, Germany, Spain and Sweden. Health Promotion International, 18 (2): 115-126.
- ⁹ Sloan, R. & Gruman, J. (1988). Participation in workplace health promotion programs: The contribution of health and organizational factors. Health Education Quarterly, 15 (3): 269-288.
- ¹⁰ Glasgow, R., McCaul, K., & Fisher, K. (1993). Participation in worksite health promotion: A critique of the literature and recommendations for future practice. Health Education Quarterly, 20(3): 391-408.
- ¹¹ Baker, E., Israel, B., & Schurman, S. (1994). A participatory approach to worksite health promotion. J Ambulatory Care Manager, 17(2); 68-81
- ¹² Serxner, S., Anderson, D., & Gold, D. (2004). Building program participation: Strategies for recruitment and retention in worksite health promotion programs. The Art of Health Promotion.
- ¹³ Serxner, S., Gold, D., Anderson, D., & Williams, D. (2001). The impact of a worksite health promotion program on short-term disability usage. JOEM, 43(1); 25-29