

*HR Leader's Definitive Guide*

# THE KEY TO ROI: MAXIMIZING WELLNESS PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

 BURNALONG



Why You Need a Corporate Wellness Program (And How to Increase Employee Involvement)

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In our e-book *Evaluating the Success of Your Wellness Program*, we discussed in detail the differences between return on investment (ROI) and value on investment (VOI), and why it's important for companies to measure both when evaluating the success of a wellness program. Both ROI and VOI stem from your ability to get more employees involved, so ongoing engagement is a key metric. The higher participation and engagement you get, the more likely your company will see both ROI and VOI. But that information begs the question: how do you get more employees involved in your wellness program?

## HOW TO MEASURE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN WELLNESS PROGRAMS

Before we dive into the factors that influence engagement in your wellness program, it's important to distinguish between various types of participation:

- **Enrollment** measures the number of people who have taken some steps (either on their own or automatically) to sign up for your wellness program. This metric is one that you should measure, but it's not actually the most important metric.
- **Engagement** measures the number of people who are actively participating in various aspects of your wellness program, and doing so in a way that allows them to achieve a benefit.

- **Hollow engagement** is actually a third metric to be aware of when it comes to wellness programs. It describes people who “go through the motions”<sup>1</sup> of participation because there is a negative consequence for not doing so, or because there is a very significant positive reward for taking specific and simple actions. An example would be employees who attend a health screening fair every year to save 10% on health insurance premiums. They do very little (or nothing) in between health screenings to improve their health, but faithfully attend the screening fair to get their insurance premium discount. It’s critical to understand the positive and negative ways that rewards can impact “participation” and “engagement” levels and structure wellness programs in a way that both reward participation and encourage meaningful engagement beyond just checking a box.

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It’s not bad to measure enrollment or participation numbers, but you should also find ways to measure meaningful engagement in the form of long-term health and wellness benefits. Since some of these metrics can be hard to assign a specific number or dollar value, you may need to send out [employee surveys](#) to gauge the positive impacts of your program and solicit feedback on reasons employees may not be engaging.

# FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE WELLNESS PROGRAM ENGAGEMENT

There are several factors that impact how much employees engage with your program. Figuring out which factors matter most to your employees is the best way to provide a wellness program that is both valuable (in terms of the benefits it provides) and useful (in terms of getting people involved).

## Family and social support

JAMA Internal Medicine featured a study<sup>2</sup> about the influence of a spouse or partner's behavior on specific behavioral changes. The study examined three healthy behaviors:

- Quitting smoking
- Engaging in more physical activity
- Losing 5% or more body weight

In the study, they discovered that a person trying to make healthy lifestyle changes is far more likely to succeed when they have the support of a partner or spouse. Another study<sup>3</sup> found that the support of family and friends has a positive effect on the level of physical activity in adolescents. Both studies underscore the importance of having the support of friends and family when trying to make positive changes in your overall well-being. More support often leads to greater participation and engagement overall. Family support is perhaps the most critical, as the behaviors of those who are closest to you are the ones most likely to impact your own behaviors (especially related to health), but social support from friends and those outside your immediate family can also make a positive difference.

## Tools, resources, and information

Another critical part of engagement is information, specifically resources and tools to participate in your wellness program. A study published by Harvard Business Review found that the most common reason people don't participate in a wellness program is not a lack of interest, but instead a lack of information.<sup>4</sup> They simply didn't know what was available or were not aware of how to participate. A significant majority of those employees would consider participating in wellness programs if they knew more.

Other surveys<sup>5</sup> asking why people don't participate in wellness programs found that they:

- Already feel like they are healthy/don't need it
- Lack the time
- Don't think the program is convenient
- Don't know enough to decide whether to participate
- Don't want to share private health data with employer

In addition to providing the right tools and resources, offering diverse programs that address more than just physical health can increase participation by providing more ways for everyone to get involved.

## Overall company morale and engagement

We've all heard about the potentially negative consequences of peer pressure, but there are some situations when peer pressure can be a good thing. Workplace wellness programs are one of those situations. When an organization has buy-in at all levels<sup>6</sup>—executives, directors, managers, and co-workers—more employees are likely to want to be part of it. Get high-level buy-in and make sure people at the top are promoting the program to improve engagement.

## Clear cost-benefit analysis

Employees who don't participate in wellness programs often don't understand exactly what those programs can provide. "Wellness" is sometimes used as an all-encompassing term that sometimes includes paid employee benefits like health care coverage, so it's important for employers to outline exactly what is available<sup>7</sup> to employees and how much each part costs. Be sure you have a comprehensive and ongoing marketing plan to promote your paid and free wellness offerings to employees multiple times through multiple channels every year.

## Personalized and targeted programs

Since the early days of wellness programs there has long been a focus on physical health. Part of the reason is that employers can tie specific cost metrics from health insurance and claims costs to wellness program ROI. [You can check out our e-book on why this is not the only metric for measuring success](#), but it bears repeating that your employees' needs are not all the same, so your employee wellness program should address the broadest range of wellness aspects possible to encourage more participation.

The most successful wellness programs are the ones that address and improve well-being in five key areas:<sup>8</sup>

- Career development and satisfaction
- Social life
- Physical health
- Financial security
- Community engagement

# BEST PRACTICES TO MAXIMIZE PARTICIPATION

Now that we know what can influence participation and engagement (both positively and negatively) the next step is to put that knowledge to work. These best practices from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)<sup>9</sup> will help ensure the highest possible participation levels.

## Relevant offerings

First and foremost, make sure that the things you offer in your wellness program are appropriate for everyone at your company. HR departments and benefits managers can fall into the trap of selecting something that is narrowly focused on the interests of a small group of decision makers while failing to account for the diversity of your organization.

For example, if you offer a financial wellness program you should have a range of financial tools:

- [Paying off student loans \(younger employees\)](#)
- [Buying a home or saving money \(mid-career employees\)](#)
- [Retirement planning \(older employees\)](#)

Offering just one risks alienating a significant portion of your employees who are at a different stage of their financial life.

Similarly, if you offer physical fitness resources, make sure they are available in ways that anyone and everyone can take advantage. An on-site fitness facility or membership to a specific gym may not be useful for employees who work remotely or prefer to work out at home rather than in a public setting.

Having a wide range of choices, like the 45+ wellness categories available through the [BurnAlong platform](#), allows people to select the things that are most meaningful and relevant to them at that moment. From yoga and nutrition classes to diabetes education, sleep health, and prenatal fitness, BurnAlong users as young as 6 months old (in Mommy & Me classes) and as old as 97 can find fulfillment and relevant programming.

## Social reinforcement

In the late 1970s a psychologist named Albert Bandura introduced the social learning theory.<sup>10</sup> It suggests that we model our behaviors on what our peers and those around us are doing. We are more likely to mimic things we see as having a positive reward. When it comes to wellness, our social circles can influence us positively to engage in and continue healthy behaviors. Having a program that allows and encourages social participation can significantly increase the chance that people start and continue to use the program.

BurnAlong allows your employees to take private classes on their own, or take classes with friends and family—even those who live in different states or around the world. The live private classes are like being in a virtual fitness studio together, watching and encouraging each other along the way for added motivation and accountability. With a corporate account, employees can even invite four additional family members to join for free.

## Positive rewards over negative consequences

Building on the social learning theory, many studies show<sup>11</sup> that positive reinforcement leads to more lasting behavioral change than negative punishment. Similarly, wellness programs that are built on providing employees with positive (and tangible) rewards for their participation can significantly increase engagement levels. Punishing employees for lack of participation—by increasing health premiums, for example—generally does not lead to lasting changes or better health. Instead it leads to behaviors that only do the minimum necessary to avoid the negative consequences.

## Integrated and all-encompassing

Wellness programs that offer a more holistic approach might require multiple vendors that offer:

- EAP
- Health insurance
- Training and ergonomics
- Disease management
- Health screenings
- Fitness activities
- Mental health support
- Financial seminars

It might not be possible to get all of this from a single vendor, but you should do what you can to integrate and consolidate these offerings wherever possible. For example, BurnAlong offers courses addressing multiple aspects of wellness (physical fitness, mental health, social health, chronic condition support, financial health, and more) and removes some of the barriers to participation. Employees just need one app and one login to take advantage of multiple wellness benefits from a platform that's proven to boost employee engagement 5x over traditional wellness programs.

## Protecting employee health information

Some employees don't participate in wellness programs because they worry about sharing private health information with an employer. Part of that concern may come from HR departments that don't focus enough on things like data security, integrity, HIPAA and regulatory compliance.<sup>12</sup> HR leaders must understand compliance and data security and work with a vendor who values your employees' privacy as well.

# BURNALONG MAKES EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION EASIER AND MORE CONVENIENT

Employee wellness programs remain one of the most important and effective ways to boost overall health and create a [culture of productive, happy employees](#). At BurnAlong, our mission is to support employees and employers with tools that make this easy to achieve. Find out more about our wellness programs and schedule a demo to see how we're helping employees find the motivation to reach and sustain their wellness goals.

Ready to  
implement  
and launch  
your corporate  
wellness  
program?

**SCHEDULE A DEMO**