

The 7 Best Reasons to Have a Wellness Program: Benefits of Wellness



June 16, 2017, by Dr. Steve Aldana

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Before I give you 7 reasons to have a wellness program let me start by saying that I am very skeptical of many of the claims being made in the wellness industry. That's why the information I'm going to share here is backed by decades of solid research. Don't worry, this is not a graduate school discourse on the science of wellness but it is a brief overview of why having a wellness program can provide great benefits to any organization.

Wellness programs are more popular than ever. They started out as employee perks for large corporations; in fact, they used to be called corporate fitness programs. Today wellness programs are common among both medium and small-sized businesses. Wellness programs are now regularly part of a company benefits package.

When done correctly, wellness programs give employees incentives, tools, social support, privacy, and strategies to adopt and maintain healthy behaviors. Most worksites do a pretty good job of helping employees improve health behaviors. In fact, I would go so far as to say that worksites, both private and public, are the chronic disease prevention centers of the United States.

Worksites are doing more to prevent, arrest, and even reverse chronic diseases than any other group. Hospitals are great at treating disease and they are good at early detection of disease, but they don't do much in the way of disease prevention. The total [reach and impact of worksite wellness programs](#) dwarfs all other efforts to improve the health of adults.

I don't know of any worksite that actively sought for the role of being disease prevention experts. Employers have been thrust into this position. They really don't want to do it. They would prefer to make and sell products, provide services, deliver the goods and services that they are designed to produce. Yet worksites are doing more disease prevention and wellness than any other entity in society today.

They are more consistent about it and they are more effective than anybody else. And they do all this because they enjoy the benefits that come from having an active healthy workforce. Worksites all across the world are implementing employee wellness programs because they like the benefits of wellness.

Mountains of Evidence Show the Benefits of Wellness

Think of the different benefits employers typically offer. These could include a retirement or pension plan, healthcare, paid time off, or maternity leave. These are designed to help your organization recruit

and maintain qualified employees. Yet there is not a single published study that shows that offering these benefits as any measurable effect on it worksite’s ability to recruit or maintain workers. We do them because we believe they are important.

These things are actually very hard to study and we have a feeling or sense that they do make a difference in our ability to attract good workers. But, there is no science to back any of this up.

Now consider your wellness program. Unlike all the other benefits your worksite offers, wellness programs have been studied for decades. There are hundreds and hundreds of rigorous scientific evaluations of the impact of wellness programs. There is more research on the impact of wellness programs than anything else your company does. Granted, the research is not perfect—no research ever is.

But after decades of scientists evaluating programs, we have an enormous amount of very solid data that show the benefits of having a wellness program. I personally have published [75 research papers](#) on the impact of worksite wellness programs. And I am just one of hundreds of scientists in the field.

This research is what I will use to back up the 7 most popular reasons to have a wellness program.

THE TOP 7 REASONS TO HAVE A WELLNESS PROGRAM

1) Wellness Programs Improve Employee Health Behaviors

The [core of every good wellness program](#) is behavior change. With the right education, skills, motivation, skills/tools, and social support, people change behaviors. Wellness programs are good at helping people adopt and maintain healthy behaviors. This is perhaps the biggest benefit of having a wellness program.

Healthy behaviors lead to lower health risks, and lower health risks lead to less chronic disease. With less chronic disease employees have fewer health care costs. It looks like this:



Many studies have evaluated the ability of wellness programs to improve health behaviors. Not every wellness program is able to show positive results. The ones that are well-organized and follow effective behavior change models show the best results. Here are the results of an evaluation I published recently. The 1,800 employees at this worksite reported their health behaviors at baseline, one year, and two years after the program began.

Table 2. Health Behavior and Emotional Health Outcomes Over 2 Years (n=1,873)³

Health Behaviors	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	F	P
Exercise (d/wk)	3.34±1.40	3.42±1.35	3.50±1.34	11.20	<0.0001
Exercise (min/wk)	165.4±155.0	177.9±159.2	186.5±174.5	11.39	<0.0001
Fruits (serv/d)	2.38±1.15	2.49±1.18	2.54±1.20	20.09	<0.0001
Vegetables (serv/d)	2.70±1.20	2.81±1.22	2.81±1.19	10.90	<0.0001
Sleep (d/wk)	4.76±1.69	4.71±1.70	4.82±1.64	3.32	0.0361
Smoking (d/wk)*	4.35±1.33	5.43±2.71	4.27±3.08	10.53	<0.0001
Alcohol (drinks/d)**	1.31±0.72	1.16±0.79	1.10 ±0.79	30.00	<0.0001
Self-Rated Health	7.96±1.37	7.88±1.34	7.92±1.35	7.31	0.0007
Mental Health-Related Outcomes					
Stress	1.99±1.98	1.77±1.88	1.80±1.88	11.41	<0.0001
Depression	0.76±1.35	0.66±1.27	0.66±1.28	3.43	0.0324
Life Satisfaction	8.38±1.35	8.48±1.29	8.49±1.29	8.76	0.0002

Source: [Population Health Management article](#)

Just about anybody can have healthy behaviors for a few days or weeks. The key is to maintain healthy behaviors for years. As soon as you stop having healthy behaviors you stop getting the benefits.

I like studies that go out for two years because the results are pretty conclusive by that time. If you can get your employees to participate in a good wellness program chances are they will adopt and maintain healthy behaviors for years to come.

Most wellness studies show the employees have better health behaviors. They eat healthier foods, they eat smaller portions, they exercise more often, they smoke less, they don't drink in excess, they wear seat belts more often, and they're pretty good at controlling their stress. Wellness programs can also help alleviate depression and the symptoms of depression as well as improve life satisfaction.

Even the American Heart Association has completed an [extensive review](#) of the ability of wellness programs to improve health and reduce cardiovascular risk.

[Others](#) have evaluated all of the research and reported that wellness programs, do in fact, have the ability to improve employee health. In 2013 researchers completed one of the most rigorous and comprehensive reviews of wellness programs. This study is called the [Rand Report](#). Here is what the authors concluded:

“We find that workplace wellness programs can help contain the current epidemic of lifestyle-related diseases, the main driver of premature morbidity and mortality as well as health care cost in the United States.” --Soeren Mattke, Lead Author of the [Rand Report](#)

2) Wellness Programs Reduce Elevated Health Risks

The foundation of any good wellness program must be focused on helping employees adopt healthy behaviors. Elevated blood glucose, high blood cholesterol, and high blood pressure are almost all caused by unhealthy diets and lack of physical activity. Eating and exercising are behaviors. A few years ago I published the results of a randomized clinical trial that helped people improve their nutrition and physical activity.

We were stunned to learn that [in as little as six weeks](#) health risks could improve dramatically. Those who maintain healthy behaviors experience lower health risks for six weeks, [six months, 12 months, and even out to 18 months](#) after this program began.

When you change your diet, get active, and avoid tobacco, really good things happen. Boise School District is a WellSteps client and not long ago we published the results of their changes in health risks. After one year, a lot of employees who had elevated health risks at baseline, had reached healthy risk levels.

Table 4. Mean Change Scores for Biometric Measures According to Baseline Risk⁴

	No.	Mean at Baseline ^a	Mean Change through 1 year ^a	F Test P Value [†]
BMI (Kg/m²)				
Normal (< 25)	903	22.4	0.2	< 0.0001
Overweight (25.0-29.9)	738	27.2	0.1	
Obese (≥ 30.0)	683	35.2	-0.3	
Missing	62			
Systolic Blood Pressure (mmHg)				
Normal (<120)	906	110.9	10.9	< 0.0001
Pre-hypertensive (120-139)	1086	128.5	3.9	
High (140-159)	322	146.1	-3.7	
Dangerous (≥160)	38	167.3	-12.6	
Missing	59			
Diastolic Blood Pressure (mmHg)				
Normal (<80)	1330	71.2	1.8	< 0.0001
Pre hypertensive (80-89)	778	83.8	-4.2	
High (90-99)	209	93.2	-8.7	
Dangerous (≥100)	33	105.6	-15.9	
Missing	61			
Glucose (mg/dL)				
Normal (<110)	2134	92.0	-2.9	< 0.0001
IFG (110-125)	117	115.1	-7.4	
Diabetes (≥126)	72	170.4	-27.1	
Missing	88			
Total CHL (mg/dL)				
Normal (<200)	1434	169.1	10.5	< 0.0001
Borderline (200-239)	691	215.6	-1.7	
High risk (≥240)	216	260.3	-14.6	
Missing	70			

^aAdjusted for age and sex.

[†]Based on Type III Sums of Squares.

Source: [JOEM](#)

Reductions in elevated health risks are important. The [New England Journal of Medicine](#) reported that for every 1% drop in total cholesterol, the risk of having a heart attack dropped by 2 to 3%. For every one point drop in elevated diastolic blood pressure, there is another 2 to 3% drop in heart disease risk.

Low health risks are the foundation of good health, and wellness programs are a great way to help employees and their spouses avoid elevated health risks. There are hundreds of research papers that evaluated the ability of wellness programs to reduce elevated health risks. [One particular study](#) looking at almost 200,000 wellness participants and showed that 5 of 7 health risks improved after one year.

[Another researcher looked](#) at all of the published studies to get a consensus. This review showed that comprehensive wellness programs will have a significant impact on elevated health risks.

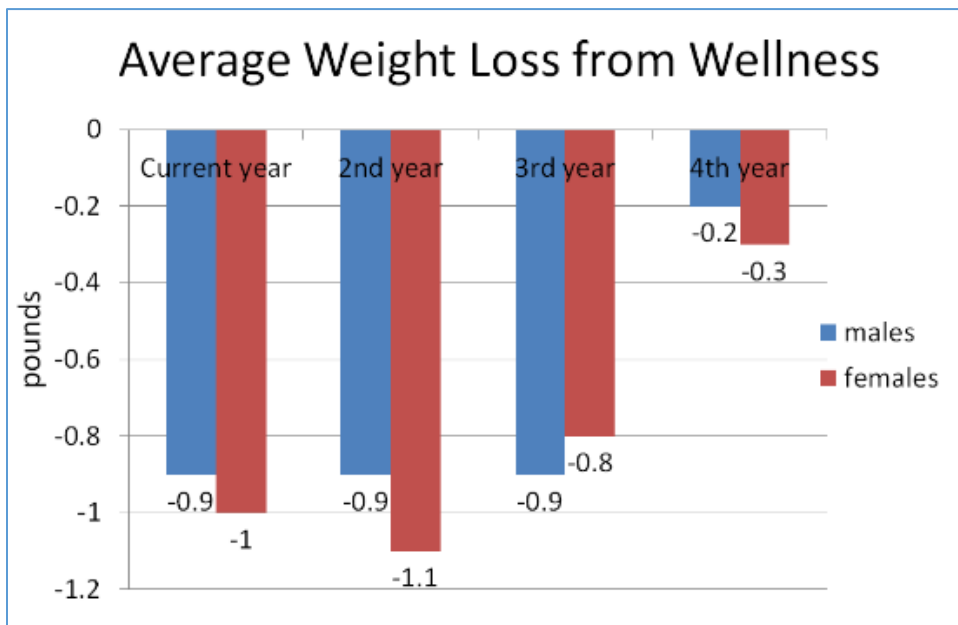
A Weakness of Wellness Programs

There is one weakness that almost all wellness programs have. After 30 years of evaluating dozens and dozens of programs it has become clear that it is difficult to impossible to get large groups of employees to reach and maintain a healthy body weight. The obesity epidemic is caused by a variety of cultural factors and helping employees lose weight has proven to be exceptionally difficult.

While the research suggests that helping people improve blood cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood glucose is possible, helping people lose weight and keep the weight off has proven to be hard to do. I'm the first one to admit that worksite wellness programs are not very effective at helping people lose weight.

Just take a look at the body mass index (BMI) data in the table above. Those who are obese do lose some weight after a few years but not very much.

There is some hope. Recently, the [RAND study](#) showed some promising results:



Source: [Rand Report](#)

If the focus of your wellness program is to help individuals reach and maintain a healthy body weight you should prepare yourself to be disappointed. The unhealthy culture that surrounds most of us makes it extremely difficult to lose weight, in fact, most people in the United States and in the industrialized world gain weight every year.

So there's a couple ways to look at this. Wellness programs are very effective at reducing elevated health risks like blood pressure, glucose, and cholesterol. But they are not very effective at helping people lose weight.

Without the impact of all the wellness programs in the world, obesity would be even worse than it currently is.

Wellness programs may not help your employees reach a healthy body weight but it looks like they are helping your employees to stop gaining weight.

3) Wellness Programs Reduce Health Care Costs

There are almost 100 different studies that have looked at the financial impact of wellness programs. I have published six of these myself, and I have years of experience conducting some extremely complicated ROI studies. These studies are not easy to do and they take years to complete.

In 2001 I published the most comprehensive review ever completed on the [financial impact of worksite wellness programs](#).

That study alone are reviewed 100 different research papers. The ability of a wellness program to reduce healthcare costs depends upon how effective the program really is. Having an occasional lunch and learn about nutrition or just doing a biometric screening will not be enough to move the healthcare cost needle.

Comprehensive worksite wellness programs that improve employee behaviors will see a bending of the healthcare cost trend. Most often they will discover that the savings from program participation will be greater than the actual cost of the program. Almost everyone of these return on investment (ROI) studies show a positive return on investment. Researchers from Harvard recently published another summary of the wellness ROI research.

Here is what they found:

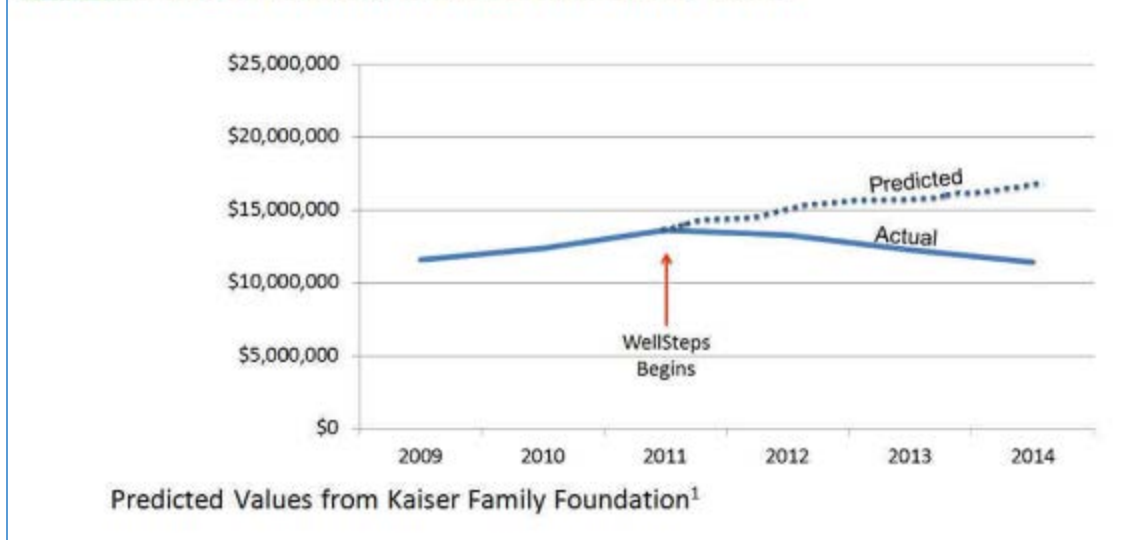
Study Focus	Number of Studies	Average Study Length	Average ROI
Health Care Costs	22	3 years	3.27

Source: [Health Affairs](#).

Among the 22 different studies that looked at wellness programs and healthcare costs, the average return on investment was 3.27. This means that for every dollar that was spent on the program the company saved \$3.27 because of reduced healthcare costs.

Last year researchers evaluated the impact of the WellSteps wellness program at a large school district. Here is the actual healthcare cost trend for this worksite. After four years of wellness this worksite is actually spending less on healthcare costs than it did before the program began. For every dollar they spent on wellness they saved \$3.3.

Figure 2. Predicted versus Actual Medical Costs for the District



Source: [Merrill et al. 2015](#)

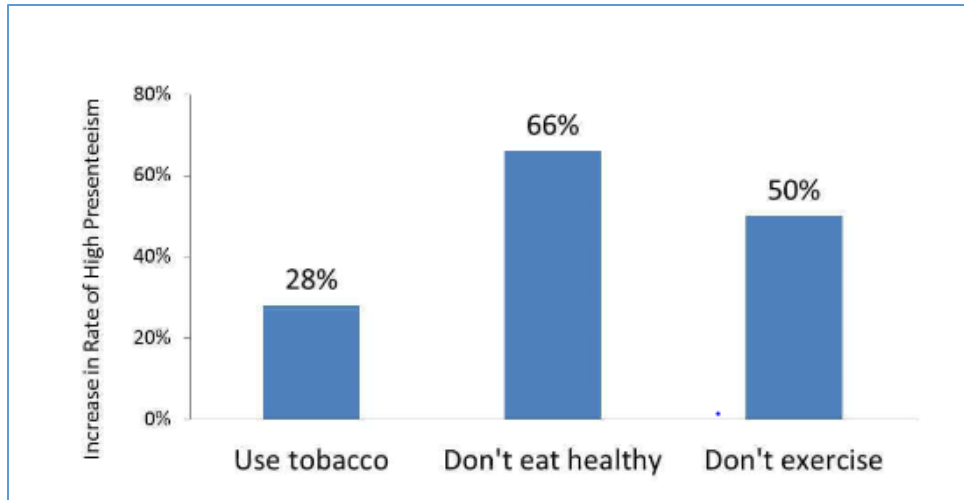
Anyone who still thinks wellness programs don't improve health is choosing to completely ignore hundreds of peer-reviewed scientific research papers that say otherwise.

4) Wellness Programs Improve Productivity

Poor employee productivity can be defined as physically being at work but not working. This type of poor productivity is called presenteeism. It is estimated that the cost associated with presenteeism due to poor employee health is at least [2 to 3 times greater than direct health care expenses](#). While the estimated cost of presenteeism dwarfs the cost of health care, it does not receive the same level of scrutiny among employers preoccupied with controlling the direct costs of poor employee health.

There are a lot of reasons why employees have low productivity. They may not know how to use the equipment, they may be distracted by other employees, they may not know what they are doing, they may be tired, or they might be on Facebook. One of the main causes of presenteeism is poor health.

New understanding of presenteeism has been revealed in [recent research](#) published by the journal Population Health Management.



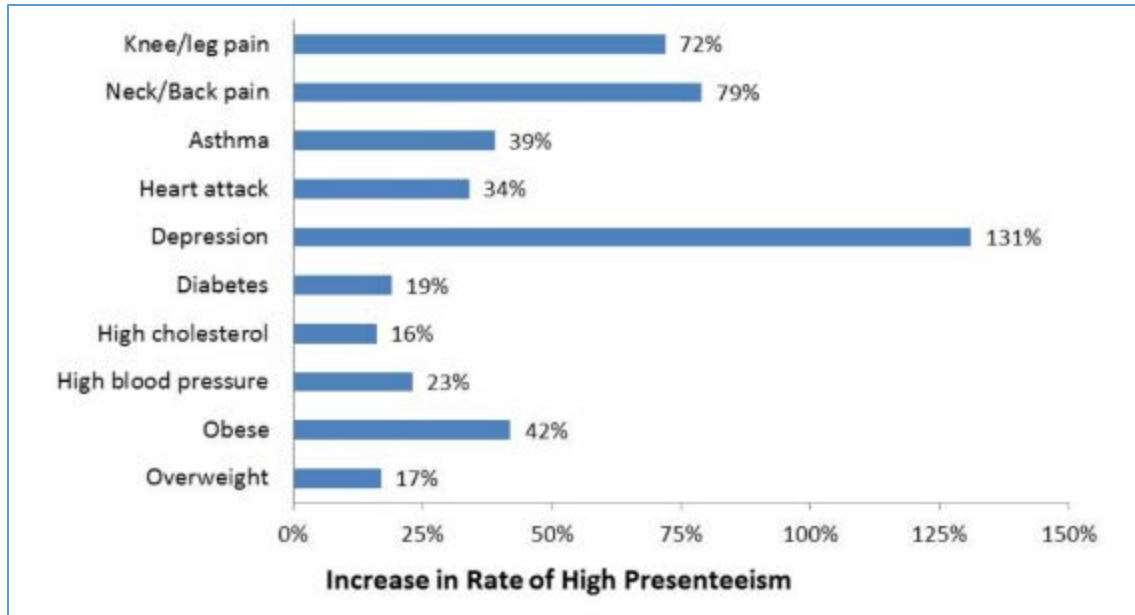
Smokers were 28% more likely to have high presenteeism than non-smokers. Employees with an unhealthy diet were 66% more likely to have high presenteeism than those who regularly ate whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Employees who didn't exercise very much were 50% more likely to have high presenteeism than employees who were regular exercisers. These findings demonstrate that poor health behaviors are strongly associated with high levels of presenteeism.

In short, unhealthy individual lifestyle choices may result in substantially higher levels of lost productive work time.

This figure displays increased rates of high presenteeism among employees who smoke, don't eat healthy, or don't exercise regularly. Poor health behaviors eventually lead to elevated health risks and chronic diseases. The figure below shows how health risks such as excess body weight, elevated blood pressure, and high cholesterol increased the odds of having high presenteeism.

The other health conditions in this figure further paint the presenteeism picture—the presence of risk factors, pain, and chronic disease, especially chronic depression, dramatically increase the odds of having high presenteeism.

Looking at this graph, you can see that employees who suffer from neck/back pain are 79% more likely to have high presenteeism than employees who do not have neck/back pain.



These results confirm several ideas about the benefits of wellness. Presenteeism is associated with poor health behaviors as well as elevated health risks and the presence of chronic disease.

Wellness programs that focus on helping employees have good health behaviors will eventually have an impact on productivity. I have written extensively about the connections between worksite wellness and productivity in a [previous blog](#).

5) Wellness Programs Can Decrease Absenteeism

There are over 50 papers that have looked at the connections between worksite wellness programs and reduced absenteeism. Worksites with comprehensive wellness programs can experience reduced absenteeism for a variety of reasons:

- Employees with good health behaviors have lower absenteeism
- Employees who can control their stress have lower absenteeism
- Employees with healthy blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose have lower absenteeism.
- Employees who are not overweight or obese have lower absenteeism

I summarized all of these studies in one [monster paper](#) that was published a few years ago. You can read the nitty-gritty details of all 46 papers if you're really curious.

Any wellness program that can reduce absenteeism will experience cost savings. Harvard researchers looked at the ROI of wellness programs as they relate absenteeism and demonstrated that for every dollar wellness programs spend on wellness they can save \$2.73 and reduce absenteeism.

Study Focus	Number of Studies	Average Study Length	Average ROI
Absenteeism	22	2 years	2.73

Source: [Health Affairs](#)

Wellness programs have the ability to improve employee health and this can have an impact on whether or not individuals are absent from work. But there is another reason why wellness programs can have such a large impact on absenteeism. Employees who have high morale are significantly less likely to be absent from work.

6) Wellness Programs Can Help Improve Employee Recruitment and Retention

I confess there is no published scientific data that shows that wellness programs will make a significant impact on your ability to recruit and retain employees. There are a lot of factors that go into the decision to accept a job offer. It helps if you can offer a good salary and a rich benefits plan.

I had the privilege of visiting the VP of benefits at the Microsoft corporate office in Redmond Washington. If you are fortunate enough to land a job at Microsoft you will get an [amazing Microsoft benefits package](#).

You'll get free wellness, free gym membership, onsite health clinics of every variety, and NO insurance premium—doesn't that sound great? All the large software/tech companies are offering wellness with their benefits plans. They do this because they are all fighting with each other to hire and retain the best workforce possible. A rich benefits package makes it easier to get the best employees.

I don't have any evidence that shows that having a wellness program will tip the scales when an employee is considering accepting a job. A Virgin HealthMiles/Workforce survey did find that about 87% of employees said they consider health and wellness offerings when choosing an employer. But compared to other defined benefits, wellness plans just don't have much sway in the employment decision process.

However, wellness programs do have a strong impact on retention. Retention is the ability a worksite has to retain its workforce. Rich benefits also have a powerful influence on retention, but a good wellness program can help keep employees loyal.

Personnel is the most important asset in every organization. When an employer offers a wellness program to its employees the company is saying, "We think you are an important part of this



organization and we want you to be healthy, happy, and employed here for a long time". When you offer your employees a wellness program, you are showing them that you care about them.

You are letting them know you want to do everything you can to keep them in good health and optimal performance. Employees know when they are appreciated. They know when feel welcome and valued as important parts of the organization. That knowledge can do a long way toward convincing employees to stick around: they can go find another job somewhere, but will they get treated and valued the same way?

7) Wellness Programs Build and Help Sustain High Employee Morale

I'm going to let you in on a little secret. The WellSteps wellness solutions has a performance guarantee. After three years we guarantee that your wellness program will have a positive return on investment. The secret is that after three years almost nobody cares about the ROI.

That may have been a good reason to start their wellness program, but after employees start to engage, communicate with each other, feel valued and appreciated, the reasons for doing a wellness program change. After three years we have found that our clients like to do wellness because they like the way it has changed their worksite culture.

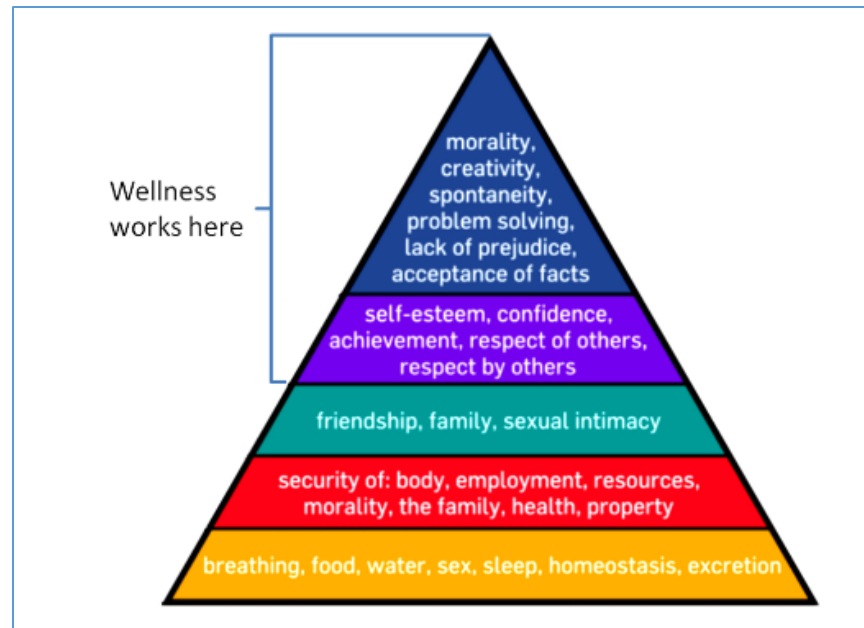
Employees are obviously healthier but more importantly they are happier. This is another reason that doesn't have scientific research to back it up. We are probably never going to have a good study that can evaluate that question. What we do have, however, is experience with hundreds of clients that have migrated away from the ROI of wellness and have moved towards the value on investment (VOI) of wellness. I've blogged about this previously [here](#).

The academic approach to wellness programs has limitations when we start talking about employee morale. As the CEO of WellSteps, a company with dozens of employees, I see the impact of our own wellness program in a very different light. Employee morale is a huge factor in the success or failure of any business and a good wellness program helps employees be happy and healthy.

Many of you have probably studied [Maslow's needs hierarchy](#). The pyramid shown below shows the different needs that we have as humans. The most important and life sustaining needs are the bottom of the pyramid, the base of the pyramid.

These include things like food, water, shelter, social interactions, etc. Without these basic needs being fulfilled we could die or just suffer through life. The top half of the hierarchy shows the kinds of things

we'd like to have once our basic needs have been met. Not everyone gets to fulfill these higher needs, and their lives are not as rewarding as they could be.



When you offer your employees a wellness program you are telling them that you respect them, you trust them, and that you want to help them be successful in life. Employees have high employee morale when they are allowed to be creative, solve problems, feel safe and appreciated, develop self-esteem, and achieve personal goals and aspirations. Employees are happy when they have a sense of control over their lives and their health.

In my opinion, this is one of the most powerful reasons to have a wellness program. Realistically, your employees don't care about your healthcare cost problem, they care about their own happiness. Your employees don't share your concerns about productivity or absenteeism. They care about having a fulfilling, enjoyable job.

Your wellness program helps employees achieve all of their needs, both physical, social, and emotional. When it is all said and done, your employees want to feel loved and appreciated, and when they do really good things happen at work.

Productivity goes up, customer service is outstanding, problems get solved, and people get creative. They like coming to work, they appreciate their employer, they work better with others, and they have high employee morale.

What is the financial value of having employees with high morale? It's probably impossible to make this calculation but reverse the question and ask it again. What does it cost your company when you have employees with poor morale? Complaints will go up, the quality of your product or service will suffer, and problems will multiply because poor employee morale can be contagious. Poor employee morale can be a company killer.

After 30 years of researching all of the benefits of a wellness program, I have come to the conclusion high employee morale, while almost impossible to evaluate, is an extremely important benefit of wellness. Perhaps this is why many of the companies with outstanding wellness programs have [dramatically better financial performance](#).

So What?

There is an enormous amount of research to support the benefits of wellness. A comprehensive wellness program is going to improve employee health and improve your organization's bottom line. It is not going to make all your problems go away, but it is going to help you create a worksite culture of health. It will boost and maintain employee morale. With an effective wellness program you will improve the lives of your employees and help drive the success of your organization.

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About The Author



[Dr. Steve Aldana](#) is the CEO of Wellsteps, a worksite wellness solution that leads the nation in wellness program deployment and engagement. Dr. Aldana authored over 75 scientific papers and 7 books on health risk management, healthy living, and health promotion programs. He has given over 350 keynote speeches across the U.S. on the ability of good nutrition and regular exercise to prevent, arrest, and reverse many chronic diseases. Email him at: steve@wellsteps.com