

How can employers increase employee engagement with workplace nutrition programmes?

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The number of organisations offering employee wellbeing programmes is on the increase. Healthy eating and weight management initiatives can contribute to prevention and management of obesity, and encourage healthy lifestyle choices among employees. Nationally, obesity rates have risen 15% since 1993 (NHS Digital, 2018). The most recent data shows that 26% of adults in England were classified as obese in 2016 (NHS Digital, 2018) and this impacts on the National Health Service (NHS) since there were 617 thousand admissions in NHS hospitals where obesity was identified as a factor (NHS Digital, 2018). A startling 74% of adults were not eating five portions of fruits and vegetables per day (NHS Digital, 2018). Employers can help to make a difference to improving public health, whilst benefiting from a healthier workforce.

Getting employees engaged in workplace health programmes can be challenging. Top-level support is critical (Blake and Lloyd, 2008). Employees need to see that company leaders are on board and championing the cause – a workplace culture and climate that support wellbeing is essential and with that comes resource investment (Lee, Blake and Lloyd, 2010). With busy schedules, it can be hard to take time out, but employees need to feel sanctioned to get involved during working hours and encouraged to take healthy breaks (Huang et al, 2017). This will mean offering activities that are accessible and can be integrated within the working day. Ask employees what they want, and design programmes based on their suggestions and needs.

Getting people involved in designing programmes will give them a sense of ownership, and employee wellbeing champions (Blake and Chambers, 2012) can be put in place to improve channels of communication and help promote activities to their peers. Evaluating the impact is important to demonstrate engagement, or highlight areas for improvement in services offered. Measuring outcomes objectively can provide valuable evidence indicating employee health and wellbeing, and positive return on investment for the company bottom-line.

Think creatively. Technology can be used to promote health and engage staff in healthy behaviours (Blake, Suggs, Coman, Aguirre, Batt, 2015) or raise awareness about being healthy at work (Gartshore and Blake, 2018).

Finally, learn from exemplars. Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust (link to this: <https://www.nuh.nhs.uk/staff-wellbeing>) is an exemplar for employee health and wellbeing. This organisation has delivered a nationally-recognised staff wellbeing programme since 2005, and works in collaboration with the University of Nottingham to generate published evidence of employee perceptions of services they offer (Blake and Batt, 2015), and the organisational benefits (Blake, Zhou and Batt, 2013).

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