

Assessing Employee Wellbeing Resources for Governmental Public Health Professionals: A Narrative Review

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Purpose of Review

Employee wellness programs are being developed and implemented in organizations nationwide to mitigate burnout and improve retention. Employees have voiced their need to be supported beyond compensation by their employers and are using this ask to reshape organizational culture. This study examines peer reviewed articles, case studies, and practitioner articles to assess the impact that employee wellness programs have on employee performance and retention within the governmental public health field across the United States.

Recent Findings

Eight literature sources were analyzed to identify themes, practices, and strategies that have been implemented within public health agencies with the goal of improving employee wellbeing. Three categories of themes emerged; identified employee wellness program strategies, employee response to wellness efforts, and organizational change around employee-focused workplaces.

Summary

The study revealed that employee wellness programs can help reduce turnover and employees tend to respond positively to these efforts. However, more information is needed to determine if this is a practice that is effective in rebuilding workforces within the governmental public health field.

INTRODUCTION

Due to large numbers of workforce members approaching retirement age, skill shortages, and increased burnout rates, the need to address employee wellness is essential to maintaining workforces across the nation.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic added additional stress to public health workforce members by throwing them into an unexpected change in working arrangements, on the fly emergency preparedness learning, shifts in job priorities, leading to adverse psychological, emotional, and physiological health effects.² Also, stress related to adapting to virtual work arrangements and having to learn different technological software has affected the health of public health employees across the nation, causing them to experience burnout, early retirement, and moving forward with transitions to different industries.³ As a result, public health leaders are starting to understand the impact of disregarding employee wellness on an organization's ability to sustain its workforce; doing so has severe financial consequences like decreased productivity due to sick-related absences and turnover.⁴

Today, public health agencies across the nation have begun to invest in the health of their employees with the hope that they will feel supported by leadership and increase productivity.⁵ Programs like the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)'s PH-HERO program were developed to address these issues through an equity lens specifically among public health practitioners within the United States with the goal of mitigating turnover and creating psychologically safe work environments.⁶ To further examine how various policies, programs, and resources will equitably support public health organizations in strengthening their workforce and improving the employee experience; this literature research was developed. Furthermore, the research discusses the changes in the workforce over time, noting that today's workforce is modern and view their relationship with their employer from a non-materialistic lens, prioritizing cultural, ethical, and personal values.⁷ In closing, the research reviews current literature and aims to inform public health leaders of the benefits and challenges associated with implementing retention and employee wellness strategies.

Table 1. Search Strategy Keywords

Public Health Workforce	Workforce Development	Employee Retention	Wellness Programming
Public Health	Employee Wellness	Workplace Programming	Workplace Wellness

METHODS

The literature review was conducted by scanning academic databases, Business Source Ultimate, Google Scholar and PubMed databases. The aim of the literature review was to identify peer-reviewed articles related to the subject-matter. In doing so, 8 articles published between the years of 2019 and 2022, were identified and used for the literature review. The following keywords, public health workforce, public health, workplace wellness, employee wellness, workplace programming, workforce development, employee retention, wellness programming was searched within the databases to discover literature. The keywords are documented below in [Table 1](#).

RESULTS

The literature review highlighted the benefits and challenges of employee wellness programs and how these investments enhance employees' lives and improve productivity within the public health field. Furthermore, the researched literature presented trends, practices, and programs that work to improve the experiences of employees in organizations within the United States and beyond. There was a focus on mental health and physical health as it relates to cardiovascular health, and work life balance. Common themes that emerged from the literature included workforce development and its relationship with employee wellness. Other themes included workplace and organizational change, work-life balance, mental health support, and physical health. Overall, the literature provided insight into methods to improve the experience that employees have while on the job.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Bailey,⁸ a practitioner-based article, discussed the need to rebuild the public health workforce and infrastructure. The researcher highlighted how the public health field needed financial support from the federal government in order to implement changes and afford the personnel required to spark organizational change. Also, the researcher emphasized the fact that the public health industry is only funded and invested in during times of emergencies, leaving public health professionals to scramble to find resources during other times. Additionally, efforts like the CDC's Public Health Infrastructure Grant have been utilized to fund efforts aimed at improving the U.S. governmental public health workforce and infrastructure with the hopes of enhancing the perceptions of the field by potential and current employees.^{6,8} Overall, the literature provided insight on how influential the public health workforce is on the

public's health and wellbeing and how the workforce needs additional support.

WORKPLACE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Employee wellness is composed of many aspects like mental health, health equity, and healthy work environments. In this study, researchers, Gabriel and Aguinis,⁹ focused on how to reduce burnout and create healthier workplaces during times of high stress. The peer reviewed article highlighted the effects of burnout on employee's ability to perform and remain emotionally attached to the organization. The researchers mentioned that burnout generally leads to poor performance, workplace accidents, decreased creativity, and mental illness. In an effort to combat burnout, the researchers proposed the following strategies to improve employee wellness and reduce burnout; stress management support, foster support, included employees in decision-making, and implementing high-quality performance.⁹ This literature was insightful in that it provided context for why employee wellness programs are needed and how factors like organizational behavior, psychology, and management affect employee burnout.

When it comes to organizational change and the implementation of wellness programs within the workplace, it is essential to consider the factors that are most important and influence employees the most. According to Kuzior et al.,^{7(p7)} "the solution to the problem should be a shift towards a sustainable organization that takes a personal approach to the employees and puts emphasis on relational, cultural, and self-fulfillment factors." Having support from an employer is increasingly growing in popularity among workforce members. Employees want to feel like their work is an experience that allows them to be their true authentic selves without compromising their values. Additionally, the researchers reasoned that strategies aimed at increasing tranquility and building a supportive work environment will continue to improve employee wellbeing and retain talent. Supportive work environments were highlighted as environments where employers were open and willing to implement practices and policies aimed at creating a sense of work-life balance that includes alternative work weeks, hybrid work, and remote work environments. Nevertheless, the literature emphasized the need to incorporate employee feedback when making decisions regarding the workplace.⁷

EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

According to the peer-reviewed article by Ho and Kuvaas, employee wellbeing "refers to people's evaluation of their lives."^{10(p236)} An employee's thoughts regarding the effect that their workload has on them holistically affects how they engage and perform in the workplace. The researchers

reasoned that systems, human resource systems in particular, work to ease the burden that employees have when working thus increasing their productivity.¹⁰ Essentially, the researchers were able to conclude that there were tradeoffs that employees experience when human resource systems are in place that affect their psychological and physical health.

When determining how to support employees, employers must think beyond compensation. Generally, employer support has come from financial incentives like pay and benefits packages but lack things like organizational support and employee wellness investment.¹¹ Researchers Tessema et al., mentioned that supporting employees in achieving work-life balance was a good way to keep them emotionally attached to their work and mitigate resignation.¹¹ Also, providing opportunities for employees to bond and connect through programming that focuses on physical, mental, and emotional well-being is essential as well. Overall, Tessema et al., concluded that employee wellness programs are good ways to ensure that employees are mentally and physically healthy.¹¹

Researchers, Hill et al., took a different approach when assessing employee wellbeing in their peer reviewed study and focused on the effect that virtual work has on employee health.³ The study highlighted how changes in work arrangements have a positive and negative effect on employees and these effects vary from person to person.³ The need to work virtually due to COVID has altered the work environment increasing the need for management to implement methods to cultivate team building and ensure that employees feel supported. The study assessed 115 empirical articles to build a framework to better understand how virtual work impacts employee health both positively and negatively. The researchers were able to determine that there are benefits to reducing burdens caused by virtual work situations.

In an effort to strengthen employee morale and reduce health-related illnesses, the idea of employee wellness programs has emerged among human resource leadership teams across the nation. According to Johnson and Long, employee wellness programs have many benefits for both employees and employers.¹² For employees, wellness programs provide a prevention intervention to reduce the onset of illnesses like cardiovascular disease. On the other hand, wellness programs provide employers the opportunity to reduce expenses related to absenteeism, short-term disability, and medical claims.¹² Employee wellness programs can consist of various initiatives like physical exercise and mental health counseling. The researchers concluded that although workforce leaders believe wellness programs are beneficial, most companies struggle to see the return on investment, thus making them reason that employee wellness programs are not as effective.¹²

BENEFITS OF EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Investing in employee wellbeing has many benefits as recent literature has highlighted. Different experiences both on the job and off the job affect an employee's ability to perform and engage with others. Workforces across the na-

tion are asking their employers to become trauma-informed and work harder to mitigate negative experiences that occur at the workplace.^{13(para 1)} The ability to gain knowledge and skills to address employee needs is essential to rebuilding and strengthening the public health workforce and workforces in other industries. Specifically, in the governmental public health field, this skill set is necessary because the "public health infrastructure enables every level of government to prevent disease, promote health, and prepare for and respond to emergencies and ongoing challenges."^{8(para 8)} Essentially, senior-level leaders within the public sector are starting to understand how investments in employee wellness work to benefit overall finances and operational efficiency.

In conclusion, the literature revealed several factors, like changes in work arrangements and the ongoing covid-19 pandemic, and their impact on increased the need for organizational leaders to implement practices to support employee well-being. Workforce leaders across the nation are beginning to understand how their workplace structures and arrangements have inherent health-diminishing aspects.¹⁴ With this knowledge, organizations have started implementing services and practices like workplace wellness programs that focus on increasing employee physical activity.¹⁵ Also, organizations have turned their focus on supporting specific groups of employees to better support them in meeting position demands and increasing productivity; these efforts include providing onsite mental health services, improved support for employees needing accommodations, and lactation rooms for mothers.¹⁶ Overall, workforce leaders are becoming aware of how transforming their organizations into an employee-focused workplaces can increase productivity, reduce turnover, and improve job satisfaction.¹¹

DISCUSSION

The literature search provided insight into the various programs, policies, and benefits of wellness programming for public health professionals within the United States. However, as it relates to the governmental public health field, the literature was limited. Nevertheless, the literature search emphasized that as workforce trends and needs change, we should continue to see organizations improve their efforts toward developing wellness and support programming to increase their competitive advantage and to remain attractive to current and potential employees (Wardlaw, 2019).^{17,18} Based on the outcome of the literature search, recommendations for future research efforts were developed with the goal of increasing research on employee wellbeing, support, and work-life balance among public health practitioners across the nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

From a public health perspective, the literature was informative but lacked specific and evidence-based strategies and practices to help governmental public health leaders in implementing initiatives aimed at supporting the workforce

in navigating the field especially during uncertain times. Moreover, researchers should consider developing studies to assess employee wellbeing and support methods being utilized within the field and the impact that they have had on employees. Additionally, future researchers should consider assessing the actual needs of governmental public health professionals or proposed methods to improve the employee experience from a wellness lens to ensure that developed practices and strategies are rooted in equity. Also, the literature would benefit from information regarding research data regarding how effective the discussed strategies have been among professionals in other industries which could be helpful in generalizing and applying those strategies to the governmental public health field. Another suggestion would be for future research efforts to focus on the effects that organizational management, institutional, and individual factors have on the relationship between human resource systems and wellbeing. This focus would help examine the barriers or challenges associated with organizations being able to implement wellbeing and support programming. Essentially, the literature search highlighted the need for more qualitative research on public health employee wellness and support.

CONCLUSION

In closing, this literature review was informative as it revealed that employee wellness programs can help reduce turnover and employees tend to respond positively to those efforts. However, more information is needed on if these practices are effective in enhancing and rebuilding the governmental public health workforce. Additionally, the literature search highlighted the importance of employee wellness programming on the ability of organizations to retain and recruit employees as changes in the workforce profile progress over time. Essentially, the literature search serves as a foundation for future research to be developed to improve the support provided to public health practitioners across the nation and worldwide.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Jamie Means Biography

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