

Wellness in the Workplace: Supporting Multiple Generational Needs

BestLifeRewarded Innovations
November 2018

ABSTRACT

Today's typical workforce spans at least four generations, which presents an interesting challenge for employers when managing the needs of baby boomers, generation X, millennials (a.k.a. gen-Yers) and generation Z. Each group has its own distinct beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, making health and wellness a particularly challenging topic to gain alignment on. This article focuses on the importance of developing highly personalized workplace wellness plans that can be better tailored to our increasingly diverse workforce. It provides an overview of best practices that help support the development of effective health and wellness programs that resonate with employees across all generations.

INTRODUCTION

Today's workforce is rapidly changing. While still sizable, the long-dominant baby boomer generation has been replaced by a wave of younger workers. Making up 35 per cent of the active workforce, millennials are now the largest single working generation in Canada. By 2025, they're expected to make up 75 per cent of the workforce globally.^{1,2} Generation X and generation Z will only continue to grow their presence as well. This shift in demographics, coupled with the fact that employees live and work much longer than previous generations, means many Canadian businesses are finding themselves managing four distinct generations of employees at one time. Not an easy task, given each group has its own set of values, beliefs and behaviours. Despite this rise in multi-generational teams, only 8 per cent of companies include age as part of their diversity and inclusion strategy.³

When it comes to wellness programs, the rise of the multi-generational workforce poses a unique set of challenges for administrators. There's now a significantly broader range of employee motivators, communication styles, technology preferences—not to mention health needs—to consider. The one-size-fits-all workplace wellness approaches of the past simply can't accommodate these increasingly diverse needs. It's clear such programs need to be replaced with more flexible, personalized initiatives that allow employers to cater to all employees, regardless of age.⁴ With these challenges in mind, this article will examine strategies for effective wellness programs capable of driving optimal user outcomes—whether an employee is 18 or 68.

GENERATIONAL NEEDS

Baby Boomers

As Canada's largest generation, baby boomers may have dictated HR trends for years, but as more and more approach retirement, their needs are changing. Born between 1946 and 1964, this group tends to have a strong work ethic, are dedicated to their work and prefer face-to-face communication over instant messaging. As they begin to think more about their retirement options, company benefits are increasingly important to them, as are flexible working situations that allow them to reduce their hours without being forced to exit the workforce completely.

When it comes to workplace wellness programs, baby boomer health goals tend to be centred around losing weight, increasing activity levels and eating better. Given their age, they're more conscious of their health habits and are looking to prevent cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and dementia.⁵ Having grown up in the pre-digital era, they tend to prefer in-person support such as workshops or speaker events, but also enjoy researching and consuming content online. They're also more likely to be motivated by financial incentives, workplace benefits and free facilities.

Gen X

Born between 1965 and 1980, generation X is in the prime of their lives. They're known to enjoy working independently, want work-life balance and prefer email communication over face time. With many in management and leadership roles, career advancement, salary and retirement benefits are increasingly important to them, as are flexible work situations so they can balance work with the demands of raising a family.

From a workplace wellness perspective, gen-Xers are similar to baby boomers in that their top health goals tend to be around losing weight, being more active and eating better. Given their age, they're increasingly conscious of their health habits and beginning to think about how to prevent cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes.⁵ Raised in an era of technological and social change, they're generally tech-savvy and enjoy researching and consuming content online. They also tend to be motivated by workplace benefits, extra vacation time or time during the day to exercise.

Millennials (a.k.a. Gen Y)

A rapidly growing presence in the workplace, millennials have been transforming the way organizations operate in recent years. Born between 1981 and 1994, work-life balance and job satisfaction are top priorities for this generation, as is having control over how and when they work. For millennials, accumulating rich life experiences is valued more than money, so paid time off and remote work opportunities are vital to them, as is frequent feedback—both positive and negative.

When it comes to workplace wellness programs, millennials have very different aspirations than their older counterparts. Their top health goals tend to focus on getting more

sleep, eating better and reducing stress rather than losing weight or increasing activity levels. They're the most likely group to say they frequently experience stress as a result of their work.⁶ Known for being digital natives, millennials are tech-savvy and generally more open to using social media or apps and wearables to help achieve their health and wellness goals. While financial incentives and workplace benefits are of interest to them, they're much more likely to be interested in things like time off during the day for exercise when it comes to program incentives.⁶

Gen Z

Just starting to enter the workforce, generation Z is in the early stages of establishing their presence but will be a big part of shaping the future of work in organizations. Born between 1995 and 2010, they're thought to be more independent and competitive than millennials, due in part to a stronger economic environment.⁷ Having grown up in a connected world, they're savvy multi-taskers, switching between different assignments and devices with ease. Given they're just starting their working lives, career advancement, job security and salary are top priorities for them, as are flexible work situations so they can work on their terms.

From a workplace wellness perspective, generation Z is similar to millennials in that their top health goals tend to be around getting more sleep, eating better and reducing stress. Despite their young age, they're keenly interested in their health. They've been found to be more interested in preventative wellness than older generations and are more willing to pay a premium for healthier products.⁸

5 KEY STRATEGIES

Every generation responds differently to technology, education, communication and wellness. A 20-year-old employee has completely different goals, interests and learning styles than a 60-year-old. Your workplace wellness program should be personalized enough to address this. [BestLifeRewarded Innovations](#) (BLRI) strives to elevate health and wellness programs by continuously adapting our services to further tailor the experience for all members. In addition, we employ the following five strategies when considering our evolving, multi-generational audience.

1. Invest in tech

- Technology offers an incredible opportunity to deliver tailored-for-you programs, easily and cost effectively. Current and future technologies can go a long way in helping us accomplish our goals. We're actively researching and developing the integration of tools like collaborative filtering via machine learning and artificial intelligence algorithms that make predictions about user interests and healthcare patterns. As more and more members engage with the BLRI platform, the system will evolve to provide personalized tools and content in optimal ways.

2. Tailor your topics

- Every generation has distinct health and wellness priorities. Tailoring your topics to meet the needs of different user demographics can help ensure they're relevant to

everyone's needs. For example, generation X is nearly twice as likely to be obese or diagnosed with diabetes. Dialling up the emphasis on diabetes prevention for those users can help them better engage with the content.⁹ Don't forget to find the similarities between generations as well. After all, who doesn't want to improve their energy, reduce stress and maintain a healthy body weight?

3. Promote different incentives

- Understanding user motivations across generations is essential for your program's success. For example, older groups tend to be more interested in lowering premiums for things such as disability or life insurance, whereas younger groups are more likely to buy into team challenges that are socially driven.⁵ Financial incentives may speak more to baby boomers, whereas paid time off or event tickets may appeal more to gen-Xers and millennials.¹⁰

4. Offer a mix of communication styles

- Providing your users with a rich variety of communication methods allows them to choose the format they're most comfortable with. For example, baby boomers tend to prefer in-person workshops or speaker events, whereas younger groups are more comfortable with tracking their habits using wearables and sharing those results on company leaderboards.⁵ Gen-Xers see email as the standard for efficient communication, whereas millennials and generation Z prefer instant messaging.¹¹

5. Integrate online and offline

- Providing both online and offline learning opportunities, while preserving user data captured during offline experiences, can help meet generational—and business—needs. Integrated solutions offer employers the ever-so-important behaviour change data no matter how their initiative is deployed. For instance, the [BestLifeRewarded](#) platform allows event facilitators to hand out bonus codes during lunch-and-learns or seminars. After the event, employees can enter their code in the platform to earn points for attending the session.

CONCLUSION

While research suggests that each generation has distinct characteristics, it's important to remember not everyone within a generation will have the same attitudes and behaviours. Generational profiling is merely a helpful framework when looking at groups of individuals within an organization. The most successful workplace wellness programs will be the ones that recognize employee demographics are rapidly changing and embrace both the challenges and the opportunities of having such a diverse workforce. A personalized well-being program that recognizes both the differences and similarities between generations can allow companies to get the best out of its workers.

References

1. Randstad Interim Inc. (2018, Mar. 22). The top 5 hr challenges companies will face in 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.randstad.ca/workforce360-trends/archives/top-hr-challenges-in-2018_1699/
2. EY. (2015). Global generations: a global study on work-life challenges across generations. Retrieved from: <https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-global-generations-a-global-study-on-work-life-challenges-across-generations/%24FILE/EY-global-generations-a-global-study-on-work-life-challenges-across-generations.pdf>
3. Randstad Interim Inc. (2018, July 3). Accelerating business with an age-diverse workforce. Retrieved from: https://www.randstad.com/workforce-insights/workforce360/archives/accelerating-business-with-an-age-diverse-workforce_308/
4. Deloitte. (2017). Talent trends. HR technology disruptions for 2018: productivity, design, and intelligence reign. Retrieved from: <http://marketing.berstein.com/rs/976-LMP-699/images/HRTechDisruptions2018-Report-10051.pdf>
5. American Institute for Preventive Medicine. Generational wellness: an analysis of generational attitudes toward health improvement. Retrieved from: https://healthylife.com/generations/assets/generation-white-paper_2016.pdf
6. American Heart Association. Health program interaction across generations. Retrieved from: http://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@fc/documents/downloadable/ucm_488651.pdf
7. Patel, D. (2017, Sep. 21). 8 ways generation Z will differ from millennials in the workplace. Retrieved from Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deeppatel/2017/09/21/8-ways-generation-z-will-differ-from-millennials-in-the-workplace/#265bbb5c76e5>
8. Nielsen. (2015). We are what we eat: healthy eating trends around the world. Retrieved from: <https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/nielsen-global/eu/nielseninsights/pdfs/Nielsen%20Global%20Health%20and%20Wellness%20Report%20-%20January%202015.pdf>
9. Asian Scientist. (2014, Apr. 7). Generation X kids fatter than baby boomers. Retrieved from: <https://www.asianscientist.com/2014/04/health/generation-x-obesity-diabetes-2014/>
10. Schweyer, A. (2015, July 21). Generations in the workforce & marketplace: preferences in rewards, recognition & incentives. Retrieved from Incentive Research Foundation: <http://theirf.org/research/generations-in-the-workforce-marketplacepreferences-in-rewards-recognition-incentives/1427/>
11. Boomer, J., et al. Understanding today's workforce: generational differences and the technologies they use. Retrieved from Firm of the Future: <https://www.firmofthefuture.com/content/understanding-todays-workforce-generational-differences-and-the-technologies-they-use/>