

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Reimagining Well-Being at Work

By Refocusing on Physical Activity and Healthy Nutrition

By Gina Julian, MS, RD and Zack Papalia, PhD, MPH



We hear it on the news, read it on social media and witness it in our workplaces: the pandemic exacerbated and highlighted the global mental health crisis. What we do not hear about as often is the pandemic’s significant effect on eating habits and physical activity. Increased stress, lack of motivation, social isolation, reduced access to resources, the convergence of work/life responsibilities and inflation have made healthy eating and exercising more challenging. Studies suggest that nearly 40% of adults in the U.S. have gained weight since the start of the pandemic, with significant decreases in physical activity identified globally.^{1,2}

The Role of Employers

Employers are uniquely positioned to support better eating and physical activity habits among their employees through the benefits, programs and policies they put in place.

With most companies requiring employees to return to the workplace, at least part-time, employers should focus on making their workspaces enticing and supportive of employee eating and physical activity habits.^{3,4} This might include:



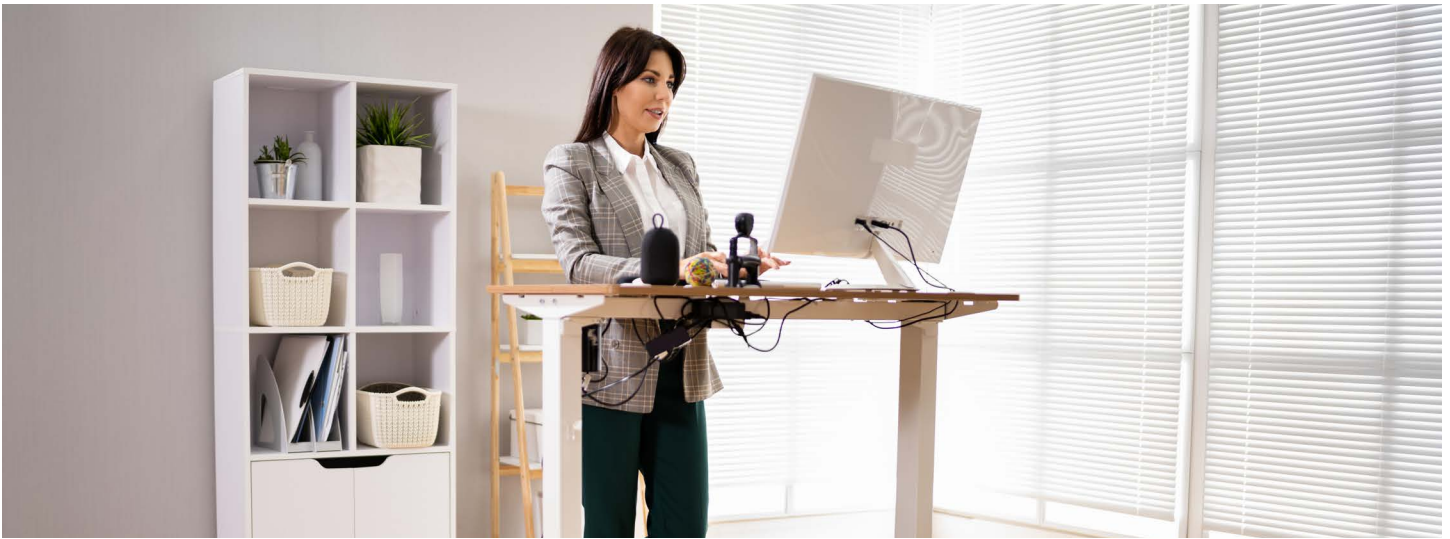
Provide healthy breakfast, lunch, and snacks at no or reduced cost




Create spaces for employees to exercise or offer onsite fitness classes




Implement policies that support taking time to exercise (e.g., flexible work hours so employees can come to work late/leave early)




Though employees are returning to the workplace, the hybrid workforce is not disappearing. This means employer strategies should consider how employees are supported in their home workspaces. One example is introducing Lifestyle Spending Accounts (LSAs), which provide employees with funding to create healthy home environments. Currently, 8% of employers offer LSAs, with another 35% considering them for 2024.⁵ LSAs can reimburse employees for expenses such as:



Home fitness equipment



Ergonomically appropriate workstations (e.g., standing desks)



Meal delivery kit subscriptions

By supporting employees’ physical well-being wherever they work, employers help foster an environment where employees feel valued. Creating and sustaining a culture of well-being creates a recruitment opportunity for new talent and helps employers retain existing top performers, reduce turnover and boost organizational performance.

An organization’s well-being program can generate substantial clinical, financial and risk management impact. According to the Business Group on Health, four of the top five cost drivers for large employers - musculoskeletal health, cardiovascular health, diabetes and some cancers - are closely linked to lifestyle behaviors. Fortunately, a little bit of movement goes a long way. As little as 150 minutes of exercise per week, when combined with the proper diet, can reduce the risk of developing diabetes by nearly 60% and reduce the risk of heart disease by 35%.⁶

If the pandemic taught us anything, it is that well-being does not exist in a silo. Well-being programs must consider and address various dimensions of the individual’s health and well-being – from physical to psychological to social. Over time, fostering and promoting holistic well-being in and out of the workplace can substantially benefit employers and employees.

1. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/did-we-really-gain-weight-during-the-pandemic-202110052606>
 2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8979477/#:~:text=The%20results%20showed%20that%20COVID,among%20certain%20groups%20of%20population.>
 3. <https://www.resumebuilder.com/9-in-10-companies-will-require-employees-to-work-from-office-in-2023/>
 4. <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2023-03-01-gartner-forecasts-39-percent-of-global-knowledge-workers-will-work-hybrid-by-the-end-of-2023>
 5. Business Group on Health’s 14th Annual Employer-Sponsored Health and Well-being Survey (May 2023)
 6. <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/prevention/people-at-risk.html>



About the Authors

Gina Julian, MS, RD, *Managing Consultant*

Gina is a Managing Consultant and a registered dietitian specializing in Well-Being and Population Health practices. In her role, she helps oversee the implementation, delivery, assessment and analysis of customers' well-being programs. Gina has worked in corporate well-being for over ten years and spent three years working for a cooking-based nutrition education nonprofit (Cooking Matters). Gina received her BA from Bates College and her Master's in Nutrition Sciences from Boston University.

Zack Papalia, PhD, MPH, *Senior Population Health Consultant*

Zack is a Senior Population Health Consultant and leads the Musculoskeletal Health committee. With a background in kinesiology, education, public health, health promotion and data analytics, his current work focuses on optimizing employee well-being programming and developing clinical strategies to help ensure broad access to high quality care. Zack earned his PhD in Kinesiology and Exercise Science from Penn State University.



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