Volume 5, No. 6 • June 2008   **Library Worklife home**

Work/Life

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Employees Surveyed Express Support for Wellness Initiatives, Ambivalence about Execution

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The fourth and final installment of *Library Worklife*'s analysis of the 2007 Library Workplace Wellness online survey summarizes qualitative feedback and comments given by users as part of the questionnaire-based survey.

Previous analysis of the survey (*Library Worklife 5, no. 2*) established a link between availability of and employee participation in workplace wellness initiatives: the greater the number of programs an employer offers, the greater the number of programs in which employees participate. Another article (*Library Worklife 5, no. 3*) interpreted the data in terms of supply and demand, exploring which workplace wellness initiatives are most commonly offered by library employers and which initatives are the most popular among library employees. This analysis suggests that public libraries struggle to match supply and demand in wellness initiatives, and also that Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) are underutilized in all library types, in part due to fear of repercussions.

To gather qualitative data about respondents' attitudes toward, and experience with, workplace wellness initiatives, the survey posed the following questions:

1. Which of these workplace wellness activities does your library offer?
2. Do staff in your library collaborate on activities, like walking clubs and healthy potlucks? Please describe.
3. If your library does not offer any of these activities, why do you think this is the case?
4. Do you think these activities are important? Why or why not?
5. Do you take advantage of any of these activities?

1. Which of these workplace wellness activities does your library offer?

The first question collected qualitative data asked respondents to select from a list of work-life initiatives any offered by their employers; the respondents were also given the opportunity to discuss any initiatives not provided by the list. Of the survey's 2,524 respondents, 107 submitted additional activities. Several categories emerged from the data; listed below are the most common categories, the number of responses and the percentage of response.

Category	# of Responses	% of Responses
Government/Campus Resources	15	14%

Flexible Hours/Split Shifts	11	10%
Wellness Classes	7	7%
Vaccinations/Screenings	5	5%
Family Leave	4	4%
Health Insurance	4	4%
None	4	4%
Weight Watchers	4	4%

The category Government/Campus Resources indicates comments of wellness initiatives that are offered by administrative bodies outside the library (county or city government, or the larger academic institution in the case of academic libraries). The following synopses are typical of responses in the following categories.

Government or Campus Resources

Many respondents noted that their workplace wellness programs are most often offered by an outside administrative body (city/council government or campus, for instance). Many laud the free or discounted access to a gym. Many of these gyms offer fitness advice. However, several respondents were discouraged by the expense or inconvenience of these resources; one academic employee noted that the campus encouraged workers to use the gym on lunch break, despite the fact that the gym is too remote to reach, use and return from during the allotted lunch break. The same employee was frustrated by the high tuition charged by the on-campus nursery school.

Flexible Hours/Split Shifts

Respondents had an ambivalent attitude toward flexible hours policies offered by their employers. A great number of responses indicate that leave is unpaid and dependant upon finding another worker to cover one's shift. One participant stated that such an arrangement could not be called an alternative work schedule – perhaps because the schedule is no real alternative, penalizing a worker for the very flexibility it offers.   Alternately, a one-person public library employee praised her city government for giving her the power to set a schedule that gives her weekends off.

Wellness Classes

Responses indicate that many employers offer health fairs and seminars held during lunch. Some employers offered rewards and prizes for completing targeted health goals. However, many employees report that the classes are offered irregularly, and some question the pertinence of the information

offered.

Vaccination/Screenings

Blood pressure checks and free flu shots were the most cited initiatives in this category. In some cases management keeps medical equipment, like blood pressure monitors, on-site to allow employees to track health progress; others host medical professionals (often once a month) who conduct basic health examinations. Flu shots may be offered on-site or at a local clinic; for free, or at a reduced rate.

2. Do staff in your library collaborate on activities, like walking clubs and healthy potlucks? Please describe.

The second question to elicit open-ended response asked respondents to evaluate staff collaboration. 1,096 of the survey's respondents answered this open-ended question. The majority of responses were "no;" however, other employees are being creative and taking advantage of time, resources and management-supported resources to build camaraderie as well as good health practices. Below are the most common categories to emerge from the data.

Category	# of Responses	% of Responses
No	618	56%
Exercise, Staff-Initiated	156	14%
Social Activities	98	9%
Government/Campus Resources	59	5%
Occasional	41	4%
Exercise (no mention of who initiated)	25	2%
Exercise, Management-Initiated	21	2%
Weight Watchers	16	1%

Again, the following quotations from the survey are typical of responses in the following categories.

No

Unfortunately, the overwhelming response to this question was "no." Many employers, according to respondents, forbid program involvement on the grounds of potentially reduced productivity. Others seem to disapprove of staff fraternization. One employee noted that, as the only employee, s/he is a group of one. And some employees stated that staff personality conflicts discouraged group activities.

Exercise, Staff- and Management-Initiated

Many wellness initiatives lend themselves to grassroots organization by staff; exercise seems to be the program most commonly staff-initiated. The co-workers of one respondent have organized Pilates and yoga classes that are held during lunch hour. Others coordinate walking groups. The employees are solely responsible for promoting the event. However, one employee notes that even one hour a week for exercise is difficult for employees who work 45-hour weeks. She notes that women who have families are even harder- pressed to incorporate this hour into their schedule.

Management-initiated exercise activities are similar, but more often incorporate competition, prizes and free tools, such as pedometers. One library has a wellness committee that pairs staff interested in walking together.

Social activities

It was refreshing to see that at least one respondent's library hosts healthy potlucks and relaxation events. Unhealthy potlucks seem more the norm (see Weight Watchers® below). Relaxation events such as watching sports together or playing croquet were mentioned. Volunteer/service projects were also one way libraries encourage staff to socialize.

Government/campus resources

Library employees are encouraged by larger governing bodies to participate in national walking events such as those for AIDS and breast cancer fundraising research. An annual contest is held at one library to challenge town staff to increase their exercise each week for a month. Location of events is sometimes a barrier in larger systems, where employees get involved only if the activity is nearby.

Weight Watchers®

Weight Watchers® is one of the more formalized nutrition and support groups that are in libraries.

3. If your library does not offer any of these activities, why do you think this is the case?

A third question invited speculation as to why a participant's library might not offer workplace wellness initiatives. Of the survey's respondents, 1,028 answered this question. It is up to the reader to discern whether categories and responses are fact or speculative or opinion, with the exception of government/campus resources. The following categories were the most common.

Category	# of Responses	% of Responses
Cost	394	38%
Apathy	186	18%

Low Priority	175	17%
Organizational Culture	87	9%
Government/Campus Resources	66	6%

Cost

Cost is always a factor, especially in this era of dwindling budgets. School libraries are also suffering. Some library administrations are strict about "company time" and consider granting time for wellness initiatives as an unnecessary expense. One respondent claimed that wellness activity costs took a backseat to preserving the director's salary.

Apathy and Low Priority

It was interesting to note the range of comments that have been categorized as apathy. On one end is a respondent who feels colleagues have no interest in wellness and on the other was one who felt that work was work, not social time. Academic library employees said the focus was and should be on students whom the library serves. In the middle was a mediator soul who said that the administration was willing but heard no suggestions from staff.

Organizational Culture

Related to apathy and low priority were comments that broadened nonparticipation to an institutional mindset. It was characterized as "nose to the grindstone" and "emotionally unhealthy" at worst, that wellness should be relegated to personal time at best. One employee felt uncomfortable, that there was a judgment associated with taking time off.

Government/Campus Resources

Generally, the city or academic campus offers wellness initiatives so the library is, by default, included in access.

4. Do you think these activities are important? Why or why not?

1,148 of the survey's respondents answered this open-ended question, the fourth to invite open-ended response. Respondents were definitely in favor of wellness activities and convinced of their benefits. The most common categories to emerge from the data are found below.

Category	# of Responses	% of Responses
Morale	320	28%

Productivity	237	21%
Quality of Life	225	20%
Prevention	59	5%

Morale

There may be a connection between healthy employees and good customer service. Several respondents said that these activities promote efficiency, positive feelings, camaraderie and team-building, all of which have an impact on the way patrons are treated. One respondent wistfully stated that it would be nice to know that the employees' health was as important as circulation statistics and the budget.

Productivity

One respondent quoted research that healthy people are more productive *and* better to work with as colleagues. Of note for administrators was the comment that employees work harder when management is flexible and sensitive, related to the last comment under Morale. Another said that supporting wellness activities would cut down on absenteeism.

Quality of life

Work/life balance is tilting more and more towards the work side, and these wellness activities shift employees back to life. One respondent talked about "refreshing the mind" as an advantage with exercise.

Prevention

Junk food, lack of exercise, stress and long work days can be precursors or causes for preventable diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure. Being attentive and promoting behaviors that counter these types of diseases mean less employee time off for doctor's and hospital visits, dependable scheduling and employees who feel at their best physically and mentally.

5. Do you take advantage of any of these activities?

The fifth open-ended question, which surveyed employee involvement, received 340 answers. Listed below are the most common categories, the number of responses and the percentage of response. Even in a workplace with lots of workplace wellness options, they may not be of interest to all staff for a variety of reasons. There is some fear that employees will be penalized formally or informally by participating.

Category	# of Responses	% of Responses
Not Offered	111	33%

Not Interested	73	21%
No	56	16%
Time	21	6%
Inconvenient	14	4%
Individual Effort	14	4%
Too Expensive	7	2%

Not Interested and Individual Effort

This is another category that has many rationales. Some employees exercise and/or eat healthy, and have options for things like the flu shot or therapy outside of work. Some are not seeing topics or activities that stimulate them or lead to the health workplaces they'd like to see. Others cite long commutes as disadvantages.

Too Expensive

Activities sometimes come with personal costs, whether it's $10 for a flu shot or a fee for yoga.

Other

Of note were several cautious comments about Employee Assistance Plans (EAP) and whether employers would be notified that a staff member was taking advantage of this benefit or whether seeking counseling would be noted in personnel files. Administrators must be purposeful in letting employees know how they are protected when they use EAP services.

The qualitative data sheds light on the question of sponsorship. Responses indicate that wellness programs may be initiated in three ways: by staff, by management or by a larger administrative body (for example, city/county government or campus). Which means of sponsorship best serves employee wellness? Each of these sponsors offers advantages and disadvantages. The comparatively small size and scope of staff-initiated programs allows them to be easily tailored to the needs of the participants. And because these programs, by definition, rely upon staff collaboration, such programs can foster a greater level of staff bonding than similar initiatives offered by library management or external administration. But this reliance on staff participation can prove a disadvantage; because the staff absorbs all costs and responsibilities, the consistency of the program will vary with the personalities, personal finances and commitment of individual members.

Wellness programs offered by external administrative bodies, like city/county government and campuses, have strengths and weakness. The organizational stability of government or campuses can insulate programs from the instability in funding, scheduling and promoting that besets staff-initiated programs. In addition to organizational stability these bodies can offer more options than possible with

staff. However, with financial support and stability comes the potential for bureaucratic sluggishness. And programs may be undermined by organizational politics and culture as easily as by individual personality conflicts.

Programs offered by library management enjoy the advantages, and are prone to the disadvantages, of those initiated by staff or an external body. Library management is ideally more attuned to the needs of employees than is an outside body, and may be able to absorb costs and responsibilities more easily than individual staff members. But library management may suffer from competing priorities, staff scheduling issues, funding shortages and the need to justify each activity with adequate participation.

We hope that library administrators and employees draw suggestions about how to initiate, implement and encourage workplace wellness activities. Support can run the gamut from time off to inviting instructors and healthcare workers in to give talks to seeking sponsorships and partnerships from local agencies and businesses. The important idea to take away is that these initiatives are important for a number of reasons and that they benefit employees, the library team and the people the library serves.

All four articles in this series are available on the ALA-APA website on the Salaries page.
Special thanks to Norman Rose, Administrative Assistant II, ALA's Office for Research and Statistics, for his assistance organizing data for this article.
ALA-APA is now hosting the Workplace Wellness website developed as part of President Loriene Roy's tenure.

We would love to have your feedback on this article!