Choosing Appropriate Interventions

There is an art and a science in choosing the right interventions for your organization. How well do you know the issues?

By David Hunnicutt, PhD
Choosing appropriate interventions is a critical step in developing and delivering a results-oriented worksite wellness program. Indeed, it is the fifth benchmark in the Well Workplace model—and it’s where the rubber meets the road. In this article, we will discuss the important issues that must be addressed in order to effectively offer the appropriate interventions for your employees.

The 7 Benchmarks

| 1 | Capturing Senior Level Support—Getting your boss and others on board makes all the difference |
| 2 | Creating Cohesive Teams—Teams help lighten the load |
| 3 | Collecting Data—You can’t change what you don’t know |
| 4 | Crafting an Operating Plan—Failing to plan is planning to fail |
| 5 | Choosing Appropriate Interventions—What do people want & are willing to work for to get |
| 6 | Creating Supportive Environments—If you build it, they will participate |
| 7 | Carefully Evaluating Outcomes—Making sure that what you did made a difference |

But before we begin, it’s important to understand that the information presented in this article will apply to virtually any intervention that’s being offered. Whether it’s tobacco cessation, physical activity, weight management, stress reduction, or medical self-care, the issues that need to be addressed are almost always the same. With this in mind, we recommend that the following issues be addressed in any and all interventions that are offered.

**Issue #1:**
What Specific Objective Does This Intervention Address?

Too many times interventions are offered simply because the practitioner believes it’s a good idea. And although these “gut instincts” might be correct, it’s essential that your interventions match up with what your employees want and what the organization needs.

Make no mistake about it; interventions need to be based on data. Drawing on the results gathered from your health risk appraisal, culture audit, interest survey, and medical claims analysis, you should have a crystal clear understanding as to the programs you should be offering.

But what happens if your organization hasn’t collected any data? Well, we believe that it would be a much better idea to go back and gather the data first to make sure your intervention has an objective data set that supports your programming decision. Sure, this is going to take some time and effort, but at least you’ll be developing programs that will endure and the outcomes can be monitored over time.

**Issue #2:**
How Many Employees Are Targeted To Participate In This Intervention?

This is an important question for worksite health promotion practitioners to ask themselves prior to delivering any intervention. More often than not, participation happens by chance—and this can be a risky thing especially if the health and well-being of your organization is depending upon your success.
So rather than just sitting back and watching what transpires, we recommend proactively targeting a specific participation goal that needs to be achieved in order for the organization to realize its health objectives. As an added level of accountability, we would encourage you to go public with your goal so that you’ll have the support and gentle pressure to accomplish what you set out to do.

**Issue #3: What Incentives Will Be Used?**

It’s no surprise that incentives increase participation rates. With this in mind, you’ll need to carefully think through the incentives that will help you get to your goal. In essence, there are three broad categories of incentives—trinkets/t-shirts, merchandise/cash, and mandated policies/organizational benefits—and each will get you progressively greater participation.

Trinkets and t-shirts are those lower-level incentives that have been popular for years. For example, complete the company health fair and we’ll give you a t-shirt. Take part in a lunch ‘n learn, and you’ll get a water bottle. Even though these items are relatively inexpensive and pretty common, they do have value; and a small percentage of people will put forth effort trying to obtain them. In fact, if you offer these kinds of incentives, you can bank on about 10-15% participation.

If you offer merchandise or cash, your participation rates will increase significantly. For example, if you promise two movie tickets for completing an HRA, you can expect 40-50% participation. And, if you link the whole process to a company policy or the organization’s benefit plan, participation rates can move into the 80-90% range.

You’ll also want to give some thought to how the incentive will be delivered to the participant. Consider the organization that promised two movie tickets for...
successful completion of an intervention. When they chose to mail the tickets to the participants’ homes, they were both shocked and surprised by how many employees reported never receiving their prizes. With this firmly in mind, you’ll want to make sure you know in advance how incentives will be distributed.

**Issue #4:** How Will The Intervention Be Promoted?

This is big. Your communication strategy will have a direct impact on the number of people who take part in your intervention. In fact, if there’s one thing that we’ve learned over the years it’s this: many people don’t participate in the program because they don’t know about it and/or they didn’t get the message in time so that they could get it on to their schedules.

When it comes to offering effective health promotion interventions, seasoned wellness practitioners know that they have to communicate early and often—and they use multiple communication channels including the Internet/Intranet, posters, meetings, emails, bulletin boards, communiqués and any other mechanism they can leverage.

**Issue #5:** How Long Will The Intervention Take To Complete?

Put simply, the longer and more complicated the intervention, generally the fewer the participants or the greater the incentive will need to be. Many times wellness practitioners grossly overestimate how much time and motivation employees have to take part in programs that require multiple sessions. This is not to say that it shouldn’t be done, rather, we believe that you need to be crystal clear both internally and externally as to the amount of time and effort the intervention will take to complete.

By being transparent from the get-go, you will have taken an important step in gaining the trust and matching the right programs with the right participants. For example, imagine how you would feel if you signed up for a program and you were “informed” later on about a lot of additional tasks and sessions required in order to qualify for your incentive. You’d be angry, and we don’t blame you. The same holds true for your employees.

**Issue #6:** Will This Intervention Be Offered At Multiple Locations And For Multiple Shifts?

For years, worksite wellness interventions were offered only to first shift employees at the company’s main headquarters. Today, this is no longer acceptable. And, the more shifts and locations that you have, the more complicated it is to offer the intervention. But that’s no excuse for neglecting those workers who are at remote sites and/or working the second and third shifts.

Technology has certainly made this problem a lot easier to solve. But, make no mistake about it, offering interventions for multiple locations and multiple shifts is hard work and requires a lot of effort and forethought. It’s beyond the scope of this article to talk about this issue in detail, but it is an issue that needs to be addressed up front if you’re going to offer effective interventions.

**Issue #7:** At What Level Will The Intervention Be Offered?

Basically, there are three levels of health promotion programming—awareness, education, and behavior change. Each requires a different amount of investment in terms of money, time, and space. We believe it’s important to be clear about the level at which the program will be offered right from the start.

Even though this may sound pretty basic, we have found that overtly determining at what level your intervention will be offered is important because it virtually eliminates “mission creep.” Mission creep is what happens when you think about offering an intervention and it keeps getting bigger and more intensive every step of the way.
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For example, there are horror stories of companies who have shared with us the terrible problems they ran into when their programs got too big, too involved, and too expensive. By overtly stating up front the level of the intervention, you can successfully avoid the problem of mission creep.

**Issue #8: What Will Be The Total Cost To Deliver The Intervention?**

This is the bottom line on the bottom line. One of the worst things that can happen is that you overspend your budget and you still have more of the intervention to deliver. This is both an embarrassing and risky proposition. We’ve seen health promotion practitioners who’ve missed the mark in this area and corporate executives have pulled the plug on programs—in midstream! This is a terrible thing to have happen. Everybody loses. But, it is a valuable learning experience and one that we hope you’ll never have to go through.

Always, always, always, make sure that you know the total cost of an intervention before you ever pull the trigger.

**Issue #9: Are There Legal Issues And/Or Waivers That Need To Be Considered?**

When it comes to changing behaviors, there may be legal ramifications and/or personal risk involved. If you’re going to be effective in delivering results-oriented interventions, we suggest you make sure that legal counsel has been informed ahead of time. In so doing, you will ensure the safety of each and every participant as well as insulating the organization from legal liability.

**Issue #10: How Will The Intervention Be Evaluated?**

If you’re going to build a results-oriented worksite wellness
program, we believe that you have to think through the evaluation of the outcomes before you offer the intervention. Will participation and participant satisfaction be enough to appease corporate executives? Or, will you need to document changes in knowledge, behaviors, and biometric measures? Or do the powers that be expect to receive an ROI analysis for a particular intervention? Again, by determining your evaluation measures up front, you will be taking important steps toward successfully getting what you need from each and every intervention.

**Issue #11: Who Will Be The Key Contact If Something Goes Wrong?**

We always try to save the best for last, and this is definitely something to think about in advance—especially if interventions are offered at multiple locations and to multiple shifts. Basically, there needs to be emergency contact numbers/emails available to everyone in case something goes south. Remember, in great health promotion programs, bad news travels fast. If something goes wrong, you’ll want to know about it immediately. By having key contact information, you can ensure that you’ll be kept in the know.

**Summary**

In this article we presented 11 important issues that need to be considered when offering health-promoting interventions in your organization. This should not be considered an exhaustive list, but rather the basics in helping you to maximize your investment in your employees’ health and well-being. If you have other issues that you feel are important, feel free to email us at wellworkplace@welcoa.org.