Adopting and Maintaining a Health Promotion Program

In a study funded by the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, Richard Wolfe, an organizational expert, and his team from the University of Alberta, looked at the factors influencing the adoption and maintenance of health promotion programs. The literature abounds with research on the outcomes of such programs, but it contains little information on the decisions for establishing and maintaining a program.

The researchers used semi-structured interviews and two questionnaires to gather information on nine large organizations in Alberta. A total of 22 interviews were conducted with senior management and program professionals. The potential discrepancy between the objectives of professionals and decision-makers prompted the investigators to study both groups.

Interview Results
Interviews with program professionals and organizational management yielded the following insights into the adoption and maintenance of programs:

Impetus The availability of space at the organization site, as a result of either a corporate move to a new facility or access to unoccupied space, prompted the creation of a fitness facility in most companies.

Adoption rationale The most common rationale for adopting a program was related to attraction of employees. Most organizations adopted their program between 1977 and 1981, when competition to hire employees was fierce and many employers in the geographical area were adopting similar programs.

Proponents “Powerful” individuals such as the CEO/president, vice-presidents and high-level managers tended to initiate the program.

Objectives at the start Six organizations had membership or participation objectives, while only one considered health outcomes and two had no identified objectives. The many well-documented benefits of health promotion programs seemed to be ignored.

Current objectives The vast majority of corporations have no written objectives. Where they exist, written objectives focus on membership and participation in the program as well as on the number and type of activities conducted (rather than on health-related outcomes).

Annual approval rationale In approximately half the organizations, little justification seems necessary for the program to continue. In the rest, annual renewal depends on program process issues such as participant numbers and effective management of the facility.

Questionnaire Results
The first questionnaire listed program outcomes documented in the literature and inquired about their influence on the decision to adopt or maintain a program. The findings corroborated the interview results:

- Improving morale and job satisfaction and displaying humanistic concerns for the well-being of employees were the top rationales.
- The least important rationales included cost savings, decreased turnover, and increased communication.

Health professionals ranked all rationales higher than did senior management, except for morale and external image. They also placed significantly more importance on cost savings and absenteeism.

The second questionnaire was based on the Quinn and Rohrbaugh competing values framework. Both management and professionals were asked to rate four categories of outcomes, which were ranked in the following order:

- developing human relations;
- increasing productivity and efficiency;
- encouraging growth and resource acquisition;
- ensuring stability and communication.

Other studies suggest that health promotion programs typically strive for productivity and efficiency, and much less for the other three types of outcomes in the list. In this study, program adoption depended more on concerns related to social responsibility, corporate image, and unionization, as well as on the organizational stature of the major program proponent.

Although the study involved only nine organizations, it points to potentially vulnerable areas in health promotion programs, and it highlights the need for health professionals and corporate decision makers to pursue the same objectives.

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