



NUTRITION

Improving health in the workplace

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Filtering the noise

Why is nutrition an important factor in improving population health? How many articles are written on the right diet, the new superfood, or the best healthy eating app? How many programs promise to improve the nutrition of your employees? There is so much noise. This paper focuses on what is proven to be true and what works.

Identifying the issue

Nutrition is a powerful risk factor for cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity and many cancers.¹ Nutrition research is constantly evolving, but there is enough evidence to conclude that increasing fruit and vegetable consumption reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and cancers. However, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (2007-2010) indicated that 76 percent of the U.S. population did not meet fruit intake recommendations and 87 percent did not meet vegetable intake recommendations.²

Are workplace nutrition programs addressing this? Out of companies with 200 employees or more, 80 percent offer some type of nutrition or weight management activities.³ But which nutrition programs are these? Some companies offer coaching programs or weight-loss programs, or use digital platforms, but do these programs have long-term value? Some weight-loss programs that are offered in a group setting offer education coupled with a social network and group accountability. These are important factors for achieving behavioral change. However, many of the positive outcomes are not maintained when members stop

attending the group coaching sessions. Some of the newer digital platforms to target nutrition have promise since they personalize the program to the member and offer unique nutrition advice based on the member's lifestyle and habits. However, similarly, these solutions have not been proven to be successful in the long term.

Addressing the challenge

There are challenges with analyzing the value of any nutrition program. There is a good chance of self-reporting bias when using questionnaires and surveys, and there is not yet an evidence-based method to "verify" the foods we eat. However, even though the data might not be perfect, there is utility in asking the questions. Specifically, asking members questions about their eating habits can bring them awareness about the health and risk of their lifestyles.

There is not a "one size fits all" or perfect nutrition program. Each company has a different culture and demographics, and similarly, individuals have different preferences. Any successful nutrition program must have the ability to be tailored to the individual. For example, there are some people who cook most of their meals at home and others who go out to eat and don't have time to cook. Of course, it is a good idea to encourage cooking at home as we know most individuals who cook daily meals have healthier nutrition. However, it is crucial to meet the individual where he or she is at; we want to provide resources to the members who eat out as well. It is important to encourage small changes to help members modify their diets, but not try to change their entire lifestyles all at once. Lastly, it is beneficial to have different methods of delivery for content – online, email, over the phone, and if possible, in person.

Workplace culture matters

For any corporate nutrition program, it is critical to address the importance of the work environment. A company that has a great nutrition counseling program but offers sodas in the vending machines, pizza at work meetings, and unhealthy enticing cafeteria options, is minimizing the value of the nutrition program. A comprehensive nutrition intervention limits or removes the unhealthy choices and attempts to nudge the employee to make a healthy decision. A company can remove all sodas from the vending



machines, put them in the back section, or charge more for them. Similarly, in a cafeteria, a company can take burgers off the menu, highlight the produce and healthier options in the front, or charge more for the burger. Financial incentives can be very impactful, so charging more for the unhealthy choice can often result in the desired behavior change.

Reflecting on habits

Accountability is also an important factor to consider when designing workplace nutrition programs. The accountability can be to the self, such as dietary self-monitoring or “food journaling,” or it can be provided by a coach, family member, friend or any support network. Dietary self-monitoring has been found to have a significant association with weight loss.⁴ It seems that the act of reflecting on what we eat on a daily basis helps us become more aware of our habits, and in turn, helps us potentially change them for the better. Nutritional counseling can be effective because the coach provides external accountability.

Where Vitality comes in

What is Vitality doing in the nutrition space? We have constructed a dynamic program that is closely aligned with many of these best practices. Vitality uses assessments to gather data on fruit and vegetable intake and other nutritional habits, and if members are not meeting the national guidelines, Vitality will alert them and provide recommended resources for improving their nutrition.

The Vitality program personalizes suggested programs and resources based on members’ lifestyles and preferences. Members can also choose how to receive educational information: Vitality offers online nutrition courses, FYI webcasts led by leading experts in the field and DIY (Do It Yourself) campaigns with tips and questions.

Vitality encourages goal setting in order to create personal accountability, and by engaging spouses and children in the program, there is group accountability as family members motivate each other. Vitality also promotes engagement in the social community tab of the challenge platform. Coworkers have the ability to talk to one another and provide support or friendly competition. Vitality’s Facebook page similarly provides a place where Vitality members can share healthy tips or stories of successes and failures. Lastly, Vitality recognizes the importance of the

environments and culture we live in. The Vitality HealthyFood™ program provides financial incentives for healthy food purchases, coupled with education about the nutritional value of each item in the grocery store. The program also offers shopping list tools and recipe catalogs.

Steps toward improvement

Overall, more large-scale studies are needed to demonstrate which workplace nutrition interventions are effective for long-term behavior change. But if you take away only our things from this paper, consider the following when designing nutrition-based initiatives to improve health in the workplace:

- To get members to eat more vegetables and fruits, gather data on your member population, set an objective, and form an intervention with a thoughtful communication strategy.
- Personalize the nutrition program. To have the greatest impact, offer members different educational programs based on their lifestyles and different education mediums based on their learning preferences.
- Offer programs that provide members with accountability. Use a coaching or counseling program, engage your population in company-wide challenges, and engage the entire family in the wellness journey.
- Change the environment so that the healthy choice is the “easy choice.” Take out sodas and unhealthy foods from the workplace or charge more for these options. Offer free fruits and vegetables if budget allows. Choose healthy catering options for meetings. Any successful wellness program needs the workplace environment to be aligned with the wellness program mission.



REFERENCES

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³ Schaeffer, J. (2015). Worksite Wellness. *Today's Dietician*, 17(6).

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