CORRESPONDENCE

Results of a Workplace Health Campaign: What Can Be Achieved?

by Dr. med. Dr. Sportwiss. Dieter Leyk, Dr. med. Ulrich Rohde, Nadine D. Hartmann, BSc Philipp A. Preuß, Dipl.-Sportl. Alexander Sievert, Dr. phil. Alexander Witzki in issue 18/2014

Enhance Motivation for Lifestyle Change

At the Occupational Medicine and Health Protection Department of BASF, we find it difficult to comprehend how the very sobering results of a singular health campaign (1) at a Bundeswehr (German armed forces) agency can be applied to other companies. Based on our almost 150 years of experience, the first and foremost concern in health promotion is to enthuse and motivate personnel, to get started with the topic, and then change their lifestyle sustainably. We think that participation rates of less than 50%, and at the end of the German Armed Forces study of slightly more than 15%, indicate that the campaign failed to reach the target group with the approach selected. Any somewhat educated person knows what a healthy diet should look like, that regular exercise promotes health and well-being, and that smoking can lead to serious disease. However, the art of successful health promotion is precisely to translate rational insight into emotional involvement and to motivate personnel by means of fun, competitions or incentives to actually change their behavior. Numerous approaches in the workplace setting—all published by us (www.basf.com/arbeitsmedizin), but unfortunately not mentioned in this article—show that a different (i.e. successful) outcome is indeed achievable.

Even types of work which are regarded as stressful, such as shift work, have no ill effects on the health of the personnel at BASF Ludwigshafen; reversely, the conclusion can be drawn that the preventive measures offered by us are effective (2).

Decisive are, however, the long-term effects of successful health promotion. Based on a long-term (>10 years) observation of a cohort of more than 31 000 subjects, we were able to show that it is indeed possible to significantly reduce mortality among participants of health promotion programs (3). It is undisputed that mortality is the hardest criterion in medicine. Dead or not dead is a criterion which leaves no room for interpretation.

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Prof. Dr. med. Stefan Lang

Abteilung Arbeitsmedizin und Gesundheitsschutz
BASF SE, Ludwigshafen
stefan.lang@basf.com

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists.

Fundamental Rethink Required

The result of this well-presented model study about a broad-based health and fitness campaign carried out in 2011 (1) explicitly supports the experiences made in other healthcare areas as well: To be able to actually reach a maximum number of insured as adherent producers of their health, first and foremost a fundamental rethink of our professional care systems/of our approach as healthcare experts is required. We should make use of the experiences and proven efficiency rule of marketing experts who succeed in engaging with people and achieving their long-term retention.

A colorful cornucopia of—statistically quite reasonable—health-promoting offerings is not suitable for companies. Offering-based prevention and health promotion is not only expensive and burdensome, it may even be counterproductive.

In evidence-based practice, the professional reflection of the actual individual requirement proves itself as a verifiable, highly effective and also sustainable approach to encourage participation, namely the need for only very specific offerings. They should exactly match or be tailored to the personal health resources of the staff member – this is what people interested in their vitality, their ability to work and perform or their bio-functional age condition want. Today it is possible to identify these treatment/action-relevant biopsychosocial strengths and resources for health and aging on the personnel level at reasonable expense (www.bmg.bund.de/praevention/betriebliche-gesundheitsfoerderung/best-practice-nordrhein-westfalen/projekte-kombination-von-handlungsfeldern/karl-mayer-bleibt-fit-vital-check.html). The reflected resources can then be mobilized in a targeted and verifiable form under everyday conditions, science-based pertinent exercise or psychological competencies (2). In this way, we will together achieve solid interventional success and/or effect lifestyle changes (Fraunhofer Innovation Forum “Demography + Health Resources”: www.age-plus-health.eu/2010/index.html).

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PD Dr. med. habil. Dagmar Pöthig

Europäische Vereinigung für Vitalität und Aktives Altern eVAA e. V.
Im GerontoLabEurope, Leipzig
poethig@evaaa.de

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In Reply:

We would like to thank both authors for their contributions regarding the important public health issue of workplace health promotion. In contrast to Prof. Lang's introductory remarks, we do not see any significant differences in our positions. For the Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces), health maintenance and –promotion of civil and military personnel was and is of pivotal importance. This is, however, not a matter of short-term or one time interventions. Rather, it must be ensured that personnel from almost all occupational, educational, and age groups stay healthy, have the necessary ability to cope with stress and display sufficient performance capacity under physically and mentally demanding deployment conditions both in Germany and internationally (1). Classical health protection measures are simply insufficient in this context: While medical screening, immunization, etc. are rather easy to implement, it is considerably more difficult to achieve a significant and sustainable improvement of exercise- and dietary behavior (1). Without modern, resource-guided, and interdisciplinary prevention research and its implementation in everyday life, only isolated, short-term successes can be achieved at best. This is why the scientific expertise will be merged into one Institute of Preventive Medicine of the German Armed Forces Bundeswehr in Koblenz in the future.

Compared with other health initiatives, participation in the model study was initially high (48% of the entire personnel) (2). With regard to the criterion “short-term success”, not only this level of participation but also the evaluation by our personnel has to be regarded as very positive (2, 3). Above all, the real challenges of virtually all campaigns are:

- to reach the target groups which would benefit most from the health promotion initiative,

- to motivate a maximum number of personnel to rethink and adopt a healthy and performance-enhancing lifestyle,
- to empower these persons to establish these behavioral changes in the long term (1).

In the light of these challenges, we are grateful for the contributions pointing to potential strategies which could lead to sustainable improvements in exercise and dietary behavior (4).

The perception of sports being fun is a key differentiator between those actively engage in sporting activities and those who are inactive (2, 5). The comments made by Prof. Lang concerning the importance of the motivation of the individual underscore our own statements (2).

Dr. Pöthig is right in saying that the stakeholders involved in the implementation of preventive measures need to rethink their approach and that significant changes in the healthcare system are required. Providing personalized, demand-based offerings and opportunities to experience a sense of achievement are certainly important approaches to win individuals over to participate in sustainable health promotion. Those enabled to better cope with the challenges in the workplace and at home are more likely to maintain a health-promoting and performance-enhancing lifestyle.

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Prof. Dr. med. Dr. Sportwiss. Dieter Leyk

Zentrales Institut des Sanitätsdienstes
der Bundeswehr Koblenz
Laborabteilung IV
Wehrmedizinische Ergonomie und Leistungsphysiologie, Koblenz
Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln
Institut für Physiologie und Anatomie
Leyk@dshs-koeln.de

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