

Employee Engagement in Wellness Programs Still Difficult for Employers

BOSTON — Employers are struggling to connect workplace wellness programs and incentives to the wants and needs of their employees, according to a new study.

Half of the 1,669 employees surveyed by Towers Watson & Co. and the National Business Group on Health earlier this year did not participate in a single wellness activity or program in 2014, according to results released on Monday at the NBGH's 29th National Health, Productivity and Human Capital Conference in Boston.

Among the most popular wellness programs offered by U.S. employers — including health risk assessments, biometric screenings, onsite vaccinations, well-being fairs, and worksite diet and exercise activities — average employee participation rates topped out at just 48%.

Financial incentives also appear to be falling short of their intended targets, according to the survey. Employers said they offered an average maximum annual incentive of \$880 per employee, but paid out an average of just \$365.

“What's even more startling is that 40% of employees didn't receive any of the incentives at all. They completely opted out of the programs,” said Shelly Wolff, New York-based senior health management consultant at Towers Watson. “Employees are leaving a ton of money on the table, and that tells us that you can't pay people to change health habits.”

Ms. Wolff said the employee uptake rate for financial wellness incentives has actually fallen in recent years, despite employers steadily increasing the amount they offer in incentives.

“I think part of it is that people give up,” Ms. Wolff said. “They feel like it's too hard or not worth it, or that it adds unneeded complexity to their lives. Whatever the reasons, it's a big disengagement number.”