



# Unique Barriers to Workplace Health Promotion Programs by Wage Category:

## A Qualitative Assessment of Secondary Data

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### What is the issue?

Workplace health promotion programs (WHPP) are widely used by employers to improve workers' health outcomes, though participation rates often fail to engage a significant proportion of employees who would most benefit from them.

Low-wage workers are less likely to be the focus of WHPP planning, despite experiencing higher levels of obesity, physical inactivity, excessive alcohol consumption, and smoking compared to higher-wage workers. Even when WHPPs are available, research suggests that low-wage workers are less likely to participate than their higher-wage colleagues.

Many WHPPs are developed and uniformly offered to all employees, failing to account for health inequities around employees' access and the differences in social and environmental factors which impact employees' personal priorities.

**This study highlights the significance of wage category as an important factor associated with the number and types of barriers to participating in workplace health promotion programming.**

### What was done and how?

A large, mid-western university implemented a program evaluation survey to assess WHPP participation. Of those employees randomly sampled, a total of 3,212 (16.1%) faculty and staff responded to the survey. Respondents were divided into four wage categories. Employees responded to a survey that assessed the perceived relevance and value of specific aspects of an employee wellness initiative and thoughts on future planning of the university's WHPP (U-WHPP). Three open-ended questions were included in qualitative analysis:

- 1 Why do you feel that the type of programs offered by U-WHPP are not easily accessible?
- 2 What could U-WHPP do to make participating in programs more convenient?
- 3 What would you like to see more of from U-WHPP?

The authors used a grounded theory approach to identify emergent themes in survey responses to the open-ended questions. Themes and sub-themes were separated by wage category to explore similarities and differences.



## What was found?

### Barriers that workers face to WHPP participation



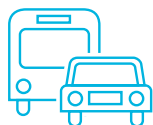
**Time:** Employees in all wage groups described time-based barriers, including programs occurring during work hours and programs that took a long time to complete. Low-wage employees are more likely to have irregular work schedules and be shift workers. This made it hard to participate in programs scheduled during the 9-5 workday.



**Financial Costs and Incentives:** Employees in all wage groups expressed interest in incentives to motivate participation. However, while low-wage employees emphasized requests for free or reduced-cost classes so they could afford to participate, higher-wage employees shared a desire for reimbursements to help offset costs of specialized equipment or subscription services in which they were already engaged.



**Workload/Job Demands:** Employees in all wage groups noted that the responsibilities and demands of their job impacted their ability to participate in healthy activities. Low-wage employees focused on external demands related to staff coverage and role flexibility. They described pressure from supervisors to stay at their desks to avoid a lack of coverage, which prevented participation. Higher-wage employees focused on self-generated, internal forces preventing participation, including their ability to carve out time given busy schedules.



**Commute:** Employees in all wage groups reported that parking was a barrier to accessing programs; however, low-wage employees more often shared issues related to public transportation and the difficulty accessing classes before or after work because of bus schedules or vanpools.



**Organizational Policies/Practices:** Employees in all wage groups noted a desire to make a culture of health an organizational priority, commenting that support from supervisors and department leadership plays a vital role in promoting U-WHPP. Lower-wage workers highlighted the need for WHPP policies that allow employees the time and flexibility to address health concerns. Employees in all wage groups also noted the importance and need for enhanced emotional and mental health support.

## What does this mean and for whom?



Understanding the unique concerns of participants in different wage groups is a first step toward designing sustainable WHPPs that can address health inequity concerns while involving the entire workforce. This can be done by engaging employee subpopulations to better understand and address their needs and barriers to WHP engagement.

Organizations can also develop organizational approaches to provide cultural support to encourage employee participation. This might be done through policies that outline how employees can use work time for participation or through better training for middle-managers about how to better support their employees' well-being. Organizations that are committed to equitable access and engagement in comprehensive WHP may increase participation rates among a significant proportion of employees.

### After the Study

In response to the program evaluation, the U-WHPP has made improvements. They have implemented trainings to help leaders create a healthy workplace culture and are addressing the social determinants of health among lower wage-earning employee populations with food-sharing cupboards and budgeting classes. The U-WHPP has also launched a Resource Coach Pilot program that offers community resource referrals.

### For more information:



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