

# The Right Fit: Healthy Work Environment – Potential Obstacles

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While it may have been easy to dismiss employee well-being as simply a personal matter in the past, top leaders and managers now recognize that emphasizing it can lead to significant returns. Employees with high well-being (physical, mental and emotional) are more resilient during widespread or personal tough times. Also, the data suggests that, in our large-scale shift to remote work, the incident rates for lower back pain, less exercise and poor mental and emotional well-being are only increasing.

Below are a list of responses you may encounter during your pitch to leadership and possible responses to their concerns.

## 1. Financial - “We cannot spend money on these initiatives right now.”

- a. By implementing strategies which improve employee health, reduce absenteeism and presenteeism, and reduce the number of musculoskeletal and air quality related diseases your employees could face, you are making an investment in your people. For most companies, up to 90% of their operating costs consist of payroll.
- b. Employees who are ill and unhealthy are twice as likely to seek employment elsewhere - recent studies show that the cost of replacing an employee can be **nearly double** their salary. By investing in your employees now, you’re also investing in the future of your company.
- c. Diseases and afflictions like asthma, recurring headaches, and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) which cause neck and back pain are the leading causes of presenteeism and absenteeism in employees. By making investments in their work comfort, encouraging physical activity and improving the air quality in their offices, you are making a direct investment in your company’s productivity, engagement and morale. Green buildings with improved indoor air quality have been directly proven to increase employee productivity and improved cognitive function.
- d. If now isn’t the right time to make these investments, try to secure a future date where these initiatives can be discussed and investigated further. Put together a budget proposal of low-cost options (for example, 1-2 standing desk stations, personal air purifiers) and ask for it to be included in your company’s annual budget review.
- e. Consider conducting a low- or no-cost workplace satisfaction survey, either with a consultant or creating one yourself on a platform such as SurveyMonkey. Topics can include workstation comfort, anonymous identification of issues relating to ergonomics, and employees can rate preferences for which upgrades would matter most to them.

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2. **Cultural - “I don’t believe these policy changes will result in any work-life balance improvement and our employees don’t care about these things. They just want to show up, do their jobs, and go home.”**
  - a. Consider this - in professional surveys conducted by ZweigGroup and other 3rd party AEC research entities, the biggest challenge noted is “recruitment and retention of talent in our industry.” Health and well-being have direct effects on an employee’s engagement, productivity, trust and loyalty to their company. Introducing policies which improve your employees’ lives show that you genuinely value them. As a result, they may feel appreciated on a deeper level than they would with general perks. Studies have shown that workers who feel nurtured and cared for by their employer are more likely to face Monday mornings with a smile.
  - b. Consider conducting an internal survey about employee workstation comfort, wants and needs, and feedback about how their workstations could be improved. Ask open-ended questions and make sure your survey is 100% confidential.
  - c. Provide case studies from other firms who have implemented these changes (refer to the case studies on Elevate Her website, or other supporting data)
  - d. Link employer-sponsored benefits and policies to long-term healthy choices and actions. Emphasize that employer-sponsored wellness programs that drive education and engagement are critical to improving physical health.
  
3. **Practical - “These elements are out of our control.”** i.e. our lease doesn’t permit us to make modifications to our office or our lease on this particular office space doesn’t expire for years. **OR** the health of our employees is their own responsibility - we cannot force people to become more physically active or consider their health.
  - a. Many of the policy suggestions included for Small, Medium and Large Firms can be made without physically altering your office space. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we are currently facing an epidemic of diseases brought on by unhealthy lifestyles. Some policy suggestions are programmatic in nature, emphasize messaging over physical action and require little to no modification of your current office settings.
  - b. While employers don’t ultimately retain control over an employee’s health choices, the research suggests that employers who enact thoughtful employee wellness programs do see the benefits. Many AEC firms claim their people are their greatest asset - by making small investments, these companies can actually stand behind that statement.

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- c. Empathy and respect for all employees has been proven to create a strong company culture. By showing employees that you care about them - even through a month-long education campaign dedicated to workplace ergonomics - you will foster a work environment that inspires employees to give their all.
- d. Ultimately, people want to work for companies that are renowned for treating their staff well.

#### 4. Perception & Beliefs - **“These initiatives won’t make a substantial difference for our employees.”**

- a. Overcoming perceptions and beliefs about the effectiveness of these policies takes time. Often, these perceptions are rooted in long-held beliefs about traditional roles of the employer and the employee. For some leadership teams, this may be difficult or nearly impossible to overcome. For such resistant leadership, we recommend an incremental approach - beginning with a pitch presentation, and allowing plenty of time for questions and discussion. Work with your HR team to follow up on specific objections with relevant data and case studies from the website. If decisions cannot be made on the program right now, try to secure a future date where policies can be revisited.
- b. While there is mixed data on the success of employee wellness programs in making large-scale health improvements, two important outcomes emerged from a recent study:<sup>1</sup>
  - i. They increased the proportion of employees reporting they had a primary care physician after 24 months
  - ii. They improved the employee’s sense of being healthy
- c. Encourage your leadership team to focus less on the immediate impacts of a workplace wellness program, and more on the long-term effects of employee well-being strategies. These strategies can be implemented over time to address:
  - i. Prioritizing mental health - consider how programs like these can help employees feel more productive, engaged and how physical activity can help address stress, exhaustion and burnout.
  - ii. Supporting financial security - make sure support is available as employees face economic consequences from the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> “Wellness Programs Show Modest Benefits, as Efforts Pivot to Well-Being”, Society for Human Resources Management, June 22, 2020. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/benefits/pages/wellness-programs-show-modest-benefits-as-efforts-pivot-to-well-being.aspx>

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- iii. Helping build resilience - ensure your employees are healthy and equipped to tackle what comes next.