



# Reaping the Rewards of Worksite Wellness

A special report  
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Employers and employees are engaged in an epic struggle to change unhealthy lifestyles. Each year most employees and most employers make efforts to achieve lifestyle improvement goals. Unfortunately, few individuals achieve their health improvement goals for more than a few months. And, most worksite health promotion initiatives achieve only small changes in overall health behavior within the workforce.

A new, and hopefully more effective, health promotion model combines individual change strategies with efforts to create supportive cultural environments. The purposes of the culture change effort would be to increase: (1) participation in initial screenings and assessments; (2) lifestyle change program engagement rates, (3) lifestyle change success rates, and (4) employees' abilities to maintain positive practices and to avoid new health risks.

The University of Michigan Worker Health Program demonstrated the value of combining individual initiative with supportive environments. In a comparison of 4 worksites, the combined approach yielded more dramatic and sustained results. Over the past 20 years, Holtyn & Associates, LLC has combined individual counseling and assessment with culture change to reduce cardiovascular risks. *Four case studies are offered to illustrate the impact of a model that simultaneously addresses individual and cultural change.*

“A new health promotion model combines individual change strategies with efforts to create supportive cultural environments.”



There is a growing consensus that healthy lifestyle practices such as physical activity, healthy eating, not smoking, social engagement and avoiding heavy drinking are important to preventing illness and extending life. A poll of workers will quickly verify that most employees are trying to improve their health practices.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of employees attempt to achieve at least one health-related lifestyle goal each year.<sup>1</sup> Few business leaders doubt that it is difficult to work while sick.<sup>2</sup> More than 90% of employers with 200 or more workers offer wellness programs.<sup>3</sup> More than half of smaller employers offer at least one wellness program.<sup>3</sup>

If motivation and intent were all that is required for wellness, Americans would be fit, trim and addiction free. Sadly, this is not even close to being the case. The percentage of Americans who adhere to all four of the most basic lifestyle prescriptions for good health — not smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, eating adequate fruits and vegetables, and getting physical activity — is a dismal 3%.<sup>4</sup> Lifestyle improvement success rates among most workers usually fall below 20%.<sup>1</sup> Less than a quarter of workers achieve their desired behavior change goals for more than a few months.<sup>1</sup> For most wellness activities, the end of the activity also marks a precipitous decline in the health behavior and a return to unhealthy practice.<sup>5</sup> As Dr. Dee Edington, of the University of Michigan’s Health Management Research Center put it, a reasonable health promotion program goal is to “just don’t get worse.”<sup>6</sup>

We may make jokes about the fate of this year’s “health resolutions,” but the implications are not all that funny.

- Approximately 40% of all the deaths in the United States are premature – at least 900,000 deaths annually.<sup>7</sup>
- Lifestyle-related chronic diseases account for an estimated 70% of the nations medical care costs.<sup>8</sup>

High lifestyle change failure rates undermine enthusiasm for wellness initiatives. Medical professionals are reluctant to give lifestyle change prescriptions that few patients can fill.<sup>9</sup> Managers lack confidence in corporate wellness programs.<sup>2</sup> They realize that lifestyle change is very difficult.<sup>2</sup> They are reluctant to subject the majority of their employees to failure.<sup>2</sup> Employees are demanding greater incentives for participation in wellness programs.<sup>10</sup>

“ We may make jokes about the fate of this year’s “health resolutions,” but the implications are not all that funny. ”



One study of 36 employers found that without an incentive, less than 20 percent of employees completed health assessments.<sup>10</sup> This study concluded that cash incentives between \$200 and \$600 were optimal. This “optimal” level of award for health assessments is much more than what most employers spend on their entire wellness program including activities that are designed to help employees change their health practices.

Much of the economic research to date has been devoted to documenting the high costs of medical care, lost productivity and illness that results from poor health practices.<sup>7,8</sup> Research has also been devoted to calculating return on investment. Current estimates show that most wellness programs more than pay for themselves.<sup>11</sup> One analysis showed that a comprehensive wellness program could break even if participation in shifting just 1% of employees from high risk to low risk status.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the economic research has not resulted in proportional investment in wellness programming. A typical company and health plan spends less than \$500 per employee annually on wellness programs. This investment is far less than one monthly installment for an employee's health insurance.

It is time to refocus the health promotion research agenda on developing program designs that achieve high lifestyle improvement success rates and that increase the overall prevalence of healthy lifestyle practices. Statistically significant differences between treatment and control groups will not be enough to make wellness a serious business proposition. Attention needs to turn to meaningful — not just statically greater than chance or temporary — increases in the prevalence of healthy practices. Employers and employees are convinced that healthy lifestyles are very beneficial and they are equally convinced that it is very difficult to achieve healthy lifestyles. A commitment of resources and enthusiasm will be more likely when people have a reasonable chance of achieving their lifestyle goals.

“A typical company and health plan spends less than \$500 per employee annually on wellness programs.”



## The focus on the individual lifestyle change

Many worksite wellness programs are directed at individual change (see Figure 1, on the next page). The individual change approach draws upon the disciplines of medicine and psychology. This approach holds that lifestyle improvement is derived from individual participation in wellness activities such as health assessments, telephone coaching and use of health information websites. Efforts to increase participation and success have focused on: (1) tailoring programs to individual readiness and preferences, (2) using principles of positive psychology that emphasize personal strengths, and (3) offering incentives to individual participants.

**Figure 1**  
Wellness Models Focused on Individual Behavior



Programs that focus on individual change frequently use personal health assessments (also known as health risk appraisals) as a starting point in the wellness program process. The assessment is designed to assist the individual in setting health behavior goals. Assessment results are often used to determine which programs are likely to be of interest and/or benefit to the individual. The personal health assessment is commonly used as a gateway and referral mechanism to behavior change programs.

## Adding supportive environments to the wellness model

The supportive environments approach is directed at creating physical and social conditions that promote health behavior. The environmental approach is seen in the behavioral science disciplines of public health, social psychology, anthropology and sociology. The following interventions are examples of the environmental approach to wellness.

“The personal health assessment is commonly used as a gateway and referral mechanism to behavior change programs.”



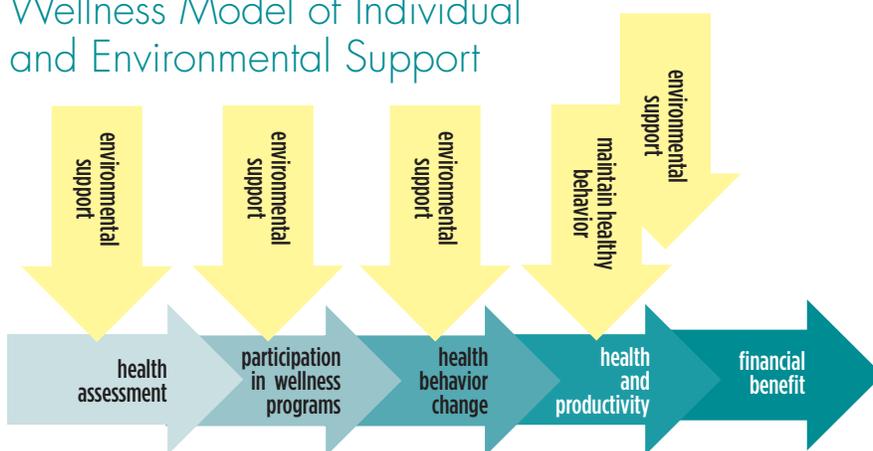
- **When an organization commits time**, space and equipment to promoting healthy lifestyles, the healthy choice can become the easier choice. An example would be to include healthy choices in vending machines.
- **Creating wellness norms makes healthy lifestyles** “the way we do things around here.” For example, healthy norms have been established for wearing car safety belts.
- **Social influences** such as modeling, traditions, communication and rewards can also reinforce positive lifestyle practices. Leadership participation in wellness programming is an example of such supportive social influences.
- **Supportive peers** can help reduce barriers to change and offer needed guidance. Mentoring, mutual support groups, group wellness contests, sports teams and household wellness programs are examples of efforts to foster positive peer support.

Fostering a supportive culture has been identified as among the best practices in worksite health promotion programs.<sup>13</sup> One analysis of 52 studies published from 1990 to 2003 found that the most effective worksite interventions include:

- Environmental supports for behavior change (e.g., access to healthy foods).
- Financial and/or other incentives (e.g., lower health insurance premiums, free gym memberships).
- Corporate policies that support healthy lifestyles (e.g., tobacco free mandates, health care coverage for preventive services).
- Frequent and simple heart disease and stroke prevention messages (e.g., posters, newsletters, e-mails).<sup>14</sup>

The environment has a number of potential functions within a wellness program model. The following diagram shows the multiple roles of environmental support in achieving financial benefits.

**Figure 2**  
Wellness Model of Individual and Environmental Support



“Fostering a supportive culture has been identified as among the best practices in worksite health promotion programs.”



As can be seen in Figure 2, the creation of a supportive environment offers a number of benefits that are less likely in programs that exclusively target individual change.

- **Environmental influences touch a cross-section of employees.** A personal health assessment is not a prerequisite to being influenced by supportive environments. The environment is a way to reach those who might not otherwise participate.

- **Environmental support plays a role in stemming the flow** to higher risk behavior. New unhealthy practices such as overeating and smoking are often the result of social influences. Unsupportive environmental conditions can be barriers to maintaining positive practices such as regular physical activity.
- **Environmental support plays a role in lasting lifestyle change.** Individual initiative and focus are important ingredients to success. A supportive environment makes it more likely that people will continue with the behavior once the initial push for change subsides.
- **Environmental support plays a role in wellness program participation.** An established tradition of completing an annual health assessment would, for example, increase the ease of administering such health assessments. A work climate of trust and openness is often required for employees to feel comfortable participating in wellness programs that require self-disclosure and risk-taking.

## Support for combining individual support with supportive environments

Combining support for individual change with supportive environments makes intuitive sense. Such a combined approach would be a logical extension of affirmative research findings with both the individual change approach — as seen in health coaching, tailored messaging, and the benefits health information Websites — as well as research on the impact of supportive environments — as seen in the impact of seat belt laws and smoking restrictions.

“Combining support for individual change with supportive environments makes intuitive sense.”



The University of Michigan Worker Health Program conducted a comparison of the relative effectiveness of four different models of worksite cardiac risk prevention.<sup>15,16</sup> Baseline screening was conducted in four manufacturing plants. Site 1 offered screening only, with referral recommendations for those found to have cardiovascular disease risks. Site 2 also provided health education information and classes. Site 3 added routine follow-up counseling and a menu of intervention types, and Site 4 added social organization within the plant.

At the beginning of the study the four worksites were comparable in size, demographic make-up of the workforce, and health risks identified at the initial screening. All worksites achieved 75% or higher participation in the initial health screenings, with help from local wellness committees that encouraged participation. Three years later health outcomes were strikingly different: health risks profiles either were unchanged or had deteriorated at sites 1 and 2. However, where pro-active outreach and follow-up were deployed (at sites 3 and 4), impressive reductions in cardiovascular risks occurred. The best results were found at site 4, where special attention was placed on creating a supportive cultural environment. The methods used in sites 3 and 4 were equally effective with blue collar, white collar, and managerial employees, with men and women, and with different races and ethnic groups.

## Case studies using the integrated, comprehensive model

In 1987, Holtyn & Associates, LLC adopted a worksite health promotion model that combines frequent one-to-one assessments and coaching with developing supportive cultural environments. Cultural outcomes include developing cultures of wellness, active integrated wellness committees, modification and development of workplace policies, conducting ongoing promotions, and providing communications support. Low risk participants receive one-to-one coaching twice per year, but high risk participants receive it four times. Biometric testing, fitness testing, and self-report of health behavior are included in the periodic meetings with the wellness coach. Holtyn & Associates, LLC developed a custom online, real time management feedback system whereby middle-managers are able to track cultural support, program participation and aggregate health behavior among their workgroups. In addition, online, real time, health status and health trend reports are available for participants, to supplement educational support and interaction with coaches between assessments. The Holtyn & Associates, LLC model costs \$350 per employee, per year which still compares favorably with the cost of other programs that have comparable incentive costs, just to get participants to complete a personal health assessment.

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Over the past 23 years, Holtyn & Associates, LLC has served approximately 500 small and medium sized employers. The following case studies were selected to reflect programming experiences across business sectors.

## Case Study #1

# Kalamazoo County Government

- **Employees: 770**
- **Program duration: 3 years**

## Highlights

Kalamazoo County Government recently performed a claims analysis for the two years prior to the wellness program and three years after starting the wellness program in 2006. The County documented a savings of 3 million dollars during the wellness program period that they attribute to the wellness program. The County's 2009 health insurance claims experience increase for its self-funded plan was only 1%.

## Case Study #2

# Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kalamazoo, MI

- **Employees: 425**
- **Program duration: 10 years**

## Highlights

KVCC is a CDC best practice worksite and was studied by the CDC Swift Worksite Assessment and Translation (SWAT) team in 2004. KVCC has maintained low single digit health claims cost increases with its self-funded plan since 2004, KVCC has not reduced coverage or plan design and attributes the savings to its vibrant wellness program. Other locally comparable employers have been receiving double digit premium cost increases.

Participants in KVCC's wellness program have maintained very high rates of health risk elimination over multiple years. Since 2004, over 60% of wellness program participants have zero cardiovascular disease heart risk factors. In addition, 95% of wellness program participants would recommend the program to others.

## Case Study #3 and #4

# Flexfab, Inc. and Hastings Fiberglass, Hastings MI

### Flexfab, Inc.

Employees: 371  
Participation: 92%  
Spouses: 111  
Program duration: 6 years  
Multiple sites

An elastomeric engineering company that manufactures products using silicone rubber and other elastomers. Flexfab specializes in the design of high performance hose, lightweight ducts, flexible connectors, boots, bellows, sleeves, special shaped aerospace products.

### Hastings Fiberglass

Employees: 76  
Program duration: 6 years

Since 1959, Hastings Fiberglass has designed and fabricated fiber glass products and tools for electrical power and communications.

## Highlights

Flexfab and Hastings Fiberglass work together to promote wellness in the small rural town of Hastings. Their two wellness committees develop community events, including weight contests and a 5 kilometer walk and run.

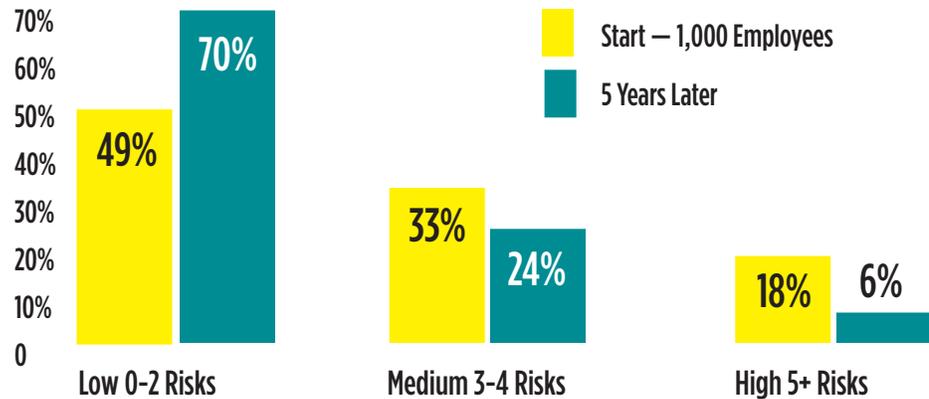
Flexfab includes spouses in the wellness program. Spouses have also reduced health risks. The addition of spouses reinforces the cultural support aspects of the wellness program to include family, in addition to supervisors, peers and friends.

## Risk factor reduction

The primary goal of Holtyn & Associates, LLC has been to measure and reduce the following cardiovascular risk factors: (1) physical inactivity, (2) high BP, (3) cholesterol  $\geq 200$ , (4) heavy weight and at-risk waist circumference, (5) smoking, (6) elevated glucose, (7) high stress, (8) low coping, (9) depression, (10) high alcohol intake, (11) high fat consumption, and (12) low fruit/vegetables/fiber consumption. Figure 3 on the next page, shows a representative aggregate risk reduction for a college, two manufacturing companies and a municipality.

**Figure 3**

## Aggregate Cardiovascular Risk Reduction Among Sample of Holtyn & Associates, LLC Clients



Holtyn & Associates, LLC utilizes biometric tests, a measurement of fitness and health behavior self-reports to assess employee health risks. As can be seen in Table 1 on the next page, dramatic reductions in health risks have occurred. This is in contrast to companies that set a goal of “not getting any worse.”<sup>6</sup> National population health risks have been trending towards higher risk.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the Holtyn population trends toward eliminating health risks. The Holtyn data is significant, because it includes the addition of new entrants into the wellness program, who tend to be less healthy. The Holtyn & Associates, LLC model creates high participant retention while continually recruiting new employees. Other programs typically experience high attrition rates, as participants fall short of their goals and drop out of the program.<sup>18</sup>

“The Holtyn & Associates, LLC model creates high participant retention while it continually recruits new employees.”



## Participation results

In the Holtyn & Associates, LLC model, employees must receive a biometric assessment and coaching session at least annually to be considered active in the program. Table 1 shows individual participation rates.

**Table 1**  
Coaching Participation Rates

Organization	Participation in One-to-One Wellness Coaching
Flexfab, Inc.	86%
Hastings Fiberglass	100%
Kalamazoo Valley Community College	83%
Kalamazoo County Government	79%

Holtyn & Associates, LLC establishes wellness committees that are engaged in creating a supportive environment. These committees must include a cross-section of employees and organizational leaders. All Holtyn & Associates, LLC clients have established ongoing, active wellness committees.

## Culture change findings

Holtyn & Associates, LLC works with wellness committees to create supportive cultural environments. Cultural support for clients is measured using survey items found in the Lifegain Health Culture Audit.<sup>17</sup> Wellness program participants rate their agreement to the statements in Table 2 on the next page, on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is “strongly disagree” and 5 is “strongly agree”. Table 2 provides comparisons over the most recent five year period.

“ Holtyn & Associates, LLC works with wellness committees to create supportive cultural environments.”



**Table 2**  
 Three Year Trends in Cultural Support

Culture Question	Overall	
	Initial	Most recent
<b>Environmental Cultural Support</b>		
My company leaders are models for a healthy lifestyle	3.18	3.47**
This company demonstrates its commitment to supporting healthy lifestyles through its use of resources such as time, space and money.	3.60	3.94**
People at this company are taught skills needed to achieve a healthy lifestyle.	3.25	3.76**
New employees at our workplace are made aware of the organization's support for healthy lifestyles.	3.30	3.63**
People are rewarded and recognized for efforts to live a healthy lifestyle.	3.11	3.67**
<b>Peer Support</b>		
My immediate supervisor supports my efforts to adopt healthier lifestyle practices.	3.60	3.70*
Coworkers support one another in efforts to adopt healthier lifestyle practices.	3.71	3.85**
My friends support one another in efforts to adopt healthier lifestyle practices.	3.91	3.91
My family members and/or house-mates support one another in efforts to adopt healthier lifestyle practices.	4.03	4.03

The level of statistical significance from a t-test comparison are indicated with \*\* significant at p<.0001 and \* significant at p<.05. Aggregate of 2,837 employees from manufacturing, governmental, lower and higher educational scores.

Cultural support measures have significantly improved in Holtyn & Associates, LLC clients. Additionally, scores in environmental support show strong, consistent improvement. However, peer support at the worksite significantly improved, but perceived support from family and friends, while high, did not improve.

## Outlook

Wellness programs are now widespread, particularly among large employers. The evidence for individual health improvement has persuaded most individuals and organizations to pursue wellness. It will be important to capitalize on the current high degree of interest by creating programming models that are likely to achieve higher levels of sustained change. Worker Health Program research and Holtyn & Associates, LLC case studies provide preliminary evidence which indicates that significant added value can be achieved by including culture change initiatives.

That employers and employees across the country are attempting to address health risks is encouraging. The evidence for economic and health benefits that could result is compelling. Unfortunately, however, high lifestyle-change failure rates currently undermine enthusiasm for wellness initiatives. Current models that focus exclusively on individual change are not producing substantial lifestyle improvements among the majority of employees. Dramatic improvements in the effectiveness of workplace wellness programs will be needed to meet the lifestyle challenges faced by Americans.

Attention must turn to the best strategies for achieving meaningful and permanent lifestyle improvements. Current evidence suggests that such a wellness model will have to address both the individual and organizational environment. Findings reported here show results that can be achieved with an intervention model which combines both approaches.

“The evidence for individual health improvement has persuaded most individuals and organizations to pursue wellness.”



# The role of communication in changing workplace culture

Holtyn & Associates, LLC has partnered with Hope Health for more than 20 years to bring high-quality, easy-to-read communication tools to their clients.

Holtyn's clients use either the *HOPE Health Letter*<sup>®</sup> or *eMazine*<sup>™</sup> electronic health letter to communicate with their employees. Many choose to customize these publications with their company-specific articles, employee achievements, community events and more to drive home the value of their programs and services. For more information on Hope Health's products and services, visit [www.HopeHealth.com](http://www.HopeHealth.com).

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# About Holtyn & Associates, LLC

Ken Holtyn, President of Holtyn & Associates LLC and Corporate Wellness Advisor, has provided wellness and health promotion services for over 25 years to more than 500 businesses.

Ken has served as member of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Advisory Panel "Best Practice Benchmarking Project" for worksite health and productivity management.

He is also Chair of the Business Group for the State of Michigan, "Michigan Steps Up" campaign.

Recognized nationally and internationally as a leader in the field of workplace health and wellness promotion, Ken testified in Washington D.C. before the U.S. Surgeon General and the Secretaries Council of Health and Human Services on the status of small business health promotion.

Holtyn & Associates LLC One to One At The Worksite™ wellness programs have received numerous awards from a wide variety of organizations, including several State of Michigan Governors Awards, the American Heart Association, C. Everett Koop National Health Award, Department of Health and Human Services "Innovation in Prevention Award" and featured on MSNBC live.

The Holtyn One to One program is listed in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP), a service of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Ken has served as Vice-President of the Health Promotion and Wellness Council of Michigan and as the American Heart Association Chairman of Worksite Health Promotion for Michigan. The Michigan House of Representatives also recognized him for his contributions to the health of the citizens of Michigan by a House Resolution.

In 2008 he was inducted into the National Wellness Institute's Service and Leadership Circle recognizing him for his contributions in the health and wellness promotion field.

# About Hope Health

## Our unique capabilities...

- We specialize in producing easy-to-read health and lifestyle content.
- Over 30 years of serving workplaces, health plans and communities. We have more than 3,000 clients, in all 50 states, and of different sizes and descriptions.
- Health, marketing, wellness, benefits, technical writing, clear design and creative skills — all combined into one powerful employee communication engine.
- Easy-to-read and high comprehension content. We're committed to Plain Language, improving health literacy, and producing relevant, actionable information.
- Industry-leading customization capabilities. We customize over 500 versions of communications each month. How? Experienced staff, procedures developed over 30 years, technologically advanced business partners, and a powerful, proprietary software platform.
- A robust and demanding medical review process to ensure accuracy, credibility, and evidence-based health content.
- And you get us. A second generation, privately-held business. There is longevity, stability, and history here. Plus, energy, optimism, and a can-do attitude. It's just fun to work with us, because we love our clients and enjoy what we do for a living.

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