

## ECONOMICS

## Wellness in the workplace

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Credit: DNY59 / E+ / Getty

Workplace wellness programs are often implemented to reduce medical spending, increase productivity, and encourage employees to improve their health-related habits. However, the voluntary nature of participation makes the impacts and effectiveness of these programs difficult to evaluate.

Damon Jones, of the University of Chicago, and colleagues addressed this

challenge by conducting a randomized controlled trial of a new workplace wellness program for employees at a large university in the United States. Eligible employees assigned to the treatment condition were invited to participate in a program that financially incentivized health screenings and participation in wellness classes. They found that larger incentives increased rates of participation, but increasing dollar amounts had diminishing effects. They also found evidence that the people who signed up to the program were already more likely to engage in healthy behaviours and had lower average medical expenditures prior to enrolment than people who were invited to the program but did not participate. Furthermore, while participation did increase rates of health screenings, the wellness program did not produce significant effects on most outcome measures studied, including medical expenditures, employee productivity, key health behaviours, and self-reported health status.

The study raises doubt about the effectiveness of workplace wellness programs for achieving many of their key goals, but also points to avenues for future research on the cost-effectiveness and other implications of these programs for both employers and employees.

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