

Age and gender predict participation in employer-sponsored health coaching programs, study finds

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Employers, in an effort to help drive down health care costs, have increasingly offered work-sponsored health promotion programs but have had limited success with encouraging workers to participate. A new study in *American Journal of Health Promotion* finds that whether or not workers enroll and participate in health coaching programs depends more on the worker than on an employer's motivational tactics.

"Human behavior is more complicated than one size being able to fit all needs," said Jessica Grossmeier, Ph.D., M.P.H., the study's lead author and vice president of research at StayWell Health, Management, St.

Paul, Minnesota. "This study demonstrates how gender make up alone could influence participation rates from one employer but not another," said Grossmeier.

The study looked at a random sample of 34,291 employees from 52 companies who participated in a telephone-based health promotion program.

Overall, gender was the best predictor of program enrollment, with older women being more likely to enroll, followed by lifestyle risk status (which looked at nutrition, physical activity and other risk factors) and age. When it comes to sticking with the health promotion program, age was the best predictor of active participation and completion.

Worksites with comprehensive communications about their [health promotion](#) programs did affect enrollment and participation. However, once people were enrolled, strategies by employers to increase motivation had less of an impact. Support from senior leadership, the use of [financial incentives](#), and an organizational health culture (for example, having worksite [fitness centers](#) or healthy dining options) did not predict active participation.

"This study will give employers more information about whether or not they want to invest in or incorporate telephonic coaching into their wellness program initiatives," said Steve King, regional director of organizational development with St. Mary's Hospital-SSM Health Care of Wisconsin. "It calls into question some of the assumptions we have, most notably about the relationship between organizational culture and wellness programs."

King added, "It is useful to study the drivers behind coaching programs, but the real need is to understand whether or not these programs are actually resulting in meaningful results. Are employees who receive

telephonic coaching actually improving their wellness? Organizations are spending a lot of money on such programs with the assumption that they will derive benefit from employees who are in better health."

More information: Grossmeier, J. Ph.D., (2012) The Influence of Worksite and Employee Variables on Employee Engagement in Telephonic Health Coaching Programs: A Retrospective Multivariate Analysis, *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

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