WELLNESS WORKS

Employee Well-Being Now Essential

By Anthony Schoettle

Not long ago, workplace wellness was viewed as the dictionary definition of a fringe benefit – something nice to offer employees alongside holiday gatherings, casual Fridays and free coffee. Today, wellness has become something far more strategic.



Companies like Zionsville-based DK Pierce & Associates have made wellness programs a keystone to its efforts to attract and retain top talent.

In an era marked by labor shortages, rising healthcare costs, burnout and increased expectations from workers, employers are learning that well-being can be a powerful recruiting and retention tool. Increasingly, it is also becoming a business strategy with measurable financial returns.

The shift reflects a dramatic change in worker expectations. Employees now are looking beyond wages and traditional benefits packages. They want employers that support their physical, mental, emotional and financial health.

Research suggests those expectations are shaping employment decisions in significant ways. According to Wellhub's 2025 State of Work-Life Wellness Report, 89% of employees say they will only consider companies that prioritize employee well-being when seeking new employment, while 88% say well-being is as important as salary. The same survey found that 83% would consider leaving an employer that does not place sufficient emphasis on wellness.

Those findings help explain why wellness is becoming a defining advantage in the competition for talent.

"Great talent does have choices," says Chelsea Song, associate professor of organizational behavior and human resource management and the Arthur M. Weimer Faculty Fellow at the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University. "People coming into the workforce now consider carefully if they will be able to thrive in a workplace, will they be less apt to burn out and will they have a certain amount of job satisfaction.

"It's becoming clear companies that don't have some emphasis on their employees' wellness and have formalized programs in place to facilitate that will be losing out on talent. For companies – and industries – slow to pick up on this, the talent gap situation is only going to get worse," she predicts.



Wellness programs, like the one offered at Aspire Indiana Health, bring co-workers together to achieve a strong work-life balance and often include employees' family members.

More than a perk

Experts say the definition of workplace wellness has expanded dramatically over the last decade. That trend was accelerated by the Covid pandemic.

Historically, wellness programs focused largely on physical health. Companies offered biometric screenings, smoking cessation classes or discounted gym memberships. While those programs still exist, wellness now encompasses a broader range of initiatives.

"The meaning of wellness has expanded quite a bit in recent years," explains Joy Higbee, director of well-being at Hancock Health.

And wellness now covers far more than physical health.

"Wellness is no longer just a gym membership, health screening or benefits package. It now includes mental health, financial well-being, recovery, caregiving, maternal health, workplace culture, leadership and the policies that shape an employee's everyday experience," states Ashley O'Rourke, executive director of the Wellness Council of Indiana, a subsidiary of the Indiana Chamber that helps employers and communities create healthier, more thriving places and experiences through workplace wellness, education, collaboration and well-being initiatives.

"Wellness is no longer simply a perk, it's part of total (employee) healthcare," adds Higbee, who oversees well-being initiatives and has been involved in developing programs focused on wellness, workforce development and community health.

That evolution reflects changing workforce demographics and heightened awareness of burnout and mental health challenges. Work-related stress remains a significant concern for employees. Nearly half of workers identify work stress as the leading cause of declining mental wellness, according to Wellhub, a New York-based workplace wellness benefits provider.

Employers have responded by investing more aggressively in well-being resources. According to Wellable, a corporate wellness platform that helps employers create and manage employee well-being programs, 86% of benefits brokers reported increased employer investment in mental health and well-being benefits in 2025, making it the most rapidly growing wellness category.

The goal is straightforward: Create a healthier, more engaged workforce while distinguishing the company from competitors fighting for the same talent pool.

"Businesses who realize the importance of wellness are smart employers," Song emphasizes. "Those that don't are – or will be – paying a high cost."

Recruiting differentiator

As labor markets remain competitive, job candidates are scrutinizing potential employers more carefully than ever.

Wellness benefits frequently arise during interviews and recruiting conversations, particularly among younger workers who place a premium on flexibility, mental health support and overall quality of life.

"The younger job candidates are asking about wellness, 100%," stresses Jaclyn Sheets, director of human resources and finance operations at Zionsville-based market access and reimbursement consulting firm DK Pierce and Associates. "We're hearing questions from job candidates we never heard 10 or even five years ago. There are so many people, especially young people, who are so into health."

Research cited by Zippia, an online career platform founded in 2015, found that 87% of employees consider health and wellness offerings when selecting an employer.

The trend underscores that many candidates – particularly among the younger generation – view wellness programs as evidence that a company genuinely cares about employees rather than simply viewing them as staff.

"The focus on health and well-being has been a game changer in terms of employee

attraction and retention for our company," Higbee declares. "For one, healthcare is insanely expensive, so any saving through wellness initiatives and prevention you can offer employees is great for the employees and the company.

"But perhaps more importantly, it shows this company cares about its employees. That's something that's extremely important to this company and resonates deeply with our employees. Yes, there's a financial benefit to the company due to the talent we're able to hire and retain, but it's also the right thing to do. That's the culture we want to build and maintain here."



While physical health is still a central focus of wellness programs, they also include a growing variety of offerings such as mental health counseling, financial management and stress-reduction initiatives.

Retention matters, too

Recruiting may get employees in the door, but retention often determines whether wellness investments generate meaningful value.

Turnover remains one of the most expensive challenges facing employers. Replacing workers can involve recruiting expenses, onboarding costs, training time and lost productivity.

Modern research consistently points to a connection between wellness programs and employee retention.

"Recruiting is where an employer makes the promise, but retention is where employees determine whether the culture, leadership and support actually live up to it," O'Rourke imparts.

Adds Higbee: "If you're making promises to job candidates of any kind, and perhaps especially concerning their personal wellness, and not making good on those promises, that very quickly rings hollow with employees. That hurts morale and your employees' trust in the company they work for, and you could end up in a worse position than you were if you never made those promises in the first place."

Conversely, according to World Metrics, an independent market research and business intelligence company, employees who actively participate in wellness programs are significantly more likely to remain with their employers, while companies with wellness programs report substantially lower turnover rates.

Similarly, Wellhub's research found that employee well-being is increasingly becoming a deciding factor in whether workers stay or leave. More than eight in 10 employees surveyed reported they would consider leaving an employer that fails to prioritize well-being.

Wellness initiatives can help strengthen employee engagement, improve morale and foster loyalty, HR experts emphasize.

"When you walk through the door here, you're not just an employee. You're a human being with a family and an entire life outside here, and we care about all of that," Sheets says. "That caring is a big part of our culture. We think having that kind of culture makes this the kind of place where people want to come to work."

Building programs that resonate

Companies with successful wellness programs take concrete action that produces real impact for their employees.

Hancock Health launched its Healthy U – also known as Healthy You – an employee wellness program designed for Hancock Health associates and their spouses. The initiative focuses on preventing chronic disease and helping participants make healthier lifestyle choices through screenings, education, coaching and wellness resources.

Hancock Health also has established four direct primary care clinics for its employees and their families, where Hancock Health essentially pays for its employees to tap into health and wellness services provided by those clinics. The medical provider also combines wellness programming (Healthy U) with easy access to primary care. "The philosophy," Higbee explains, "is that employees who have regular relationships with primary care providers are more likely to receive preventive care, address health issues early and improve long-term health outcomes."

Hancock Health won HR.com's 2026 Best Comprehensive Wellness Program award for its employee wellness initiatives. The award specifically recognized Hancock Health's year-long weight management program that combines lifestyle medicine, clinical care, medical fitness and, when appropriate, medication to support long-term employee health outcomes.

DK Pierce operates an in-house fitness center for its employees and also runs several wellness programs, including DK Life, a program designed to empower, educate and support employees' well-being through a variety of health, fitness and community-focused initiatives. It also features the DK Olympics – a team-based, months-long activity that is part of a broader wellness initiative that also includes step challenges, hydration contests and a gamified wellness platform designed to encourage healthy, balanced lifestyles among employees.

Aspire Indiana Health is a nonprofit community health system providing integrated primary care, behavioral health, addiction treatment, recovery services and community-based support programs. Among Aspire's offerings is REST (Resilience and Emotional Support Teams), a crisis-response program that provides short-term emotional and psychological support to people affected by traumatic events, disasters or workplace crises. Additionally, Aspire's Provider Engagement Program helps employees get connected to primary care providers and get annual physicals and preventive care.

The organization's year-round "Best Self Challenge" is designed to help its more than 800 employees improve their overall well-being through monthly education, challenges and

incentives.

Of course, offering wellness benefits alone does not guarantee success.

Participation remains an obstacle. Although most workers have access to at least one wellness resource, utilization rates often lag behind availability. SelectSoftware Reviews, a Massachusetts-based HR technology research and advisory firm, reports approximately 85% of workers have access to wellness programs, yet participation typically averages only about one-third of eligible employees.

Successful employers are offering a portfolio of resources that address physical health, mental health, financial wellness and work-life balance. They also recognize that employee needs vary dramatically across age groups, family situations and job types. The most effective programs are often those that align closely with employee needs while embedding wellness into organizational culture rather than treating it as a standalone initiative.

Measuring the return

For years, business leaders debated whether wellness programs actually paid off financially.

While experts continue to caution that results vary by program design and participation rates, today evidence increasingly suggests that effective wellness initiatives can generate measurable returns.

The most obvious benefits typically involve healthcare costs.

According to Zippia, 72% of employers report lower healthcare costs after implementing wellness initiatives.

Other research points to broader gains. SelectSoftware Reviews, an independent HR technology advisory and research company, calculated that employers achieve an average return of approximately $1.47 for every dollar invested in wellness initiatives.

Additional studies suggest returns can be even higher. Industry benchmarks cited by multiple wellness researchers place ROI between $1.50 and $3 for every dollar invested, with some mature, comprehensive programs reporting significantly higher returns.

The reasons for the ROI are multifaceted.

Healthier employees often experience fewer medical issues, lower absenteeism and higher productivity. They also may be less likely to experience burnout or disengagement.

Research compiled by Wellable notes that wellness programs have been associated with reductions in healthcare costs, higher employee satisfaction and productivity gains.

There may be another element that is more difficult to calculate but no less important.

"Workplace well-being is about creating the culture where people know they matter, they're supported and then have opportunities to thrive in the workplace and externally outside the workplace because everyone's needs are unique," says Kristin Lamb, workforce well-being leader at Aspire Indiana Health. "So, providing that opportunity is where I feel I've seen the most impact."

Looking beyond healthcare costs

Many experts suggest employers should evaluate wellness investments using a broader lens than healthcare spending alone.

Some benefits are easier to quantify than others.

Reduced absenteeism, lower turnover and lower medical claims can all be measured directly. Other benefits, such as improved morale, stronger engagement, enhanced employer brand and better recruiting outcomes, may be more difficult to calculate.

Still, those factors can significantly influence organizational performance.

Wellhub's 2026 Return on Wellbeing report found that 95% of organizations that actively measure wellness ROI report positive returns. The same research found that 91% believe wellness programs improve productivity and 87% say they help reduce healthcare benefit costs.

Those findings are helping shift executive conversations around wellness from whether programs should exist to how they should be structured and measured.

Increasingly, employers are viewing wellness investments similarly to investments in technology, equipment or training. The question is not whether they cost money, but whether they generate value.

"Wellness initiatives can no longer be viewed as an add-on or superfluous, feel-good expense," Song suggests. "It's quite clearly moved into the realm of essential. If wellness initiatives aren't part of your central business strategy, quite simply you're missing out on a growth opportunity."

That broader view is definitely gaining momentum, Lamb observes. "Caring for our team is essential, not optional," she asserts. "And that sentiment is sweeping across industries in Indiana – and beyond – at an ever-increasing pace."



RESOURCES: Joy Higbee, Hancock Health, at www.hancockhealth.org | Kristin Lamb, Aspire Indiana Health, at www.aspireindiana.org | Ashley O'Rourke, Wellness Council of Indiana, at www.wellnessindiana.org | Jaclyn Sheets, DK Pierce & Associates, at www.dkpierce.net | Chelsea Song, Indiana University, at www.indiana.edu