

Improving wellbeing: case study

Optus

August 2017

Megan Kingham remembers the days when workplace wellbeing programs were about “a fruit box and a yoga class”. But the Manager of Health and Wellbeing at Optus says physical health interventions alone do not cut it anymore.

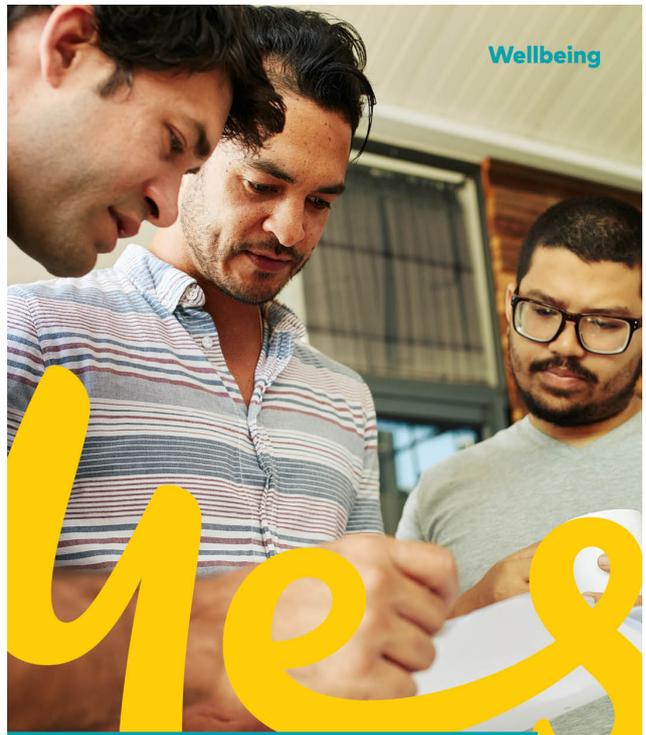
“Optus really began making a concerted effort to invest in wellbeing in 2012. For us it’s about being an employer of choice. A lot of large organisations began moving into wellbeing around that time because there was a demand from the employee base,” Kingham says.

To build the profile of the Health and Wellbeing unit within Optus, Kingham first created a website that is the central place for all wellbeing information, from booking a flu vaccination to finding resources.

Next, the Health and Wellbeing team began exploring what initiatives would help their 10,000 colleagues. They decided on four key risk factors – nutrition, activity, sleep and stress – and built programs around them.

For example, data from the company’s Employee Assistance Program revealed the most common stresses that employees were presenting with were relationship breakdowns and financial stress. In response, Optus developed a financial wellbeing program for interested staff members in 2014. It was so well received it is being offered again in 2017.

Mental health is another key area of focus. Under its Healthy Minds program, the company offers a one-day workshop for all established and emerging leaders on how to help colleagues who may be experiencing mental health issues. Over 900 staff have completed the training so far.



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Optus wellbeing program for employees

“If you do notice someone is not travelling well, what do you say? That’s what people are most worried about and that’s what we focus on,” Kingham says.

Optus’ employee base extends well beyond its Macquarie Park headquarters, with staff in the field and in retail stores. In recognition of this diversity, the company has worked to tailor its

wellbeing programs based on age, gender and work unit.

For example, Optus' retail store staff are generally young and technically savvy, and their biggest concern is how to manage when customers become angry or upset.

"We realised they don't have the same access to support services as people in head office, they don't have a kitchen to gather in, they can't go to a face-to-face session. So we decided we needed to create a mobile program for them."

Optus partnered with ABC Commercial to create a four-week, app-based, team-learning program called Happy People. It focuses on employees' mood, stress, sleep and energy levels, and aims to equip them with strategies to manage stress and develop resilience. Staff from 162 stores took part in a pilot in 2016, and an evaluation by Macquarie University found the "results were very positive". Over 70% of surveyed staff said the Happy People program was beneficial to their health and wellbeing. As a consequence, Optus plans to make Happy People available to office and field staff in 2017.

Kingham admits not every initiative goes as smoothly. Programs that have failed to take off include one on social connectedness in Brisbane, and one on brain training for which "interest petered out pretty quickly".

"It's a good lesson – you can't just roll things out, you have to consult with your employees. Our approach is we're not afraid to give things a try in a small location, in a small group. Then if it works we roll it out more widely."

Optus has wellbeing champions in all its locations whose job it is to help roll out programs and gather feedback. Employees can also provide feedback directly to the Health and Wellbeing unit in person or via its website.

Kingham concedes demonstrating the return on investment can be a "challenge".

"Participation rates and feedback are the best ways to track results," Kingham says. "We do have ROI measures, and they're good, I just don't know that they're great. For example, we don't use absenteeism as a measure because we've got a very flexible workforce. If someone's away from work, it's not always a health issue, it's just as likely they have to take a family member to an appointment or they're working from home."

Kingham says another obstacle for her unit is getting employees' attention.

"In an organisation of this size, there's a lot of people trying to get their message out. We can't just rely on an email now, we have to get our content on as many platforms as possible in order for people to find it but also in order to retain the resource. That means webinars, podcasts, apps and online training. Digitisation is where it's all moving to and you must have resources that people can access when they want, where they want."

"The other thing that I think needs to be considered is there's a lot of health information out there that is unreliable. You have to stick to the evidence-based stuff otherwise you damage your credibility."

Kingham's number one piece of advice for others who are implementing a workplace wellbeing program is to start small and manage expectations.

"If management expect a wellbeing program will turn everything around in six months, it will fail. The establishment of a good wellbeing program takes three to five years, and before you start you need to be sure of what your workforce looks like – don't assume their needs. Small pilots are a cost effective way of testing programs. Start small and build on that."

