- Work environment

WellBeing | special report WORKPLACE WELLNESS



Modern Workplace Wellness Strategies

A healthy workplace offers benefits for employees and the businesses that employ them, but to put a workplace wellness program in place you need to understand what your people and your business need.

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Did you know it's estimated that you spend as much as one-third of your time at work? It's therefore not surprising that your job is a major contributing factor in the quality of your health and wellbeing.

This presents an opportunity for employer and employee. It's an avenue through which both together can actively improve the quality of life and wellbeing of all. It's an opportunity that is receiving increased interest from employers — and for good reason: the size of the opportunity is significant.

An important role for preventive healthcare

Health statistics on Australians make for sobering reading. The Australian Institute of Health Welfare (AIHW) estimates that two-thirds of Australians are now overweight or obese and about half of all Australians have a chronic disease, with 20 per cent having at least two — think arthritis, asthma, back problems, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and mental health conditions. AIHW also indicates that mental health and dementia-related health issues are continuing to increase.

Much the same is true for health statistics of New Zealanders. The New Zealand Ministry of Health (NZHM) estimates two-thirds of New Zealanders are also obese or overweight. NZHM indicates that, though New Zealanders overall are living longer in good health, there are those living longer in poorer health, and that 88 per cent of health loss for New Zealanders is related to chronic disease. As in Australia, NZHM confirms that health issues related to mental health and dementia are a growing challenge.

An important theme highlighted by AIHW and NZHM is the invaluable role preventive health and wellbeing offers in turning the tide on the development of poor health, notably chronic conditions.

NZHM estimates that one-third of health loss experienced by New Zealanders is preventable. In 2005, in response to an increasing incidence of chronic disease across Australia, the AIHW launched the National Chronic Disease Strategy. It's an overarching framework with

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Workplace wellness refers to any workplace activity or policy designed to support behaviour that improves the health of its employees.

co-ordinated national support focused on improving chronic disease prevention.

Given how much time we spend in the workplace, it makes sense that this is where a good portion of preventive healthcare can begin.

Your job & your wellbeing

A Medibank Report in 2005–06 reviewing workplace wellness in Australia estimated the cost of absenteeism to employers in this country at AU$7 billion per year and the cost of presenteeism — when you're at work but not fully productive — at AU$26 billion.

A 2015 survey report produced in collaboration between Southern Cross Health Society and Business NZ estimated that the number of days lost on average across the New Zealand workforce is 6.7 million days per annum. It also indicated that up to 35 per cent of employees turn up to work in NZ businesses when ill.

What you need to know

These statistics confirm the significant opportunity that exists. This brings us back to workplace wellness programs and the role they can play as part of the preventive healthcare agenda. Studies verify that workplace wellness programs, if effective, deliver benefits to the employer in the form of improved employee engagement, productivity and resilience and benefits to the employee in the form of greater wellbeing.

Reviews of workplace wellness programs confirm the most effective programs are those promoting and enabling preventative wellbeing strategies for employees. Enter stage left: you.

Let's assume for a moment you are working for a company that does not yet run a program or has a fledging program. This presents an opportunity for you as the employee to step forward into the role of workplace wellness advocate where you promote the value of a workplace wellness program and what it can offer to employer and employees.

For you to step into the role of workplace wellness advocate, you need to be able to answer a number of key questions, including: What defines workplace wellness? What does a workplace wellness program look like? What are the benefits and for whom? How does one get a wellness program started? And, importantly, how do you become a workplace wellness advocate? How do you foster a credible position in your company where you help promote workplace wellness as an essential ongoing business activity?

What defines workplace wellness?

Workplace wellness refers to any workplace activity or policy designed to support behaviour that improves employee health. It often resides under an umbrella titled Employee Workplace Health, alongside occupational health and safety policy and activity.

Workplace health and safety, as the name suggests, focuses on safety in the workplace. It's the activities and policies that protect you at work and minimise your risk of being harmed while directly doing your job or being in the work environment.

In contrast, workplace wellness is classified as a preventive strategy. The activities and policies are focused on supporting your wellness at work. It's founded on the concept that employers recognise employees as invaluable assets, as human capital they must work to attract, retain and proactively support so employees can deliver sustainable workplace performance.

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It means the workplace wellness program can be presented as a core component of a company's talent management plan — the plan used to attract employees, to be used as a vehicle for a company to invest in the development of work-related skills, behaviours and capabilities and to keep employees engaged, productive and committed to working for the company.

What exactly is workplace wellness?

Workplace wellness is categorised using spheres, each representing a different area of wellness. The spheres of physical, mental and emotional wellness are commonly used and explained below. An alternative classification also commonly used is physical, psychological and social wellness.

Physical wellness describes what is often classified as the more traditional area of health and wellbeing, activities that determine your ability to create sustainable physical energy: ie the level and quality of energy required to meet ongoing typical demands of a busy modern workplace. It includes an eating plan or your dietary choices and sleeping habits, as well as the movement, rest and recovery strategies you use.

Mental wellbeing is often described as psychological wellness. It refers to your ability to understand how your job contributes to your overall sense of purpose and meaning, how you cultivate and remain self-directed in the workplace and, importantly, how you stay engaged at work in a way that allows you to fulfil your professional and personal potential while still being able to deal with the normal day-to-day stresses and pressures.

Emotional wellbeing equates to social wellness. It refers to your ability to create and sustain key relationships at work and how you develop and maintain strong collaboration, relating and influencing skills. It covers how you remain inspired and inspire those with whom you work so you can foster healthy and productive one-on-one and team relationships essential to helping to create a constructive workplace culture.



Workplace wellness is classified as a preventive strategy. The activities and policies are focused on supporting your wellness at work.

What are the benefits?

Studies indicate those employees who maintain higher levels of wellness are more likely to perform better at work. They are found to be less stressed and more energised, have better concentration and memory, feel more empowered and self-directed and are more productive. These things manifest as sustainable, improved and higher performance for the employee.

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For the employer there's a range of potential benefits including reduced absenteeism and sick leave, less presenteeism, increased staff retention, reduced turnover, increased productivity and essentially a more engaged, motivated and collaborative workplace culture. The benefits manifest as either reduced costs or gains from improved productivity that ultimately translate to a healthier business bottom line.

Stress as an example

Let's use stress as a tangible example to demonstrate the value. A 2014 employee survey report of 385,000 Australian employees found 36 per cent felt highly or extremely stressed and 39 per cent felt moderately stressed.

Stress is accepted as a normal part of day-to-day life but ongoing and unresolved stress, particularly that which is overwhelming, can result in physical, emotional and mental fatigue and ultimately lowered wellness resilience.

For employees the impact can manifest in a number of ways. It may cause reduced concentration and poorer memory leading to distracted or foggy thinking, which in turn manifests as reduced productivity; or, from the employer's perspective, increased presenteeism. Or, at worst, it may lead to increased fatigue, leading over time to reduced immunity and increased likelihood of illness manifesting as sick leave; or, from the employer's perspective, increased absenteeism.

The solution is a workplace wellness program that has a strong focus on enabling more effective stress management for employees. The benefits can be substantial. A 2011 study into leadership, culture and management practices of high-performing workplaces found the healthiest Australian employees are 300 per cent more productive than their unhealthy colleagues.

Being able to articulate case studies such as these is important; it will enable you to build support for investment in a workplace wellness program.

What does a workplace wellness program look like?

Just like the businesses we work for, workplace wellness programs come in a range of shapes, sizes and budgets. There is no one-size-fits-all. Program design, specifically what solutions workplace wellness programs include, can be placed on a spectrum. On the far left end are off-the-shelf solutions and on the far right are more customised or bespoke solutions. This is important as it offers variety and flexibility to a wide range of needs and budgets.

Off-the-shelf vs customised

Off-the-shelf programs are designed and delivered by an external workplace wellness provider. They are often charged per employee and/or a type of fee driven by participation rate. These often suit organisations with a larger headcount and a bigger budget. Customised programs, on the other hand, are often largely designed internally, being more suitable for mid-sized to smaller organisations. They allow you or your employer to engage a range of often smaller and specialist solution providers to deliver different elements of your program. Costing of customised programs is determined by the scope of your program, being influenced by the number, size and complexity of solutions.

In-house workplace wellness programs also exist and should be mentioned. These generally suit organisations with a larger headcount, in particular those that are able to invest in dedicated resources to set up, oversee and deliver these programs.

Length of program

There is no set time period over which a program is run. However, it's recommended that if you are seeking to support and enable long-term wellness change it's important to create a

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A pedometer calculator could be given as part of an initiative to promote less sitting and more movement.

program that delivers over time. Twelve months is the recommended minimum but an ongoing program is preferable.

A challenge for ongoing programs is how to keep the program relevant so it attracts not only sustained interest from employees but also ongoing sponsorship and funding commitment from the employer.

There's a number of ways to create sustained interest. An important strategy is to ensure the program outcomes are aligned to outcomes focused on by the business itself. Areas such as absenteeism and presenteeism have been mentioned already, but enabling the program to support company goals focused on culture, training and leadership also offers potential alignment opportunities.

Promoting relevance

If the wellness workplace program outcomes are aligned to the company's key vision and goal focus areas, the program will be viewed as having ongoing relevance to the business's wider change agenda. It will also offer potential opportunity for cross-promotion and use of resources. This is particularly important where resources and funding are limited. You may be able to leverage access to resources in a number of areas, including program planning, communication and assessment.

Two areas to investigate for interconnectedness in business outcomes are the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and the training and developmental program. Areas of your wellness program will likely contribute to and support skills, attitudes and behaviours being promoted and targeted by both these programs.

You are also encouraged to engage with your

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Regular workplace massage could be part of your wellness strategy.

human resources area or business partner. Workplace wellness is generally overseen by human resources, also called People and Culture. They are responsible for assisting your business to leverage its human capital — its employees — and so will have a natural interest in wanting to sponsor and enable a workplace wellness program.

Program focus

It's important for your program to have clear focus. Always identify a small list of prioritised themes. Workplace wellness is a significant area and potentially spans a wide scope of topics. Trying to promote too many topics across too many areas will leave you stretched with a diluted message. Identifying themes by calendar year, quarter and potentially by month is a way to help keep focus in your program and its targeted outcomes.

Always begin with creating clear wellness outcomes you are seeking to achieve, then identify your key wellness messages and finally align wellness initiatives to the theme. For example, you could choose to do healthy eating and lifestyle before the Christmas season and holidays; winter health leading into the colder months; and perhaps physical activity and movement at the beginning of spring.

Solution providers

Workplace wellness solution providers also come in a range of shapes, sizes and budgets. It means that whether you are just starting out with a program, are looking to run a workplace wellness pilot or are a large Australian company with a relatively large budget and/or access to resources, investment in workplace wellness is achievable.

However, before engaging with providers it's best to confirm the scope of your program, its indicative budget and resources and, importantly, the wellness problem you are seeking to resolve or help redress. Once you have this confirmed, you can then begin collating information on potential providers who may be able to assist or partner with you.

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Activities to include

Generally, a program is constructed with three key aims: to provide the employees with education, to arm them with strategies and tools and to motivate them to take sustainable action to achieve the wellness change in focus.

Wellness education

The aim of education is to create awareness of the wellness impact of employees' daily-weekly-monthly habits, choices and rituals. Awareness is the essential first step to help employees understand there are consequences of their daily decisions and that many of these consequences accumulate over time to significantly impact on their wellbeing.

Chronic health issues accumulate over time; they result from making less healthy choices day in, day out. It's why making healthier choices most of the time is an important wellbeing goal.

Education is available in a variety of forms. Some of the more common forms include face-to-face workshops, lunch-n-learn presentations, webinars, e-learning, booklet drops and workplace posters.

One of the earlier types of workplace wellness education initiatives was health and wellness assessments. These have changed over time. They initially started as medical health diagnostics offered to senior management but have now evolved to include nutritional and wellbeing assessments, ergonomic assessments and healthy lifestyle assessments, all of which can be offered to a broad range of employees.

Wellness strategies

Education is essential but not sufficient to enable wellness change. Arming employees with strategies and tools is essential to bringing education to life. Tools can be as simple or complex as you wish. They can be designed to meet a range of budgets and different wellness needs.

Some less expensive options include providing or making information freely

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available, potentially doing this online via a company intranet. Information can be broad or specific. Examples include information on healthy eating guidelines, healthy living principles or education on how to more effectively manage stress.

Non-information solutions can include access to gym discounts, access to health snacks in communal kitchens or a daily delivery of fresh fruit.

Options requiring more investment include paid access for employees to take part in corporate activity events, offering regular workplace massage, access to ongoing lunchtime yoga sessions and potentially providing employees with tools. An example of a tool is a pedometer calculator that allows employees to count their daily steps. This could be offered as part of an initiative to promote less sitting and more movement.

Accessing free services

If you are starting out and budget is an issue, it's worth investigating what government information and services are available. Australian examples include Get Healthy at Work (a NSW Government initiative), My Healthy Balance (a Western Australian program) and Healthier Happier Work (a Queensland Government initiative).

In New Zealand, you can investigate the Workers Wellness Information and Resources report produced in January 2016 for guidance. Government resources are generally free or at minimal cost but offer lots of information and great advice on how to create and initiate workplace wellness programs.

It may also be worthwhile considering how you can make use of the not-for-profit health and wellness associations. Well-known examples include Beyond Blue, Heart Foundation and Bowel Cancer Australia and New Zealand. They are often open to coming along to present to staff. They come with a pre-prepared message and an outcome they are seeking to achieve. They are practised in engaging groups in their message and may offer free access to information, strategies and tools.

Taking wellness action

Taking wellness action is the final essential element of a successful program. It's all about providing ongoing motivation to encourage participating employees to act but also to stay committed to action to achieve their wellness goal.



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Be aware that people are more likely to start and stick to a wellness change when others around them are also committing. Designing your program to have a specific theme, clear messaging and outcomes will give you your best chance of engaging interest from a broad range of people.

There's a general rule of thumb that says 33 per cent of staff are already interested and taking action on wellness, another 33 per cent are thinking about it and with the right initiatives will engage, but the remaining 33 per cent may not have given it thought or for some reason may feel reluctant to take part.

Understanding whether this general rule of thumb applies to your company or whether your company profile differs from this will be important before launching your program. It will give insight into how best to design your program and the likely take-up.

Change is a journey

Improving wellness requires change, but change occurs over time and can be confronting. Giving thought to whom you are seeking to engage, what stage they may be at on their wellness journey and hence what approach, message, support and tools you may need to engage them is critical.

It reinforces the importance of good planning, why programs delivered over longer timeframes are more successful and why having a clear connection between wellness educations, strategies and taking wellness action is essential.

If the budget allows, an effective strategy is providing access to ongoing support through wellness coaching. This can be delivered online or face to face, and one on one or to small groups.

If you are not able to invest in coaching, redirect your focus to your messaging and how to use it to engage employees in group activities, or get them using a tool that enables self-monitoring and feedback on their progress. Support through other participants and self-monitoring help provide ongoing motivation through small progress wins that encourage them to continue on their wellness journey.

What not to do

Along with understanding what you need to do, it's important to understand what not to do — what can undermine the success of a wellness program. There are four key areas to review when designing, developing and implementing your program.

Take a strategic approach

Workplace wellness programs can develop organically over time, responding to wellness needs as they arise. Or they can be designed with specific intent deliberately anchored to a clear strategic purpose. Organically developed workplace wellness programs may succeed but they are at risk of experiencing the challenges that arise when the goals are not specific. They can suffer from too much trial and error, using budget and resources ineffectively.

Because a wellness program requires funding, resources and sponsorship, thinking about how you can run a small initiative requiring limited resources or budget to provide proof of concept is a good strategy to consider. Investigate whether you can run a small pilot in a discrete area or within a team that will produce clear results you can use to promote and build your case for investment.

Non-information solutions can include access to gym discounts, access to health snacks in communal kitchens or a daily delivery of fresh fruit.

Whether you start on a small or larger

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scale, it's important in seeking investment of funds and resources to be able to demonstrate and explain the drivers of value for a workplace wellness program. The best way of understanding the business-wide value levers to focus on is to understand business-wide workplace wellness needs. This is best achieved through a needs analysis survey. Identify who currently conducts these types of surveys and seek guidance on how best to do this.

Measure & report

To protect the longevity of a program it's important to have clear objectives. Also key is to understand how you'll measure and prove success or prove progress towards success for your program. It will allow you to use the results to further promote visibility of the program and/or justify additional and/or ongoing workplace wellness program investment.

It would be wise to identify the known and widely accepted company performance metrics used to assess value and benefit of programs, notably those receiving current focus. For example, are sick leave rates an issue or are absenteeism, staff turnover or staff engagement scores being assessed and viewed with concern? Gaining insight into key metrics of focus and how you can influence them will provide invaluable insight into what to focus on.

Secure adequate resources

Having access to dedicated and sufficient resources will give a workplace wellness program its best chance of success. However, this is not always possible, particularly in businesses that have not invested in a workplace wellness program previously or those that may classify a wellness program or initiative as a nice-to-have or add-on rather than a must-have program.

Gaining access to dedicated and adequate



resources may be challenging. If resources are limited, focus on seeking funding for a pilot, where you keep the pilot scope clear and targeted with a set timeframe. Your objective will be to achieve success on a small scale with a view to using the successful result to promote visibility of the potential benefits of a workplace wellness program and show why there should be ongoing allocation of resources and funding.

It's estimated that those who work in offices sit for as much as 70 per cent of their day.

Target your solutions

There's a large number of providers of workplace wellness solutions. Many promote a large, comprehensive program. This may be appropriate but, if you are starting out, be discerning of what your workplace wellness needs are and what part of them you can influence. And, as stated, complete a needs analysis using a survey tool so you can focus on solving the issues or problems that will deliver greatest benefit to a wide range of employees.

If you start with a targeted solution and show success, over time you will set yourself up to achieve more success. It allows you to gain insight into what works and what does not work in approach, message, delivery and follow-up. You can use this insight to more effectively guide the focus and intent of your program as you look to extend your range of offerings and solutions.

Be a wellness advocate

An advocate is someone who publicly supports or recommends a cause or policy. Becoming a wellbeing advocate will require you to commit to promoting the what, why and how of creating a workplace wellness program in your company. You will need to explain what a program is, why it offers benefit and how you can take the first steps to creating a program.

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Model wellness

There is an expression: become the change that you seek. You would become an advocate because you believe in the importance of workplace wellness and are committed to making a difference.

It follows that the best way to start your journey as a wellness advocate is to ensure you are doing what you are seeking to encourage others to do. Taking personal responsibility for your own wellness is essential. Being able to talk the talk and walk the walk will provide you a platform from which to engage others' interest in and support for your intent.

And, once you have your first initiative underway, remember to promote the success stories of those who are also now modelling wellness. They will serve as role models to others, sort of like a wellness advocate army who will help you inspire others to join. Remember the general rule of thumb that says 33 per cent of employees are keen to engage if given a why and 33 per cent are feeling reluctant and need convincing. Allowing these employees to hear and share in the wellness journeys of others may be just what they need to help them overcome their resistance.

The business case

There are no boundaries on wellness between work and home. It's not possible to be well at home but not well at work. It means that the wellness program will likely have a more far-reaching benefit than merely that to the employer. This is a great message to promote.

However, it's important to remember that you will be asking your company to invest funds and resources. It's a business's goal to remain profitable; as with all company initiatives seeking endorsement and investment, your employer will want to understand the benefits a wellness program will deliver.

It reinforces the importance of committing time to creating a clear business case for why your company will benefit from investment in a wellness program. This will be your first step to initiating your wellness program. If this is not your strength, find someone who has these skills to help you.

The good news is that a business case need not be a large, complex document. It's more important to be clear on what you will do, why it will provide benefits, to whom it will provide benefits and how you will take reasonable steps to ensure you can deliver the benefits.

Start small

Start with a small, low-investment initiative. An option is to align your workplace wellness pilot to an existing initiative that supports the theme of workplace wellness. Alternatively, find an opportunity where you can extend the scope of an existing initiative to include workplace wellness or, as previously discussed, undertake your own workplace wellness pilot initiative.

A small initiative that has very clear scope and requires limited funds or resources can

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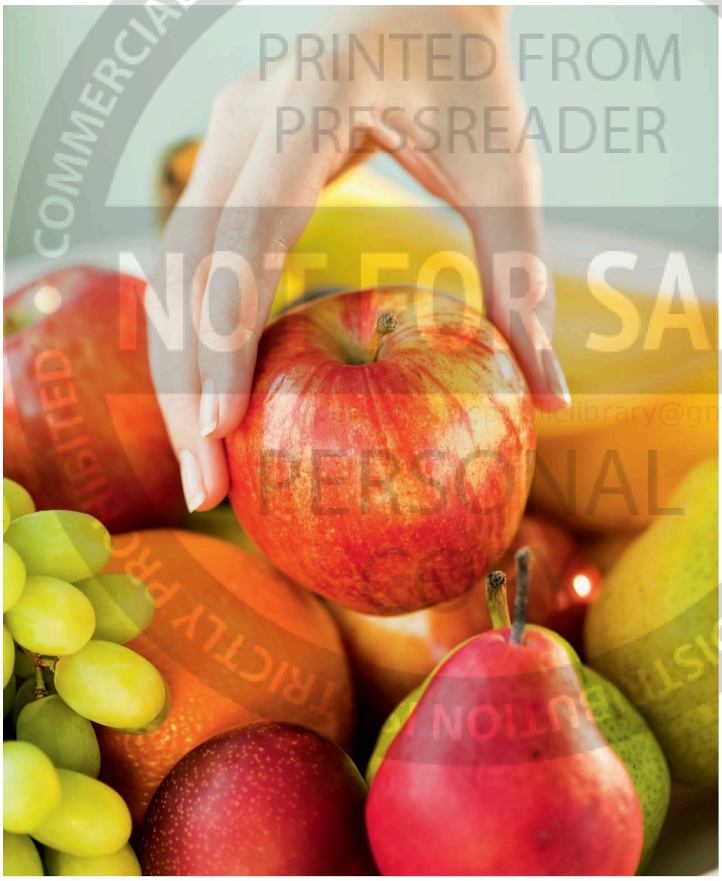

allow you to test interest and take-up. Identify one wellness change that if it occurred in your workplace would benefit lots of people. Aim to choose a wellness theme that is already topical and receiving wide exposure in the general media.

A pilot idea

For example, the issue of physical activity, or rather lack of movement of employees from sitting too much at work — what is referred to as sedentary behaviour — is currently very topical. It's estimated that those who work in offices sit for as much as 70 per cent of their day. This includes time travelling to work, sitting on public transport, sitting at their desks and then going home to sit in front of TV or technology.

There's a range of issues associated with too much sitting but it may be best to promote the message in the positive — to promote the benefits of sitting less. You need to do some research to be able to clearly articulate the benefits.

The call to action could be move more and sit less. It's simple and the outcome is clear: you want employees to move more and sit less at work. To support this, you would need to provide education on what the wellbeing consequences are for sitting too much, why there are benefits to their wellbeing in moving more and sitting less, together with strategies participating employees can use to move more and sit less. Finally, you would support it by providing access to a tool that confirms for people they are moving more and sitting less.

A checklist to get your program started

Let's assume you now have sufficient understanding to feel confident to take your first step. Here's a checklist of essential steps to move forward with your plan.

- **Needs analysis.** Understand what wellness problem you are seeking to solve and for whom. Ensure you consider both the employee and employer perspective.
- **Scope.** Clearly document the scope: your objectives, your outcomes, how you will measure outcomes, who will benefit.
- **Business case.** Present a business case with a cost-benefit analysis to gain access to adequate resources and budget.
- **Prepare.** Focus on design, solutions for inclusion, delivery timeline, challenges to overcome, how to collate participant feedback, how to measure success against targeted metrics and how you will promote and communicate the program to participants.
- **Deliver.** Launch and roll-out of the program solution(s).
- **Monitor.** Collate information so you understand take-up and outcomes achieved.
- **Review.** After each initiative, undertake a review to understand if you need to make any changes or refinements to improve take-up, engagement or your ability to enable wellness change.

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