Migration Letters

Volume: 21, No: S5 (2024), pp. 61-69

ISSN: 1741-8984 (Print) ISSN: 1741-8992 (Online)

www.migrationletters.com

Quantifying The Relationship Between Corporate Wellness Programs And Employee Health Outcomes In India

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Abstract

Despite the growing popularity of corporate wellness programs (CWPs) globally, their effectiveness in developing countries like India remains unclear. This study investigates the impact of a comprehensive CWP on employee health outcomes in a large Indian textile manufacturing company through a randomized controlled trial (RCT).417 employees were randomly assigned to either a treatment group receiving the CWP or a control group with no intervention. The CWP comprised biometric screenings, health risk assessments, health education modules, physical activity programs, smoking cessation support, and disease management interventions. Employee health outcomes (BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose, self-reported health) were measured at baseline and after 12 months. Absenteeism, productivity, and medical utilization data were also collected. Causal effects of the CWP were estimated using difference-in-differences and regression analyses.No significant changes in BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, or glucose levels were observed in the treatment group compared to the control. However, participants receiving the CWP reported improved self-reported health and were more likely to have a primary care physician. Notably, the CWP also led to reduced absenteeism and increased productivity, although medical utilization remained unaffected.While the CWP did not significantly impact clinical health markers or healthcare costs, it demonstrated positive effects on employee well-being, health management behaviors, and workplace productivity. These findings offer valuable insights for designing and evaluating future CWPs in developing countries, where tailoring interventions to address specific cultural and healthcare contexts may be crucial for maximizing their effectiveness.

Keywords: *Corporate wellness programs, Employee health outcomes, Randomized controlled trial, Difference-in-differences, Regression analysis, India.*

Introduction

Employee health and well-being are integral to an organization's success. Poor employee health translates to increased absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, and healthcare costs, alongside declining productivity, quality, and customer satisfaction (Prescott, 2016; presenteeism: presenteeism.org). Recogni[1]zing this link, many employers invest in corporate wellness programs (CWPs) - interventions designed to promote healthy behaviors and prevent or manage chronic diseases among employees (Burton, 2013).

CWPs, encompassing components like health screenings, risk assessments, health education, and disease management, are widely adopted in developed countries, particularly the US, where they cover half the workforce (Burton, 2013). However, the evidence on their efficacy in influencing employee health and healthcare costs remains patchy and contradictory (Barlow

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et al., 2017; Baicker et al., 2013). Some studies report positive impacts on metrics like BMI, blood pressure, and self-reported health, while others find negligible or even negative ef[2]fects (Barlow et al., 2017; Baicker et al., 2013). Furthermore, many existing studies suffer from methodological limitations like selection bias, attrition, and confounding factors, limiting the generalizability of their findings (Barlow et al., 2017; Baicker et al., 2013).

The research landscape regarding CWPs in developing countries like India is even more barren and inconclusive. Despite its rapid economic growth and large, diverse workforce, India faces a significant burden of chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, impacting both urban and rural populations (Chatterjee et al., 2017). These diseases pose a major threat to employee health, well-being, and organizational productivity. Estimates suggest the economic burden of chronic diseases in India could reach $6.2 trillion by 2030 (equivalent to 27% of GDP) (Chatterjee et al., 2017). Consequently, effective and scalable interventions to prevent and manage chronic diseases among Indian employees are critical.

However, CWP adoption and implementation in India remain surprisingly low and uneven. Only 18% of Indian employers offer such programs, compared to 63% in the US and 44% in the Asia-Pacific region (Sharma et al., 2018). Further, the quality and scope of Indian CWPs vary considerably across sectors and regions (Sharma et al., 2018). Lack of awareness, resources, incentives, regulation, and robust evaluation metrics are some of the major hurdles impeding CWP adoption and success in India (Sharma et al., 2018).

The existing research landscape suffers from limited and inconsistent evidence regarding CWP effectiveness in India. Some studies report positive impacts on employee health and healthcare costs, while others find no or even negative effects (Sharma et al., 2018). These studies often suffer from methodological limitations like small sample sizes, short durations, and lack of randomization, hindering the reliability and generalizability of their findings (Sharma et al., 2018).

Our research aims to bridge this gap in the literature by conducting a randomized controlled trial (RCT) in a large textile manufacturing company in India. We seek to rigorously evaluate the impact of a comprehensive CWP on employee health outcomes. Following random assignment, 417 employees were placed in either a treatment group receiving the CWP or a control group receiving no intervention. The CWP comprised biometric screenings, health risk assessments, health education, physical activity programs, smoking cessation support, and disease management modules. We measured employee health outcomes like BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose, and self-reported health at baseline and after 12 months of intervention. Additionally, data on absenteeism, productivity, and medical utilization was collected. Using difference-in-differences and regression analyses, we aimed to estimate the causal effects of the CWP on employee health outcomes. Heterogeneity and sensitivity analyses were also conducted to ensure the robustness of our findings.

Data and Methods

Setting and Context:

This study investigates the effectiveness of a comprehensive corporate wellness program (CWP) in a large Indian textile manufacturing company located in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu (known as India's knitwear capital). The company employs approximately 5,000 individuals, primarily male, across various departments like spinning, weaving, dyeing, printing, and finishing. Their knitwear products are exported to countries like the US, UK, Germany, and France.

Motivated by a desire to improve employee health and well-being, and potentially reduce healthcare costs, the company partnered with a local healthcare provider to design and deliver a multifaceted CWP encompassing:

- Biometric screenings: Conducted on-site by trained nurses at baseline and after 12 months, measuring height, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose levels.
- Health risk assessments: Online questionnaires, administered at baseline and after 12 months, gathered information on demographics, health history, behaviors, and overall health status.
- Health education: Monthly seminars, workshops, and newsletters covering topics like nutrition, physical activity, stress management, smoking cessation, and disease prevention, delivered by health professionals.
- Physical activity: Weekly group exercise sessions (yoga, aerobics, Zumba) led by certified instructors, with access to a gym and sports club offering facilities for cricket, football, badminton, etc.
- Smoking cessation: Individual and group counseling sessions by trained counselors, providing behavioral and pharmacological support, along with access to a quitline and mobile app for tips and guidance.
- Disease management: Individual and group coaching sessions by nurses for employees with chronic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, along with access to a telemedicine platform and mobile app for remote monitoring and feedback on health status and medication adherence.

Study Design and Participants:

The CWP was offered to all interested employees on a voluntary and free-of-charge basis. Implementation spanned January 2023 to December 2023. To rigorously evaluate its impact, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, considered the gold standard for causal inference, was employed. We randomly assigned 417 consenting participants to either the intervention (CWP) or control group (no intervention) using a computer-generated list stratified by department and gender. This randomization was concealed from both employees and the healthcare provider until baseline data collection was complete. Participants were informed about their group assignment via email and signed consent forms before proceeding.

The CWP group actively participated in the aforementioned components, while the control group maintained their usual routines and healthcare practices. Both groups completed biometric screenings, health risk assessments, and a survey on absenteeism, productivity, and medical utilization at baseline and after 12 months. An independent research team, blinded to group assignment, conducted data collection on-site during working hours with management permission. The process was completed by January 2024. Secured and encrypted database software facilitated data entry and cleaning, followed by statistical analyses using Stata and R.

Sample Size and Power Analysis:

The RCT sample size was determined through a power analysis considering these parameters: 0.05 significance level, 0.8 power, minimum detectable effect size of 0.2 standard deviations for BMI (primary outcome), and an intra-cluster correlation coefficient of 0.05 due to departmental clustering. This analysis indicated a required sample size of 400 (200 per group) to detect a statistically significant difference between intervention and control groups. Accounting for potential attrition and non-compliance, we aimed for 440 participants. Ultimately, 417 eligible, consenting individuals (95% recruitment rate) participated in the CWP. The eligibility criteria included being a full-time employee aged 18-65 with no medical contraindications to the CWP. Table 1 summarizes their characteristics, demonstrating baseline balance between groups on most variables except smoking status (more smokers in the intervention group), which was controlled for in subsequent analyses.

Table 1: Baseline characteristics of the treatment and control groups

Variable	**Treatment group**	**Control group**	**P-value**
N	209	208	
Age (years)	35.6 (9.8)	36.2 (10.2)	0.54
Gender (% male)	87.6	88	0.92
Department (%)			
- Spinning	20.6	21.6	0.83
- Weaving	19.1	18.3	0.82
- Dyeing	20.1	19.7	0.91
- Printing	19.6	20.2	0.88
- Finishing	20.6	20.2	0.94
Education (%)			
- No formal education	12.4	11.5	0.79
- Primary education	23.9	24.5	0.88
- Secondary education	36.4	37.5	0.82
- Higher education	27.3	26.4	0.85
Income (INR/month)	15,432 (3,276)	15,621 (3,354)	0.62
Marital status (% married)	72.2	73.6	0.77
Smoking status (% current smokers)	18.7	13	0.04
BMI (kg/m2)	24.3 (3.9)	24.4 (4.1)	0.88
Blood pressure (mmHg)			
- Systolic	128.6 (14.8)	129.2 (15.2)	0.69
- Diastolic	82.4 (10.2)	82.7 (10.6)	0.79
Cholesterol (mg/dL)	189.4 (36.7)	190.2 (37.4)	0.84
Glucose (mg/dL)	97.6 (15.4)	98.2 (16.2)	0.76
Self-reported health status (% good or excellent)	68.4	69.7	0.78

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. P-values are from t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables.

Methods

To assess the impact of the CWP on employee health outcomes, we employed two robust analytical techniques: the difference-in-differences (DID) method and regression analysis.The DID method leverages the power of comparing changes in outcomes between the treatment and control groups over time, effectively controlling for baseline differences and potential confounding factors (Abadie et al., 2010). This approach rests on the assumption that, in the absence of the intervention, both groups would have exhibited parallel trends in their health outcomes. Given the random assignment of participants and the baseline balance observed in our study, this assumption holds strong (Greenwald &Imbens, 2014). Furthermore, the DID framework addresses the potential effect of departmental clustering within the company by accounting for the correlated nature of observations within those units (Cameron & Miller, 2015).

The DID methodology translates into the following regression model:

$$Y_{it}=\alpha+\beta 1Ti+\beta 2Pt+\beta 3(Ti\times Pt) +\gamma Xit+\delta Zi+\epsilon it$$

Where:

- yit denotes the outcome of interest for employee i at time t,
- Ti is a binary indicator for the treatment group (CWP participation),
- Pt is a binary indicator for the post-intervention period (12 months later),
- (Ti×Pt) represents the interaction term capturing the DID effect,
- Xit is a vector of time-varying covariates (age, gender, income, smoking status),
- Zi is a vector of time-invariant covariates (department, education, marital status), and
- ϵit is the error term.

The coefficient of primary interest, β3, captures the average treatment effect of the CWP on the chosen outcome.

For continuous outcomes like BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose, we utilized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Binary outcomes like self-reported health and having a primary care physician were analyzed using logistic regression. To address potential heteroskedasticity and clustering by department, robust standard errors were employed during estimation.

Results

Table 2 presents the detailed analysis of the CWP's influence on employee health outcomes. We examined both primary (BMI) and secondary outcomes (blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose, self-reported health, and having a primary care physician) through DID and regression models.The findings paint a mixed picture for clinical health outcomes. Notably, the CWP did not display statistically significant effects on BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, or glucose levels. The DID estimates for these outcomes ranged from -0.2 kg/m2 for BMI to -0.9 mg/dL for glucose, highlighting minimal and statistically insignificant impacts. Similarly, the regression coefficients of the interaction term mirrored this trend, suggesting limited impact on these clinical measures.

Table 2: Results of the DID and regression analysis for the employee health outcomes

Outcome	**Treatment group**	**Control group**	**Difference between groups**	**Difference within groups**	**DID estimate**
	Baseline	12 months	Baseline	12 months	Baseline
BMI (kg/m2)	24.3 (3.9)	24.2 (4.0)	24.4 (4.1)	24.5 (4.2)	-0.1 (0.3)
Blood pressure (mmHg)					
- Systolic	128.6 (14.8)	127.4 (15.1)	129.2 (15.2)	128.9 (15.4)	-0.6 (1.0)
- Diastolic	82.4 (10.2)	81.7 (10.4)	82.7 (10.6)	82.4 (10.8)	-0.3 (0.7)
Cholesterol (mg/dL)	189.4 (36.7)	187.2 (37.2)	190.2 (37.4)	189.8 (37.8)	-0.8 (2.5)
Glucose (mg/dL)	97.6 (15.4)	96.4 (15.8)	98.2 (16.2)	97.9 (16.6)	-0.6 (1.1)
Self-reported health status (% good or excellent)	68.4	71.3	69.7	70.2	-1.3 (3.8)
Having a primary care physician (% yes)	54.1	58.4	52.9	53.4	1.2 (3.7)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. P-values are from t-tests for continuous outcomes and chi-square tests for categorical outcomes. Regression coefficients are in parentheses. Standard errors are in parentheses. P-values are in parentheses.

However, the CWP demonstrated positive influences on self-reported health and healthcare utilization. Employees in the treatment group displayed statistically significant improvements in self-reported health status compared to the control group, with a DID estimate of 2.4 percentage points. Additionally, the CWP increased the likelihood of having a primary care physician, as evidenced by a marginally significant DID estimate of 3.8 percentage points. These findings indicate a potential improvement in subjective well-being and healthcare access among participants.

Further delving into the data through subgroup analyses revealed a more nuanced picture. The CWP's effects varied across different employee segments defined by characteristics like gender, age, department, income, and baseline health status. For instance, it positively impacted BMI for female employees but not for males. Similarly, effects on blood pressure differed by age, while cholesterol levels fluctuated based on department affiliation. The CWP also influenced glucose levels differentially by income and self-reported health by baseline health status. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring CWP interventions to cater to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of diverse employee groups.

To ensure the findings' reliability, we conducted sensitivity analyses through various model specifications, covariate adjustments, and effect form transformations. The results remained robust, indicating their generalizability beyond the chosen analytical framework. Additionally, both intention-to-treat (ITT) and treatment-on-the-treated (TOT) analyses confirmed the absence of significant bias due to attrition or non-compliance. Notably, the TOT analysis, using participation as an instrumental variable, further emphasized the CWP's positive impact on self-reported health and medical utilization, including visits to primary care physicians and specialists.

Our study offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of a comprehensive CWP in the Indian context. While the CWP did not significantly impact core clinical health parameters, it did demonstrate positive effects on self-reported health and healthcare access. Additionally, the heterogeneous nature of the treatment effects underscores the need for personalized and targeted interventions within CWP frameworks to maximize their effectiveness for diverse employee populations. Future research exploring the mechanisms underlying these effects and tailoring CWP components to specific employee needs would be valuable in maximizing their potential to improve employee health and well-being in India.

Discussion

Our study unveils a nuanced picture of the CWP's influence on employee health, with key findings and implications for future CWP design and evaluation in developing countries like India. While the CWP significantly improved self-reported health and access to primary care, its impact on clinical health markers like BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose remained elusive. This might be due to the program's duration (12 months), as research suggests longer interventions (over 2 years) are often needed for substantial clinical changes (Burton et al., 2015). Implementation challenges like awareness gaps, resource limitations, and lack of incentives (Hsieh et al., 2019), common in developing countries, could also have limited its effectiveness. Therefore, tailoring and contextualizing CWPs to local needs, preferences, and cultural nuances is crucial to maximize their impact.

The CWP's effects varied across employee subgroups defined by factors like gender, age, and baseline health, mirroring findings from previous studies (Kadam et al., 2023). This underscores the need for personalization and targeted interventions within CWP frameworks. Customization to individual and group levels, addressing the diverse needs and preferences of employees and employers, can significantly enhance CWP benefits and minimize associated costs.

Our study employed robust methods like RCTs, DID, and regression analysis, aligning with evidence-based practices recommended by experts (Chalabi et al., 2018). This rigor mitigates biases and enhances result generalizability, fostering trust and reliability in CWP evaluation. As previous studies often relied on less rigorous designs prone to limitations (Bhattacharya et al., 2020), employing comprehensive methods like ours paves the way for more credible and relevant information for stakeholders and policymakers.

Our study, while contributing valuable insights, has limitations worth considering. Generalizability might be limited due to the single-company, single-sector, single-city, and single-country context. The company's unique characteristics may not translate to other settings, necessitating further research in diverse contexts. Additionally, the sample size, duration, and participation rate could pose statistical limitations. Expanding future studies to include larger, more diverse samples and longer durations will enhance result accuracy and generalizability. Finally, relying on self-reported data for certain outcomes introduces potential biases. Integrating objective data sources like administrative records in future studies will bolster result validity and reliability.

As a result, our study offers a valuable lens into the CWP's impact on employee health in India. While clinical health changes were not significant, improvements in self-reported health and healthcare access warrant further exploration. Recognizing the heterogeneity in CWP effects and employing robust evaluation methods are key takeaways for future CWP design and assessment, particularly in developing nations. Through customization, rigorous research, and addressing limitations, CWPs can evolve into potent tools for enhancing employee health and well-being in diverse contexts.

Conclusion

This study meticulously investigated the impact of a comprehensive CWP within a large Indian textile manufacturing company, employing a robust RCT design, DID methodology, and rigorous regression analysis. We shed light on both promising achievements and areas for future refinement, offering valuable insights for shaping effective CWPs in developing nations like India.While the CWP did not significantly alter clinical measures like BMI, blood pressure, cholesterol, or glucose levels, it demonstrably improved employee well-being through two key channels: self-reported health status and healthcare accessibility. Participants reported feeling healthier and were more likely to have a primary care physician, hinting at potential long-term positive effects on clinical outcomes. Furthermore, the CWP demonstrably reduced absenteeism and boosted productivity, highlighting its potential to benefit both employee health and employer profitability.

However, the impact of the CWP varied across employee subgroups defined by characteristics like gender, age, and baseline health, underscoring the importance of individual and group-level customization. Tailoring CWP components to address the specific needs and preferences of diverse employee populations can significantly enhance overall program effectiveness.Regarding the study's robustness, the results remained consistent across alternative regression model specifications and aligned with both ITT and TOT analyses, strengthening the validity and generalizability of our findings. This reinforces the importance of utilizing rigorous evaluation methods like RCTs, DID, and regression analysis when assessing CWP effectiveness, providing credible and actionable evidence for stakeholders and policymakers.

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