

Employees with workplace flexibility have healthier lifestyle habits

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If companies provide workplace flexibility and if employees perceive that flexibility as real, then healthier lifestyle habits are put into action by those employees, according to new research by lead author Joseph G. Grzywacz, Ph.D., of Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

The study, titled “The Effects of Workplace Flexibility on Health Behaviors: A Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Analysis,” is published in the Dec. 11 issue of *The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

“People who believe they have flexibility in their work lives have healthier lifestyles. Individuals who perceive an increase in their flexibility are more likely to start some positive lifestyle behaviors,” Grzywacz said.

“This study is important because it reinforces the idea that workplace flexibility is important to workplace health.”

Grzywacz explains that while workplace flexibility is widely believed to be an essential element of effective worksite health promotion programs, there has been little systemic research in support of this belief. Grzywacz said the goal of his study is to improve “understanding of the potential effect of workplace flexibility on worker lifestyle habits.”

Data for the study came from Health Risk Appraisals (HRAs) completed by employees of a large multinational pharmaceutical company. This

company is consistently recognized by Working Mother magazine as among the most family-friendly employers in the United States, in large part, because of its commitment to flexibility such as compressed workweeks, flextime, job sharing, and remote or telework. Employees with a wide variety of jobs and responsibilities completed the HRA, including executives, administrative support staff, and warehouse and production workers.

“These weren’t all office workers – that’s an important point,” Grzywacz said. “This isn’t just about high-level office workers – these people perform a wide variety of tasks within the company.”

The data was analyzed to determine if lifestyle behaviors differ between employees with different levels of perceived flexibility and to identify if changes in flexibility over a one-year time period predicted changes in health behavior. The study focused on frequency of physical activity, engagement in stress management programs, participation in health education activities, healthful sleep habits, and self-appraised overall lifestyle.

“Overall, the results showed that nearly all the health behaviors examined in this study were associated with perceived flexibility,” Grzywacz said. “Although further research is needed, these results suggest that flexibility programs that are situated within a broader organizational commitment to employee health may be useful for promoting positive lifestyle habits.”

Source: Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center

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