

Wellness Geeks Become **ROCK STARS**



BY **Steven G. Aldana** PHD



SEVERAL YEARS AGO I WAS BUSY STUDYING THE IMPACT OF VARIOUS ASPECTS OF WORKSITE WELLNESS EFFORTS. I was publishing papers that showed how employee wellness programs resulted in lower health care costs and improvements in health behavior and health risks. I even published findings that showed how programs could reduce employee absenteeism. With this new research slowly working its way into the scientific journals I remember thinking to myself, “Why aren’t insurance corporations working with the companies they cover to prevent chronic diseases?”

Every month they gather premiums and pay for medical services. If they could continue to gather premiums, but pay out less, they’d make even greater profits. Worksite wellness could be a huge money maker for insurance companies.” My thoughts were logical and accurate, but they were premature.

The business and insurance communities were not ready for this kind of thinking.

I continued publishing my research and time went by. It seemed to me that no one cared, or at least, no one was listening to the evidence that was being produced. Ron Goetzel, Dee Edington, Troy Adams, and many others continued to work for years to research employee wellness programs as well. We’d work to get papers published and wonder if anyone would actually read them. Looking back, it was a lonely time. We had important findings to share, but it seemed that no one cared.

Then something happened. I’m not sure, but I think incessant increases

in the cost of healthcare and the sudden appearance of the obesity epidemic led to a state of heightened awareness about the importance of worksite wellness programs. In just a few short years, it seemed that lots of people and worksites were suddenly very interested in wellness programs. Each of the nation’s largest insurance companies, Aetna, Wellpoint, Anthem, Cigna, United, Great West, and a whole bunch of Blue Cross and Blue Shield organizations have become ardent supporters and promoters of worksite wellness programs. This interest has spread well beyond insurance companies, insurance brokers, producers, and even third party administrators have jumped on the worksite wellness wagon. Third party administrators? Who would have guessed? I’ve now worked with all of these, plus benefits consultants, pharmaceutical companies, school districts, church groups, and companies of all sizes. Recently I met with the HR leadership from one of the nation’s largest cigarette companies. Imagine, a comprehensive wellness program at a cigarette company! During our initial discussions I found it impossible to contain my curiosity. I had to ask, “Does your wellness program have a smoking cessation component?” Nope, there were no smoking cessation programs, but everything else was there. Even cigarette manufacturers are starting to see the connections between employee health and the bottom.

I’ve even been asked to help the Federal Reserve Bank understand how employee behaviors play a large strategic role in successful business strategy. Until then, I can honestly say that I’d never used the words “wellness” and “monetary policy” in the same sentence.



But the evidence that worksite wellness has gained popularity goes well beyond insurance interests. Recently I was in Los Angeles working with a large group of corporate executives. I was advising them on worksite wellness programs. They had a professional car service drive me back to LAX. The driver, dressed in black, pulled up in a black, 2008 Audi A8L. Imagine a balding, middle-aged researcher (from Idaho) reclining into the luxurious, black leather seat of an exquisite, high performance automobile. As I sat there wide eyed, I learned from the driver that the car cost more than many American homes. As we approached LAX, I got a little concerned when I saw that the police had barricaded the entire street and were carefully emptying and searching every car that was approaching the airport. As our turn came to be searched, I happened to watch the eyes of the officer in charge. First he looked at our car, then he

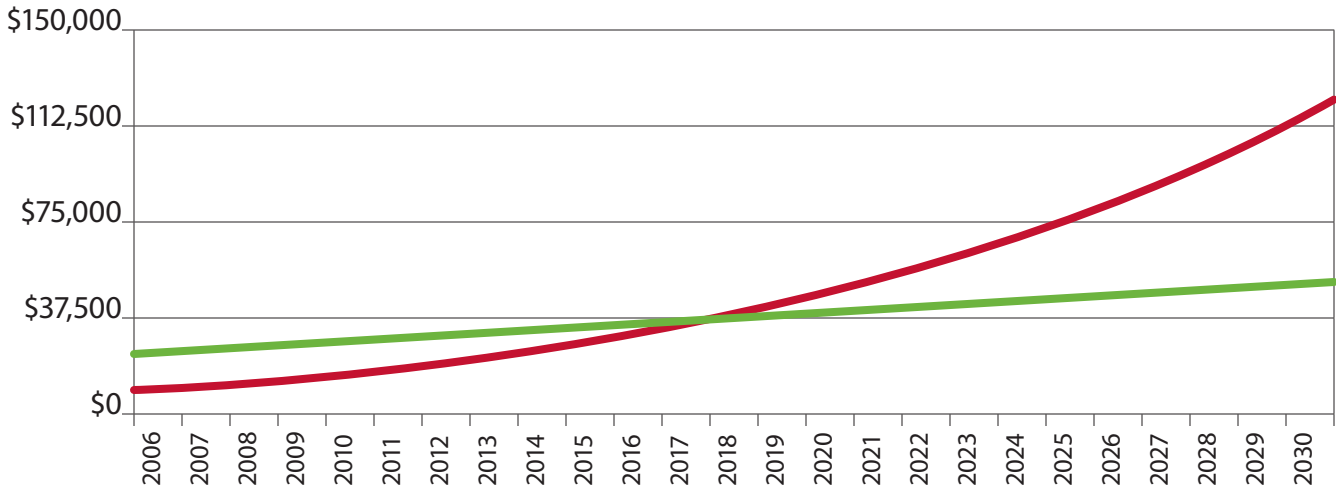
looked at my driver and squinting, he tried to see through the tinted windows that obscured me from the rest of the world. Without speaking a word, he waved us through. Now, even wider eyed, I asked my driver what had just happened. He reached up and slid his black sun glasses down toward the tip of his nose and exposed his eyes to me for the first time. He said, "Rock star status... police don't bother with executives, Hollywood types, or rock stars." My lower jaw came unhinged. Then, as I imagined a picture of me with the label "rock star" under it, my jaw dropping astonishment turned to uncontrolled laughter. I almost fell out of my seat I was laughing so hard. "Me" and "Rock star status" are definitely words that should never be used in the same sentence. After I stopped laughing and had time to relax, I couldn't help but think back to the time just a few years previous when it seemed to me that no one really cared about worksite wellness.

Okay...back to reality. Clearly, rock star status is a label that doesn't even come close to being accurate for me or any of my wellness colleagues. But we are becoming a more respected and important part of successful business strategies. Many of us run one-person wellness programs. We may work in quiet, somewhat isolated work environments and all this talk about growing national interest in worksite wellness may seem imaginary, but it isn't. Consider this evidence:

- ▶ Participation and interest in worksite wellness meetings and conferences has grown exponentially
- ▶ Talk to any wellness vendor and they will tell you business is booming
- ▶ Vendors can also tell you that the merger and acquisition of wellness companies has reached

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a fevered pitch, most companies have been purchased or have had offers

- ▶ WELCOA memberships have never been higher
- ▶ Every presidential candidate in the U.S. has made prevention a core component of their health care proposals
- ▶ The Governor of Indiana signed into law a bill that gives a direct tax credit to any worksite in the state for up to 50% of the cost of an employee wellness program—not just a tax write off, but a direct tax credit.
- ▶ Did I mention third party administrators are starting to do worksite wellness? Who knew?

I think the main reason for the increased interest can be easily summarized by some employee data from an automotive manufacturing plant for whom I recently did some

work. The green line in the graph (pictured above) is the projected average salary for the 600 employees at this plant. The red line is the projected health care costs per employee. Look at the place where the two lines cross.

At this point, which is about 10 years into the future, this company will start paying more for employee health care than they pay for salaries. In this scenario, health care will eclipse payroll as the single largest company expense. Well, I know for a fact that, this will never actually happen. Before the company gets to this point they can: stop insuring their employees, shift an increasing share of the cost onto the employees or the final price of their products, relocate the plant to Mexico or Asia, or file for bankruptcy. Everyday companies all over the U.S. are making these choices.

Thankfully a growing number of worksites are starting to see that there is a more viable option to tackling this problem. Now more than ever, they are turning to effective, well designed wellness programs to help ease the

health care cost pain. Most of the rise in health care cost is linked to rising rates of disease prevalence. In other words, the cost increase is primarily caused by having more and more people seek treatment for preventable chronic diseases. (Thorpe, 2006) Our unhealthy behaviors are leading to increased health risks. Elevated health risks lead to chronic diseases and higher health care costs. Ask yourself how much your company’s health care costs increased in the past few years. The national average increase is about 10% per year. Almost one third of this increase is due to one thing... increases in body weight. (Thorpe, 2006)

I’ve spent almost 20 years in academia. As a tenured, full professor, I enjoyed the luxury



of having the most secure job on the planet. Having a job where you can never be fired is a real oddity in America today. Yet, despite this and my generous benefits package I recently resigned from Brigham Young University. My colleagues told me I was crazy to leave, and my wife, well, she was sure I had lost all my marbles.

But I had come to the realization that if I was really going to contribute to a national effort to improve public health, I couldn't do it from behind the walls of academia. Ultimately, I decided to take a leap of faith and follow my heart. I resigned so that I could be more involved with changing our American way of living. Now I get to focus exclusively on what I feel is really important, helping Americans adopt and maintain healthy behaviors. Worksites are the key to improving this situation because they are the only segment of our society that can actually make money by promoting healthy behaviors. Better

stated, it's not that they will make money so much as they will lose less. Worksites that implement wellness programs will pay less for health care.

No other group can get such dramatic financial rewards by embracing healthier lifestyles.

If we are successful in improving health on a national level, hospitals, doctors, pharmaceutical companies, manufacturers of processed foods, fast food companies, and many other companies may actually lose money. In reality, our successful efforts will reduce corporate profits for many organizations. Despite this, the time has come for us to reverse our current unhealthy culture and environment. We've come down the path of Western living too far, and now it's time to back up and change our lifestyles to something better and healthier.

Now is the time to take all the great research that has been published, marry it with a healthy dose of reality and use this information to help worksites change public health on a massive scale. By teaming up with Dr. Troy Adams, also a recovering academic, I and my team at WellSteps are working toward changing health on a large scale.

From what I can see, we've just scratched the surface on what will eventually become a nationwide effort to improve health by adopting healthier behaviors. We are

at the very beginning of what will become a new culture of health that will slowly become a normal part of our schools, homes, communities, and worksites. As we continue to change the way we live in the U.S. I believe wellness professionals all across our country will become leaders in this effort.

It turns out that all of my hard work, and the hard work of my colleagues wasn't a waste. And with the growing culture of health that is evolving in our country, we might even attain rock star status. ★

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Dr. Aldana has published over 60 research articles and has written five books on the connections between healthy living and disease prevention. He is a regular consultant to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health, and the California Department of Health Services. In the past few years he has given over 80 invited lectures and keynote speeches around the United States. He has received numerous state, private, and federal grants to research how the adoption of healthy behaviors can prevent, arrest, and even reverse many common chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer.



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