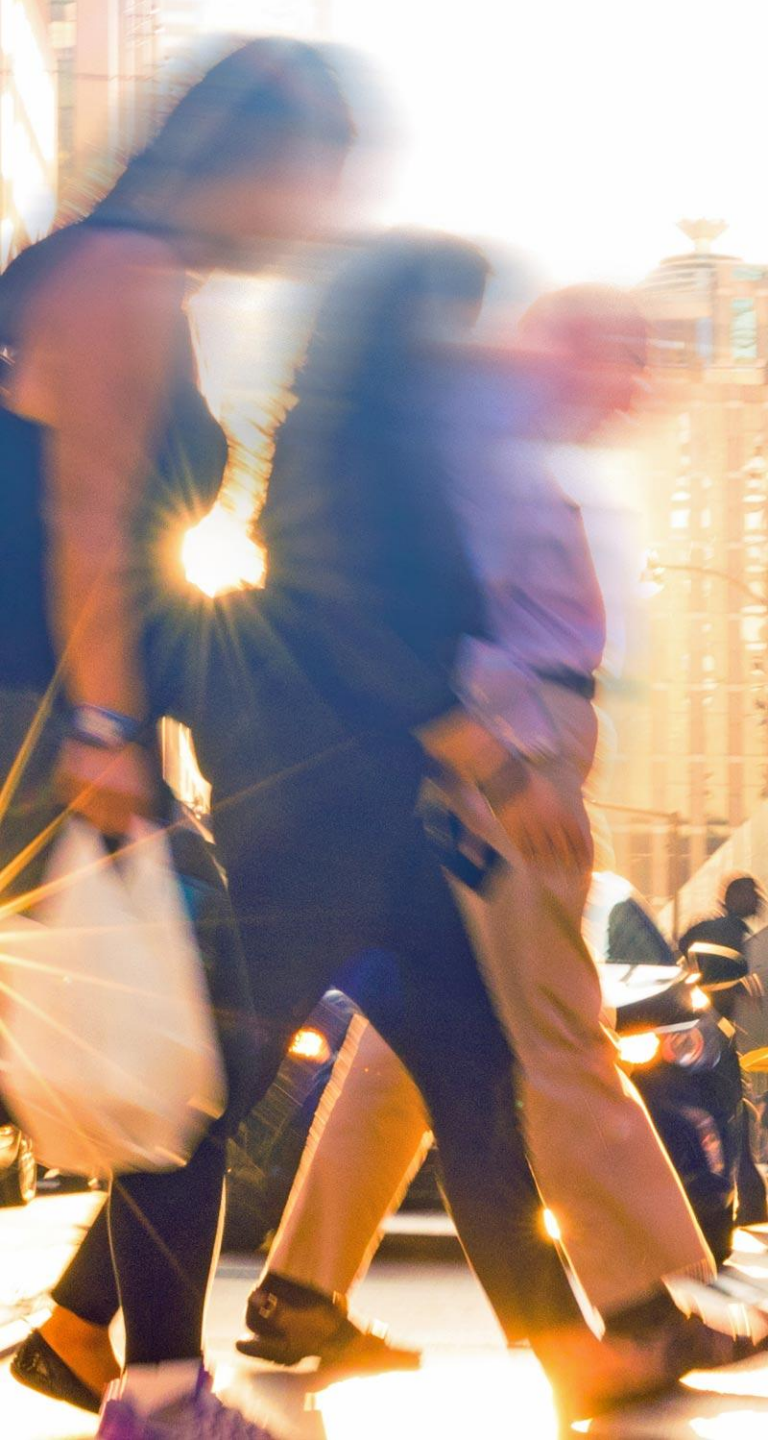


Engaging employees in wellness: Insights from workplace champions

Aviroop Biswas, PhD
Scientist, Institute for Work & Health

IWH Open Speaker Series

October 21st, 2025

Institute for Work & Health | Research Excellence Safe Work Healthy Workers

Acknowledgements

Principal Investigator: Avi Biswas

Study Team:

Khalida Nasir

Lynda Robson

Basak Yanar

Arif Jetha

Monique Gignac

SSHRC CRSH

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Thank you to our stakeholder advisory committee and study participants

Workplace wellness/well-being programs

- Supporting healthy living
  - Healthy and active living
  - Supporting non-smoking
  - Financial wellness
- Work/life balance
  - Flexible working hours
  - Time and stress management
  - Work/life balance
- Work environment
  - Facilities or supports for healthy living
  - Safe working environment
- Mental health support

Effective workplace wellness

Challenges of workplace wellness programs

- Organizational involvement is voluntary and commitment varies
- Program-to-program differences
- Employee participation is voluntary
  - Generally low participation rates
  - However, 55% of Canadian employees report benefiting from programs

(2025 Mental Health Research Canada Report)

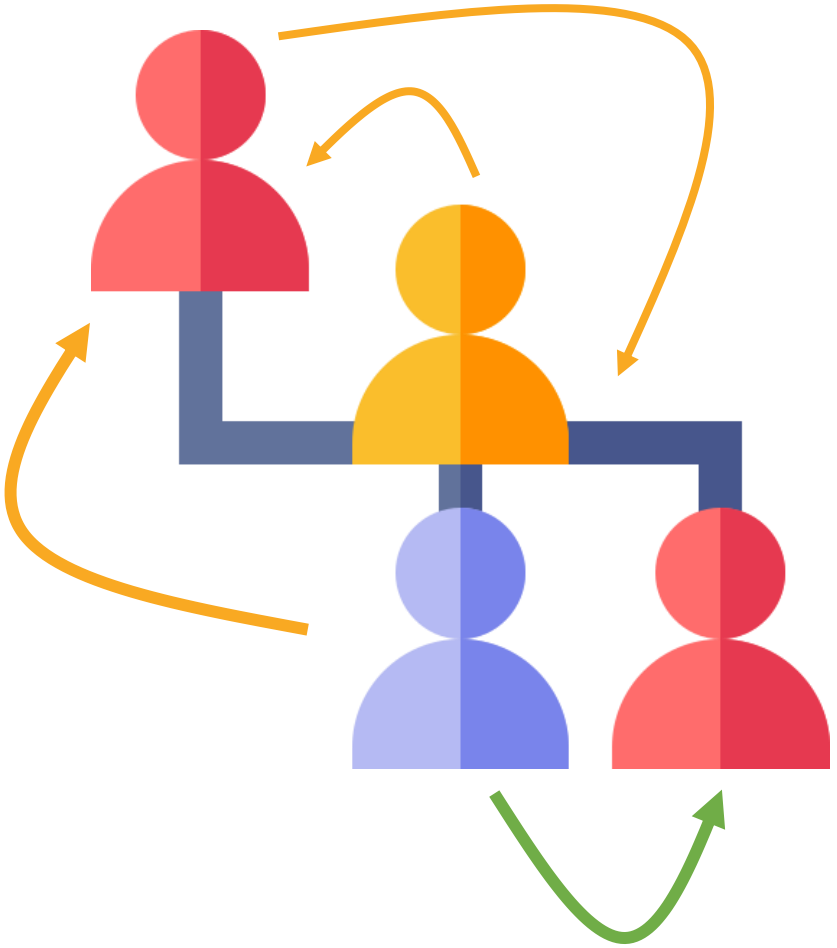
Previous research

"Identify and include champions and making sure they are supported is critical to continued engagement in wellbeing programs"

Biswas et al. "Organizational Perspectives on How to Successfully Integrate Health Promotion Activities into Occupational Health and Safety." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. 2021 Apr 1;63(4):270-284.*

HERO Health and Well-being Best Practices Scorecard: https://hero-health.org/

Workplace wellness champions



Objectives

We examined the experiences of workplace wellbeing champions across different organizational contexts.

We explored:

1) How champions perceive their roles
2) Their sources of motivation
3) Their approaches to implementing wellness efforts
4) Their successes and challenges in engaging colleagues

Methods

- One-on-one qualitative interviews conducted between April 2023 and September 2023
- Participants self-identified as workplace wellness champions
- We identified and interpreted patterns/themes from the interviews
- Consulted throughout with an advisory committee of stakeholders

Participants

- **Number of interviews:**
  - 22 champions (18 women and 4 men)
- **Industries represented:**
  - Government, healthcare, education, manufacturing, market research, police services, recreation management, consultancy
- **Job roles:**
  - Corporate wellness leads, human resources, OHS officers, diversity and equity officers, projects leads and managers, mental health leads, and employee engagement officers

Broad themes

Champion motivation, role, and sustainability

Recognition, credibility, and organizational support

Organizational structures and competing organizational priorities

Promoting and maintaining engagement among colleagues

Theme 1: Champion motivation, role, and sustainability

1.1: Passion-driven:
Champions were motivated by personal values, passion, and lived experiences.

> ***"I think personal stories resonate really well. I think the other piece is that you sometimes have to be vulnerable and just show why it matters to you because I think that gives you credibility, quite honestly."***
> **(Informal champion)**

Institute for Work & Health

Theme 1: Champion motivation, role, and sustainability

1.2: Two pathways:
Informal champions often start voluntarily and sometimes transitioned into formal positions. Formal champions build structures and programs.

> ***"I was an active member pitching my ideas… and then they created the position… and that's how I ended up in this role"*** **(Formal champion)**

1.3: Sustainability challenges:
Champions expressed concerns about burnout and the need for broader organizational support.

> ***"Some of us are spending upwards of seven or eight hours over the course of a week doing this"*** **(Informal champion)**

1.3: Sustainability challenges:
Champions expressed concerns about burnout and the need for broader organizational support.

> ***"Everyone I know in this field, pretty much, it seems that there's a certain time where they burn out, because they're so passionate about what they do and their heart is in the right place"*** **(Formal champion)**

Theme 2: Recognition, credibility, and organizational support

2.1: Recognition varies:
Some champions felt valued, while others saw their efforts dismissed as “not real work.”

“Some people would be like, oh, that’s great that you do this stuff… others were like, that’s not really work… that should be like on volunteer time or your lunch hour” **(Formal champion).**

2.2: Trust builds influence:
Formal champions drew legitimacy from their roles, while informal champions build trust through independence.

"I'm actually really clear that I'm not representing the employer… people were skeptical about a conversation being brokered at work by work people" **(Informal champion)**

Theme 3: Organizational structures and competing organizational priorities

3.1: Bureaucracy slows progress:
Formal champions face multiple approval layers; informal champions may encounter sudden changes.

> ***"They understand that a lot of this stuff needs to be formalized and supported, but it's just slow… I'm going to have like ten people approving my work"*** **(Formal champion).**

3.2: Managers make a difference:
Supportive supervisors help champions balance wellness with their other work.

3.3: Work comes first:
Heavy workloads and productivity pressures can limit staff participation.

"People are struggling…
it's not a priority when they have work to do"
(Informal champion).

3.3: Work comes first:
Heavy workloads and productivity pressures can limit staff participation.

> ***"You can provide resources about work-life balance, but ultimately you can't actually improve on work-life balance because that's affected by the organization. That depends on the organization making some kind of change, which you can't influence as well."***
>
> **(Informal champion).**

Theme 4: Promoting and maintaining engagement among colleagues

4.1: Tailor programs to staff needs:
Champions design activities that match staff needs and preferences.

"Trying to get people from all the different departments… it's hard, but you're trying to bring them to the table" **(Formal champion).**

Theme 4: Promoting and maintaining engagement among colleagues

4.2: Role modelling and communication are critical:
Importance of being visible and consistent in promoting wellness.

> ***"The more they see me… they'll be more apt to go, 'you know what, I'll go to that wellness event"*** **(Formal champion).**

4.3: Focus on attenders:
Champions focused on supporting already engaged, rather than trying to convert non-participants.

"We haven't really explored in a formal way why people don't attend… it might be worthwhile including that" **(Formal champion).**

4.4: Face-to-face helps:
In-person activities boost connection and participation.

"If you see someone that's leaving their desk to join some initiative, you're more likely to do it"
(Formal champion).

Study limitations & next steps

- Study did not capture views of other stakeholders (e.g., employers, managers, EAPs).

  Future research may also focus on views of non-attenders.

- May not have captured other experiences by champions, especially champions in low-resource organizations.

Discussion

- Champions can bring workplace wellness to life
- Sustainability and risk of burnout
- Balancing leadership support with autonomy
- Tailoring and delivery of wellness activities
- Champions may not be effective on their own

Thank you

Avi Biswas, PhD

Scientist, Institute for Work & Health

 abiswas@iwh.on.ca

Sign up online for our monthly e-alerts, our quarterly newsletter, event notifications and more: iwh.on.ca/subscribe