



Original article

Policy, environment, and worksite fitness program participation among financial enterprise employees in Taiwan

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Abstract

Background/Objective: This study explored the intertwined effects between the policies and regulations of the companies and personal background on participation in the physical fitness programs and leisure-time activities in financial enterprises.

Methods: A total of 823 employees were selected as the sample with the multilevel stratification random-sampling technique. The response rate was 52.0%. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and hierarchical linear logistic regression.

Results: Thirty-two percent and 39% of the employees participated in the physical fitness programs and leisure-time activities, respectively. The factors affecting participation were categorized into intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes, and primary groups, as well as institutional factors. In the interpersonal processes and primary groups level, higher family social support, more equipment in health promotion was associated with more participation in the programs. With the influence from the institutional level, it was found that health promotion policy amplified the relationship between employees' age and participation, but attenuated the relationship between education level and participation. Health promotion equipment in the institutes attenuated the relationship between colleague social support, family social support, and education level with program participation. Physical activity equipment in the community attenuated the relationship between family social support and program participation.

Conclusion: The influential factors of social support and worksite environment could predict the employees' participation in the physical fitness programs and leisure-time physical activities. Health promotion policy and equipment attenuated the negative effects of nonparticipation as well as amplified the positive effects of participation.

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Keywords: Health promotion equipment; Health promotion policy; Physical fitness; Workplace health promotion

Introduction

With the emergence of a new era in public health, the goal of health promotion has been adopted in many countries. As employed adults spend at least one-third of their daily life at work, workplaces provide a logical setting in which the environment might be shaped to promote healthier behavior

and improve employees' lifestyles. Workplace health promotion is not limited to traditional hazards control and disease prevention; rather, promoting employees' health-related behavior before the onset of disease is the new focus. Research has indicated that employees who participate in health-promoting programs not only have less absenteeism, sick leave, and reduced medical care cost, but also have higher overall morale.^{1,2} Meanwhile, employees are under new health risks because of changes in the style of labor and occupational patterns resulting from the globalized economy and swift changes in scientific technology. Based on research on workplace health and safety conducted by the Taiwan National

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Labor Commission,³ 31% of workers interviewed believed that their workplace environment had a negative effect on their health. More than 60% of the interviewees claimed that they had workplace-related discomfort; > 50% had physical pain; and 34% had poor quality of sleep. Among those interviewed, employees of financial and insurance companies felt they had the highest amount of pressure from work. Financial enterprises play an important role in national economies. A stable financial system can improve the growth and development of a country; meanwhile, international financial crises can occur because of the systemic failure in one country. Thus, the importance of this business can cause great stress for employees. A study of 38 managers and 1326 staff in Taiwan⁴ found that the respondents, both managers and staff, did not live an active lifestyle. Only 26.4% of them exercised three times a week and 38.2% engaged in leisure-time physical activity during holidays. Sixty percent of the managers and 50% of the staff did not have a balanced diet or eat two servings of fruit per day. A physically inactive lifestyle paired with the sedentary work pattern of the financial institute workers might cause the problem of obesity for this employment group.

Obesity is one of the most important factors underlying many diseases, and is a growing problem worldwide. Recent statistics indicated that 1 billion people worldwide were overweight, with 300 million classified as obese.⁵ Adults were at continued risk for weight gain over time, with average increases of two pounds per year.⁶ Energy expenditure is important for weight control as well as obesity prevention. Public habits have not changed to a great degree, although it is well known to most people that regular physical activity and leisure-time activities help with people's health. A study conducted in Northern Ireland⁷ indicated that even a short-term health promotion intervention project can improve the lifestyle of the employees. Taiwanese enterprises have implemented many health-promoting programs with support from the government in recent decades on tobacco control, physical fitness, preventive screening, health education, healthy diet, and stress management.⁸ Among these, the most popular projects were fitness activities and leisure-time activities.⁹ Thus, it is worthwhile to explore the factors that influence employees to participate in future programs.

McLeroy and colleagues¹⁰ proposed an ecological model identifying five specific levels of influence as the most relevant for explaining and changing health behavior, that is, intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes and primary groups, organizational factors, community factors, and public policy. Studies have indicated that sex and socioeconomic status are associated with participation in health promotion programs. Women and those with higher salaries participated more than men and those with lower salaries.^{11,12} A systematic review by Robroek et al.¹³ also found contradictory results for age, with both statistically significant higher and lower participation levels among older employees. The authors further indicated that few studies evaluated the influence of health, lifestyle, and work-related factors on participation, which is an obstacle for insight into underlying

determinants of initial participation and sound program planning.

Despite the importance of the organizational sciences, little is known about the extent to which organizational behavior and work-related well-being can be explained by environmental factors and by employees' personal background. To date, no study has explored the influence of company policies and regulations on participation, although these factors are important. In this paper, we report and discuss our in-depth exploration of personal and organizational factors influencing workers' likelihood of participating in fitness programs, as well as the environment for physical activity inside the workplace and in the surrounding areas based on a social ecological model that might be associated with participation.

Methods

The research proposal was reviewed and approved by a review board appointed by the Health Promotion Administration, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Taiwan. The board members also examined the ethical issues without any negative comments. Informed consent was received from the participants to safeguard the rights of the participants.

Participants and procedure

This study was an institution-based survey. This involved a stratified clustering sampling design based on company size to select a nationally representative sample. The target population for the survey was the employees in any one of the 1346 financial institutions in Taiwan. All employees who worked at these financial institutions were eligible to complete the questionnaire. The institutions were categorized into small, medium, and large companies based on the criteria set by the Commission of Labor and the World Bank. Sample size was estimated by using the formula of standard error with $\alpha = 0.05$, $Z = 1.96$, and maximum sampling error = 0.05. Companies were drawn proportionally within each category. Among the 1346 registered institutions with 47,069 employees, two from 64 medium-sized companies and 29 from 1282 small companies were selected. A total of 31 companies were sampled, representing 823 persons. Respondents completed the questionnaire at the company and returned it in an envelope to the research team, providing a total sample of 428 participants (52.0% response rate).

Measures

Outcome variables

Two types of fitness program participation were self-reported. Taking part in physical fitness and leisure-time physical activity programs offered by the workplace was assessed using the following question: "Have you ever participated in any sport or exercise activities held by the company?" Respondents were asked to identify the types of physical activity they had engaged in from 12 named activities, for example, physical fitness, sporting games, and

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