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## HEALTH & WELLBEING

### **Why your workplace wellness program isn't working**

Whether it's meditation practices, time management lessons or sleep apps, employers have been investing more resources into employee wellness programs. But that may be for naught



A NEW OXFORD University study is casting major doubt on the effectiveness of all these workplace wellness programs that have proliferated over the past few years. A study of over 46,000 British workers that looked at the effectiveness of 90 different kinds of workplace wellness interventions found that, for the most part, those who participated in workplace wellness programs were no more well off than colleagues who didn't.

“The results...pose a challenge to the popularity and legitimacy of individual-level mental well-being interventions like mindfulness, resilience and stress management, relaxation classes and well-being apps. I find little evidence in support of any benefits from these interventions,” wrote lead researcher Dr. William J. Fleming, in the *[Industrial Relations Journal](#)*.

Workplaces that want to improve the mental health of their workers would be far better, Dr. Fleming's research suggests, to focus on “the greater benefits of organizational rather than individual change,” by “enhancing job resources whilst also mitigating job demands.”

Findings like this cast some doubt on how Canadian workplaces have approached mental wellbeing. Most Canadian workers expect their employer to help support mental wellness, and as [Victoria Wells pointed out in the \*Financial Post\*](#), the cost of poor mental health is estimated to be around \$51 billion a year in Canada alone when you factor in extra healthcare costs and lost productivity. (These costs are particularly high among young workers, with another study suggesting that Gen Z and millennial employees are missing “the equivalent of a day of work every week due to mental health struggles,” [reported Fortune.](#))

For workplaces to take this seriously, though, it will amount to a bit of an about-face on how they have approached workplace wellness in recent years. Individual-level programs have been more in vogue than larger, more systemic changes that may entail more significant costs. “Employers want to be seen as doing something, but they don’t want to look closely and change the way work is organized,” Tony D. LaMontagne, an Australian professor of workplace wellbeing, [told the \*New York Times\*](#).

That’s not to say that Fleming wants to throw the baby out with the bathwater, at least not entirely. “If employees do want access to mindfulness apps and sleep programs and wellbeing apps, there is not anything wrong with that,” he told the *Times*. “But if you’re seriously trying to drive employees’ wellbeing, then it has to be about working practices.”