Gallup & Healthways Provide A New Way To Look At The Health Of The Nation

John Harris on the opportunities this data will provide.

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About David Hunnicutt

Since his arrival at WELCOA in 1995, David Hunnicutt has interviewed hundreds of the most influential business and health leaders in America. Known for his ability to make complex issues easier to understand, David has a proven track record of asking the right questions and getting straight answers. As a result of his efforts, David’s expert interviews have been widely-published and read by workplace wellness practitioners across the country.

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About John Harris

John Harris, M.Ed., FAWHP, is Vice President, Innovations and Chief Wellness Officer for Healthways, Inc. Mr. Harris serves as the primary wellness authority within Healthways, contributing to prevention efforts throughout the organization. He was formerly an Executive Vice President of Axia Health Management, which was acquired by Healthways in late 2006. He was also the co-founder of Harris HealthTrends, an entrepreneurial corporation specializing in the prevention of disease and the reduction of healthcare costs, and served as its Chief Executive Officer for over 18 years.

WELCOA's News & Views

An Expert Interview with John Harris

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In a historic partnership, Gallup and Healthways joined forces to provide a daily pulse of the nation’s health and well-being. In this exclusive interview, John Harris, Vice-President, Innovations and Chief Wellness Officer for Healthways tells WELCOA President David Hunnicutt about this groundbreaking partnership and the impact it will have on American companies and their employees.

HUNNICUTT: How would you characterize the well-being of the typical U.S. employee?

HARRIS: Whether you measure it strictly on a physical scale or you look on a broader scale that includes emotional and social factors, the answer is not good. Much is known about the overweight and unfit nature of the American worker and certainly that’s bad enough, but well-being is even worse if you take the emotional and social factors into account. For instance, U.S. workers hit a record low level of well-being on the job in October of last year. In 2009, on average, only 49 percent of all Americans provided positive responses in the four categories of work environment that we measure. These categories include job satisfaction, a trusting work environment, collaborative supervision and an opportunity to use their strengths each day. Unfortunately, we’re not seeing much of an improvement in 2010 either.

DH: How would you rate the overall quantity and quality of workplace wellness initiatives in this country?

JH: We know that thousands of companies have implemented wellness programs, and are reaping the benefits in terms of lower healthcare costs and improved productivity. Still, many companies do not have programs — particularly the medium-sized and smaller companies — so there’s much work yet to be done. Of course, this could explain some of the abysmal statistics that we see in the American workforce. Some of our data shows that 50 percent of American employees haven’t exercised in the past 30 days. About 67 percent of the workforce is overweight or obese, and there has been a 36 percent hike in healthcare spending associated with obesity in recent years. So, while the quantity of programs has continued to grow, and I think the quality is relatively good, we certainly have got to do considerably better if we’re going to impact this abysmal state.

DH: Explain the partnership between Gallup and Healthways and the potential contributions both organizations can make to advance health in this country.

JH: Gallup is the largest and probably most prestigious public opinion institution in the world. It has over 70 years of history in gathering data, and is a real leader in the development of behavioral data. Healthways is a leading provider of specialized, comprehensive health and care support solutions that allow people to better manage and maximize their health and well-being. Gallup and Healthways joined forces to lead the nation in understanding the key factors that affect overall health and well-being and to look at what can be done to improve them.
The Facts…

WELCOA’s trademarked Seven Benchmark System for building results-oriented workplace wellness programs has been used by 1,000’s of companies throughout the U.S. To learn more about this process simply visit http://www.welcoa.org/wellworkplace/index.php?category=16

WELCOA MEMBERSHIP

More than three thousand organizations across the U.S. and Canada are members of WELCOA. With the most comprehensive benefits of any organization, WELCOA membership will save you time and money in your quest to build a results-oriented workplace wellness program.

To learn more about how you can become a WELCOA member simply visit http://www.welcoa.org/member/benefits.php

Your Number One Resource For Workplace Wellness Information

To access hundreds of free documents and stay abreast of the latest developments in workplace wellness, be sure to visit WELCOA’s homepage at www.welcoa.org.

Over the next 25 years, Gallup and Healthways will take a daily pulse of the nation’s individual and collective well-being and provide workable solutions for a healthier workforce. The Gallup-Healthways collaboration draws on a diverse background of people who have achievements in research, science and industrial psychology. In fact, we have a Nobel Prize winning economic science professional whose research has really pioneered behavioral economics. So, we’re backed by a great team.

DH: You’ve been involved in the field of health promotion since the early days, and have delved into a variety of new and exciting areas. How did you settle on the idea of well-being?

JH: Well, the story behind it is pretty interesting. Healthways and Gallup are both members of the Center for Health Transformation, which is led by former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. Speaker Gingrich suggested that we bring our two organizations together in a joint effort that combined our collective talent. He felt this could result in one of those proverbial situations where the sum of the parts is greater than the whole.

So, Healthways and Gallup were introduced through Speaker Gingrich and collectively we recognized that focusing on the complete well-being of an individual was bound to produce better results than just focusing on the physical side, which was pretty much the norm with wellness in the past.

DH: What exactly is well-being and how do you define it and measure it?

JH: That’s a great question. After considering many different definitions, we focused on some work that the World Health Organization did back in 1946. At that time it stated: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” This is probably a definition that many people have heard, and to a great extent that sums up well-being. If I were to put it in simpler terms, I would say it’s everything in life that makes it worth living. So, that’s how we’ve defined it.

Now, as for measurement, Healthways and Gallup developed the Gallup Healthways Well-Being Index (WBI). The WBI measures six domains, including physical health, emotional health, healthy behavior, work environment, life evaluation and basic access to necessities like food and water. We actually expanded the look at basic necessities because a lot of people’s first reaction is, “Gee, that sounds sort of Third World.” However, the reality is that people in rural areas often don’t have easy access to fresh produce or fitness centers, and we sometimes find that people in urban settings don’t have safe places to exercise. So access is certainly still an issue.

The Well-Being Index provides an unprecedented and real-time view of the public’s well-being, giving U.S. communities, government and organizations unmatched insight into their populations’ respective health and prosperity. We draw on data from about 1,000 in-depth surveys completed almost every day of
the year. These surveys are conducted in both English and Spanish and done with both land lines and cell phones. It actually takes about 26,000 calls a night to reach the 1,000 representative completed surveys.

We view the Well-Being Index as today’s true voice of the people. To our knowledge, this effort is the most ambitious ever undertaken to measure what Americans believe constitutes a good life.

We view the Well-Being Index as today’s true voice of the people. To our knowledge, this effort is the most ambitious ever undertaken to measure what Americans believe constitutes a good life. It’s helping us understand who is feeling good about their life, who is in need of a helping hand and how people value their health and well-being. We launched in January of 2008 and through year-end 2009 we’ve completed 709,000 surveys that are, again, representative of the U.S.’s well-being. So we’re pleased with the size of the undertaking and we’re really happy with the information that it’s providing.

DH: How does your view of well-being differ from the traditional view, which places an emphasis on things like disease management, physical activity, obesity, smoking cessation, etc.?

JH: Well, the traditional emphasis of most worksite health programs has been on the physical side. These include diseases, biometric risk factors and physical behavior. However, in addition to the physical focus, well-being also includes the emotional and social domains, which we are discovering are of utmost importance. The information and database that Gallup and Healthways have compiled allows organizations to address the physical, emotional and social factors, all of which affect behavior change. When you put all of this together, you start to see that it completes the puzzle; it shows what makes people tick and why they’re unable to focus on and affect the physical side of health.

DH: What are the challenges for employers in broadening their focus from health to well-being?

JH: The biggest challenge is philosophical. For so long programs have focused on physical health, maybe with some emphasis on emotional health through stress management and depression programs. However, the Well-Being Index is showing us that we need to focus much more on emotional health and a number of sociological factors. Show me a person who feels he or she is in a non-supportive work environment, is busy taking care of elderly parents, struggling financially, and getting little time to enjoy family and friends and I’ll show you a person who is probably not very concerned about his or her cholesterol level, weight or the amount of exercise they’re getting in a given day. Albert Einstein was quoted as saying something...
RESOURCES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT…

The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index™ has been developed to provide the official measure for health and well-being. It’s the voice of Americans and the most ambitious effort ever undertaken to measure what people believe constitutes a good life.

Over the next 25 years, the Well-Being Index will collect and measure the daily pulse of the nation’s well-being and provide best-in-class solutions for a healthier world. By helping Americans understand how work impacts life and health and conversely how life affects work and health, we can work together to improve well-being for a better way of life.

To find out more about The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index™ please visit:

www.well-beingindex.com

Like “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” In many cases, that’s really what we’ve done with wellness programs through the years. We’ve continued to do the same things with some improvement over time, but we haven’t really stopped to think and look at this in a completely different way.

So, the challenge for employers is going to be shifting their focus. They’re going to have to first look at things like creating a supportive work culture and addressing the emotional and sociological factors of their employees before they look at the physical factors. They then must broaden the scope of their efforts to take all that in, or in some cases, maybe just better integrate the programs they already have. For instance, at Healthways we focus on what we call the “four homes” to address an individual’s holistic wellbeing. One is the medical home, which looks at their trusted clinicians and how we can get them involved in the process. The second is the work home, which consists of what employers can do to create the best possible environment for people to make changes or sustain healthy behaviors. The third is the health home, which includes the experts in the community, such as a personal trainer or massage therapist. The final home is the personal home, which includes friends, families and other support circles that can help people in their efforts.

We find that if we tie the four homes together it really maximizes success. So, you can see how this approach can promote sustainable behavior improvement, but it is a departure from the focus on just physical health. For employers to have great impact here, they really need to philosophically move to the social and emotional side, in addition to staying focused on improving physical health.

DH: Do you anticipate that worksites will have to do major overhauls to their existing programs or will it be more like a series of nudges?

JH: It’s less than a major overhaul, but more than just a few nudges. I think it will require merging existing programs. For instance, bringing the Employee Assistance Program and wellness programs into one integrated initiative, or recognizing efforts to improve work culture, which has traditionally been the domain of human resources. This all needs to be part of the overall wellness effort and what is required is well within the realm of reasonable. We hope people will view it as something less than monumental, but it is going to take work.

DH: What are some of the biggest surprises that you’ve had with the data from the Well-Being Index?

JH: There have been a lot of surprises. I think the work environment has been one of the biggest surprises. We’ve been able to show through the survey that the work environment has a direct impact on health and productivity. The more negative the work
environment, the less productive the employee and the greater the toll it takes on his or her health. In a negative work environment, people with health conditions have even more difficulty carrying out their typical work activities. For instance, we have data that shows if a person operates in a negative work environment and has one to three chronic conditions, they experience six more days per year of being unable to carry out their normal activity than if they were in a positive work environment. That number increases to 16 more days per year for people who have four or more chronic illnesses. So you can see that the work environment is very significant. Many companies hire vendors to provide wellness programs, but then don’t do what is needed in the work environment for those programs to be completely successful. So they fail and it’s blamed on the wellness program structure, programs, or the vendor, when in reality it may have been an infrastructure issue in a company’s own work environment.

Another thing that’s been very interesting to me is something we call the Life Evaluation Sub-Index. This is basically an indicator of optimism, and we look at it in terms of how people feel today and how they believe they will feel five years from now. We then place people in “thriving”, “struggling” or “suffering” categories. People who say that they exercise tend to be thriving more than those who don’t exercise, so that’s been interesting to me. The survey is telling us that even one or two days of exercise per week may pay off in much higher life evaluation. Those reporting more days of exercise also report higher scores on the Gallup-Healthways Emotional Health Sub-Index. So, exercise seems to be closely tied to emotions. It’s also interesting to note that people in the thriving category have a risk profile that is skewed towards lower risk while those struggling and suffering have a risk profile that is skewed towards higher risk. Of course, we know that where your risk factors go your costs go — so it really drives the chicken or the egg question. If we drive people’s optimism up, can we drive their risk down, or do we have to drive their risk down to change their optimism? We’re not really sure of the answer yet, but we know they’re related.

We also discovered that commute time affects well-being. People with a longer commute to work report more stress, higher levels of anger and do not feel as well rested as people commuting less. Additionally, the greater a person’s commute time, the lower their overall Life Evaluation score. Another finding for me that was pretty amazing relates to social time and stress. Individuals citing six-plus hours of social time a day report much more happiness and enjoyment than their peers who don’t experience nearly as much social time. Happy individuals are on average healthier; they have higher incomes and they have better social relationships and greater longevity. So again, very interesting ties between happiness and health.

Finally, we have found that in addition to diet and exercise, the direct drivers of obesity are emotional health, financial stress and recognition at work. People who score well in those areas have a much easier time losing weight or have a lower BMI to start with. So, while exercise and nutrition are still critically important,
people should definitely be acting upon these emotional and sociological factors to achieve the highest impact and best results.

DH: How can employers learn more about the Well-Being Index, and how can it help them keep their populations healthy and productive?

JH: I encourage your readers to visit the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index Website, www.well-beingindex.com. This site provides great information and regular updates on our findings. Visitors can use the WBI to get an idea of what the well-being at their organization looks like. This alone has produced fascinating information. For example, we’re finding that companies with multiple locations can be vastly different site to site, which in the past I don’t think we’ve considered. As we think about how we communicate programs or deliver them, it’s telling us that our approach has to be different site to site even within a single organization. The WBI allows companies to compare themselves to national norms, which can be very interesting and surprising, but it also allows them to compare their own units, location by location, to see where they stand.

Employers can learn more from the WBI as compared to a general health risk assessment. They get a picture of the emotional and social side of health in addition to the physical side. This provides a better understanding of interpersonal relationships and looks at productivity, absenteeism, and presenteeism in new and different ways. It also allows them to view their work environment and determine what is causing issues and barriers. Is it the stress or is it the culture? Is it the leadership? What resources do they need to add or change?

Finally, we often use the Well-Being Index at the corporate level to create a plan for well-being focused on improving employee health, impacting productivity, reducing health-related costs and improving business performance. We hope to use the WBI over time as a way for companies to improve their business performance. We know that well-being itself makes people perform better, and thus helps companies perform better. However, we also believe companies with high well-being will have an advantage in recruitment, retention, and a variety of other tangibles and intangibles that impact their success.

DH: What advice would you give employers as they prepare themselves to better address well-being at the workplace?

JH: The first thing is to be open-minded to new ways of thinking and new ways of working. I’ve been in this field nearly 35 years and I’ve been a real wellness purist, if you will. So I have to say that even for me standing in the midst of it, I’m amazed at what we’re learning and how differently we’re going to need to approach well-being in the future. So, being open-minded is crucial. I would also encourage employers to recognize that work culture and work environment might be holding them back in their efforts to impact employee health.

There is a clear link between physical, emotional and social health, and if all three can be addressed, the opportunity to improve well-being, reduce health-related costs,
and improve business performance all become within an employer’s reach. So it brings many initiatives together — many things that have traditionally been done separately.

For the first time, the kind of impact we’ve dreamt about in this field for years is a realistic goal. I believe a better understanding of well-being will help us get there. With the advent of a better understanding, it gives us an opportunity to impact well-being now and reap the benefits in the very near future.

DH: How do you see the field changing in the next 10 years?

JH: To answer this question, let me use an example. I call this my Mr. Jones example. In the wellness and disease management programs of the past, we would contact Mr. Jones and begin the dialogue something like this: “Hello, Mr. Jones, I’m calling to talk to you about your cholesterol, weight and diabetes. How are you today?” Mr. Jones’ response might be something like: “Well, I’m spending 10 hours a week taking care of my elderly parents. That has led to working less overtime, causing both financial burden and pressure from my boss. As a result, my wife and I have been fighting more. That’s how I’m doing today.” Unfortunately, the typical response to that kind of answer would be something like: “Okay, Mr. Jones, thanks for sharing. Now, let’s talk about your cholesterol, weight and diabetes.” In the past, we didn’t have the tools to address the sociological and emotional factors. Maybe we would’ve referred Mr. Jones to the EAP, but at that point we fragmented his care.

By contrast, imagine a day when our response is totally different. Instead, either through knowledge we already have or through Mr. Jones’ disclosure, we would immediately focus on the emotional and social factors that are keeping Mr. Jones from addressing his physical problem. This would help us gain Mr. Jones’ trust, lighten his burden and ultimately allow us to shift the focus to his physical need. The dialogue might be totally different. For instance, maybe we would say: “Mr. Jones, I’m so happy we’ve helped you better balance your life and that you’re feeling some relief. Now, if you’re going to continue the good work you’re doing as a worker, son and spouse, you really need to stay physically healthy and maintain a high energy level. To make sure you’re there for your loved ones in the long run, today I want to begin the dialogue about your cholesterol, weight and diabetes.”

The approach becomes totally different, and we recognize that we’ve got to get at the social and emotional factors before we have any hope of impacting the physical side of a person like Mr. Jones. So, I believe the programs of the future will address the whole person, focusing on each of their unique needs. By doing that, we’ll have the ability to impact the physical, emotional and social domains, generating sustainable behavior change, improving health, reducing healthcare costs, and seeing measurable business performance improvements.

DH: How optimistic are you about the road ahead?

JH: I am very optimistic. This treasure trove of information we collect at the rate of a thousand surveys a night and the Well-Being Index provides so much oppor-
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An Unprecedented View Of Wellness
Healthways and Gallup have developed the Well-Being Index (WBI), which provides an unprecedented and real-time view of the public’s well-being, giving U.S. communities, government and organizations unmatched insight into their populations’ respective health and prosperity.  

The Big Picture
Employers can learn more from the WBI as compared to a general health risk assessment. They get a picture of the emotional and social side of health in addition to the physical side. This provides a better understanding of interpersonal relationships and looks at productivity, absenteeism, and presenteeism in new and different ways.  

Re-Thinking Conventional Wisdom
I’ve been in this field nearly 35 years and I’ve been a real wellness purist, if you will. So I have to say that even for me standing in the midst of it, I’m amazed at what we’re learning and how differently we’re going to need to approach well-being in the future.  

Results Are Within Our Reach
There is a clear link between physical, emotional and social health, and if all three can be addressed, the opportunity to improve well-being, reduce health-related costs, and improve business performance all become within an employer’s reach.  

Information = Opportunity
This treasure trove of information we collect at the rate of a thousand surveys a night provides so much opportunity to change people’s behaviors. For the first time, the opportunity is there to reverse this epidemic of obesity and poor fitness and the resulting chronic disease we’re dealing with in the U.S.
tunity to change people’s behaviors. For the first time the opportunity is there to reverse this epidemic of obesity and poor fitness and the resulting chronic disease we’re dealing with in the U.S. We’re just beginning to fully understand the power of the data we have, and this gives me huge reason for optimism. There’s much more to come here, and I believe it really will change the face of this field.

Health promotion has been part of the healthcare reform dialogue, which certainly has been reason for optimism. The question you have to ask yourself is: will some of the bills that happen now or in the future change our direction? At least we’re in the forefront now, which we really weren’t in the past. As we gain insights through the WBI, we’ve got an enormous opportunity, one like we’ve never known before. As a result, I see the next 10 years as extraordinarily exciting.

DH: What would be your biggest criticism of the field or discipline of workplace health promotion at the present time?

JH: My biggest criticism and my biggest frustration is very clear. In spite of all we know about healthcare costs and the proven link between health behavior and cost, corporate America has still not taken health promotion very seriously. In fact, even though we know the extent to which lifestyle behaviors impact cost, the discussion never became front and center in the current healthcare reform debate, where employers and many others had a great opportunity to gain ground and to try to push efforts forward. That’s certainly a frustration I have. Many programs remain underfunded; they’re not given the latitude and the resources they need and they’re not positioned to become an asset to the businesses they serve. Of course, I think the new information provided by the WBI will help us demonstrate that value.

DH: What’s your biggest item of praise for the field?

JH: Unequivocally, I would say it’s the people in this field. For 40 years, we’ve fought an uphill battle and have gained ground in bringing wellness to the corporate sector. Sometimes it strikes me as odd that we’ve had to work so hard to get companies to do what is in their own best interest, but we have. At this point, I think there’s really a nucleus of people in this field who are true believers and who have pressed forward relentlessly in spite of the deck being stacked against them from time to time. It’s for these people that I have the highest praise and the highest appreciation. Whether corporate America recognizes it or not, it owes an enormous debt of gratitude to these professionals who work so hard to advance this field. Fortunately, I think the best days are yet to come.