



# How To Design, Run, And Manage A Workplace Health Program In-House: Garver's DIY Story

Garver is an engineering, design, planning, and environmental services firm with a do-it-yourself (DIY) culture. The company decided to build, run, and evaluate its wellness program in-house. The approach allows the company to keep the budget in check, have full HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliant access to the data collected, and customize the look, feel, and focus of the program. Its wellness staff fits the culture and serves as the trusted face of the program. It took years for Garver to develop its successful program, and the lessons learned have paid off. Garver has built a complete, high-impact wellness program and has won many national awards.

## Program Evolution

Garver leaders became interested in wellness after a significant rise in health insurance rates. Former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Brock Johnson was an avid cyclist and asked for a wellness program to motivate employees to exercise. At the program's launch in 2006, the focus was only on physical activity, with a website for employees to track their exercise. This method did not lead to reduced costs, so Johnson asked for a more complete program to support healthy living.

Some lessons can only be learned through experience. After trying a disease management approach and various full-time hires for the program, Garver learned that having a wellness manager who understands the company culture and needs was just as important as having a full-time staff member for the program. In 2015, Garver hired its current Wellness Team



The bicycle of late CEO Brock Johnson hangs in an on-site gym in his memory and highlights the company's commitment to wellness and to its cycling culture. Garver was the first Arkansas engineering firm to earn recognition as a bicycle-friendly business.



### Garver: At A Glance

**Locations:** Headquartered in North Little Rock, AR, with 24 sites in 10 states

**Size:** Approximately 160 employees at headquarters and 340 employees at other sites

**Industry:** Engineering, design, planning, and environmental services that help to improve transportation, waterways, facility designs, and more

North American Industry  
Classification System (NAICS) Sector:  
Professional, Scientific, and  
Technical Services

Manager, Sarah Palmiero, a registered and licensed dietitian and certified personal trainer. The goal was for Palmiero to become the face of wellness at Garver, build relationships, and gain employee trust.

To keep up with its growth—150 new employees were hired in 2017 alone—Garver hired another full-time wellness staff member that year, rather than outsourcing any of the wellness work.

Keeping the program in-house, and allowing face-time with employees has helped create the trust critical for program

success. Employees were more open to the health promotion efforts because of the personal approach used to run the program. The wellness team was consistent, accessible, visible, and integrated into the company. During one of the early years of the program, an outside contractor did the biometric screenings but according to the annual feedback survey, employees did not receive this change well. They did not like strangers poking and prodding them and collecting their health information. To make employees more comfortable, Garver went back to having the wellness team do the screenings themselves.

## The Garver Wellness Program

Building upon her predecessors' work, Palmiero has broadened the initial focus of the program beyond physical activity. Garver calls this a "high-touch" approach because it depends on personal attention and service. The program seeks to "create and promote an atmosphere of healthy living." It spans the financial, mental, occupational, physical, and social aspects of well-being.

To encourage participation, Garver offers a points system so employees can earn both insurance premium discounts and cash (up to \$470). Employees who meet the minimum requirements get a discount that translates to no premium cost for individual insurance and a 30 percent discount for a family plan. The minimum requirements to earn the discount include participating in the biometric screening, taking the health risk assessment, and earning at least 100 points through program participation. Employees can earn points for achieving low-risk biometric outcomes or participating in a variety of activities including:

- Race events
- Wellness challenges
- Physical activity (at or outside Garver)
- Community involvement (e.g., volunteering)
- Preventive services (e.g., wellness exams, cancer screening)

- Wellness webinars
- Lunch-and-learn sessions
- Personal health goal achievement
- Consultation sessions (e.g., health coaching)
- Financial workshops
- Professional development (i.e., career)

*Find good people, keep good people, and enhance good people.*

~ Dathan Gaskill, Chief Financial Officer

## DIY Culture

When asked about the company's choice to do it themselves, CEO Dan Williams said, "Family culture is baked in from the beginning of the company and wellness is part of it. It makes good economic sense to run the program in-house. We're a company of do-it-yourselfers and this allows us to customize and get what we want. It's the only way to make it fit just right to our needs and culture."

## How Garver Designed The Wellness Program

Research was done on other companies with health promotion programs to learn what they were doing right. The company's leaders also read reports and gathered information online from reliable sources to help plan and make decisions. Additionally, Palmiero continues to monitor studies and reports for current trends and ways to improve.

## How Garver Runs The Program

In addition to having a wellness team, Garver uses in-house expertise to communicate, market, and implement the program. The marketing and communications team produces all the materials to promote the program internally to employees and externally in recruitment efforts.

## Workplace Health Awards

- Well Workplace Award, 2017, Gold Level (sponsored by the Wellness Council of America)
- Healthiest 100 Employers in America (No. 45), 2017 (sponsored by Springbuk)
- Best and Brightest in Wellness, 2017 (sponsored by Best and Brightest)
- Best Firms to Work For Award, 2014–2017 (sponsored by the Zweig Group)

## Employee Testimonial: A Life-Saving Program

One employee admitted that the only reason she went to the doctor was to earn wellness points. But the doctor found a tumor and the employee was diagnosed with breast cancer. The employee has received chemotherapy and radiation and her most recent mammogram results came back normal. If she had waited to get screened, the cancer could have spread. "The program actually saved my life," she said.

Because the wellness portal is built in-house, it is fully customized. The company's information technology department designs and builds the portal to suit program needs. The portal includes blog posts, recipes, sample workouts, and webinars, and relies on a Garver videographer to film wellness education videos. The portal is capable of individual data tracking (including trends), and features a real-time leaderboard showing the 10 employees with the most wellness points. The leaderboard motivates competitive employees to participate more, earn bragging rights, and get recognized on posters hung on the walls of the office.

Garver also spins existing connections into more internal offerings. For instance, the company's retirement broker provides financial education, and the employee support program provided by Corporate Chaplains of America offers emotional support to employees on-site at 12 offices and remotely to all other sites.

### How Garver Manages The Program

To measure program success, Garver tracks satisfaction, participation, and health trends. Garver uses three sources of data for these outcomes: a yearly survey, biometric outcomes, and claims data. Palmiero looks at aggregate biometric and claims data for patterns. She focuses on gaps in care, and then provides the Executive Health Committee with a report on ways to improve.

Garver clearly lets employees know about all the ways it keeps their data safe and confidential and complies with all HIPAA and Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) guidelines. Senior leaders see only the aggregate data. Because Garver has built trust, employees have not worried about the privacy and confidentiality of their health data.

Garver uses the annual survey to meet employees' changing needs and interests. Changes have included allowing employees to earn partial points for participation (no longer an all-or-nothing approach), making the wellness portal mobile-friendly, offering open hours for health consultations, and adding more programs outside of physical activity, such as community involvement and financial wellness.

## Garver's Success

Garver's success in building a culture of trust and a high-impact, high-touch program is supported by the data. In 2017, 99 percent of full-time employees participated and earned the discount, and 100 percent of people who took the survey were satisfied with the program. Employees on Garver's health insurance plan have "lifestyle disease" markers lower than the national average in hypertension (33 percent less), chronic back pain (50 percent less), and diabetes (40 percent less).

## A Culture Of Trust And Taking Care Of One Another

Asked about Garver culture, employees said it "feels like a family ... helping each other, helping Garver. The company wins loyalty "because they invest in employees" and "Garver encourages you to grow in all aspects," according to its employees. Laura Nick, Corporate Communications Leader, agreed, "Employees are supportive of one another and view the perks as investments in them."

This investment shows in the program. Palmiero believes having on-site staff is essential for building relationships and

## Employee Testimonial: Off-Site, But Not Out Of Touch

Many Garver employees work in the field or travel for an extended time. One employee said he was finding it hard to cook for just one person. As a result, he ate too much and gained weight so he asked Palmiero for help. To meet this challenge, Palmiero offered on-site cooking classes after work and the employee was able to have video chats with her for health coaching.

trust, which allow wellness efforts to thrive. For example, the Wellness Team Manager and Wellness Coordinator also serve as personal health coaches. They give one-on-one support to employees on health issues, help them set personal goals, and even serve as personal trainers. As one employee noted, “Sarah Palmiero does a great job reaching out to people and has an open-door policy. She’s there to listen.”

Since the wellness team cannot be everywhere at once, Garver has dedicated volunteer wellness champions in each office location. Wellness champions help inspire employees to take care of their health and well-being, and relay employee feedback to the wellness team.

Garver leaders believe employees are more engaged than competitors’ employees because of the culture of trust and caring, as well as the program’s emphasis on healthy living. “The wellness program has allowed us to be named a ‘Best Place to Work’ and is one of the things we do to make employees feel like family,” said Williams. Wren Ward, Recruitment Team Manager, said other people, including clients, notice Garver’s healthy living culture and look for opportunities to work there.

## Future Plans

As the company prepares to celebrate its centennial in 2019, Garver plans to brand the program with a wellness logo, tweak existing programs (e.g., expand the challenges from four weeks to six weeks and tie lunch-and-learns to the challenges), and build upon goals. These include having the wellness champions become “wellness warriors” and take on a more visible role, expanding the face of wellness for the company. Wellness warriors will participate in wellness committee meetings and might lead group exercise sessions for their local offices. Garver also plans to continue to look for ways to improve the program, break down barriers to behavior change, and tailor the program to the different employee needs across worksites.

## Advice For Other Employers

To run a program in-house, Williams noted the importance of being a culture of “yes”—always looking for a solution to make things work. Williams recommended hiring people who fit with the company’s culture, resolving logistics for sustaining the program with internal resources instead of outsourcing the tasks, and improving the program to meet employees’ changing needs.

## Recommendations For Action

- **Start with your “why” and “what.”** Why do you want a program? What do you want to achieve?
- **Educate yourself.** Go to conferences, seek out health promotion experts, read reports, and learn from other companies who are doing it right.
  - Read [case studies](#) of other companies’ approaches to workplace wellness.
  - Visit companies that have won organizational health awards.
- **Get senior executive support.** Employees must see that leaders are supportive of wellness. This [webinar](#) (slides and webinar recording) details the business case for worksite health.
- **Choose the right people for the job.** It is important to hire people who fit the company culture to run the program and advocate for its development and improvement.
- **Start low-impact.** Palmiero recommended, “Don’t be scared to start small, start somewhere.”

The [CDC Workplace Health Resource Center \(WHRC\)](#) is a one-stop shop for organizations to find credible tools, guides, case studies, and other resources to design, develop, implement, evaluate, and sustain workplace health promotion programs. Visit <https://www.cdc.gov/WHRC> to find more case studies of workplace health programs in the field.