

Wellness Tourism: An Initiative for Comprising Wellness Tourism Vacations within the Corporate Wellness Strategy

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Wellness tourism is one of the latest niche tourism that is expected to continue growing as a fast business attracting various types and categories of tourist demand. This paper suggests embracing wellness tourism vacations by business employers as an essential component of the wellness strategy that they apply with their employees. It highlights the wellness tourism definition, market, aspects and trends. On the other hand, it explains the corporate wellness and the most popular wellness programs applied by business firms. Furthermore, it presents a proposal for how the wellness tourism package can be designed and implemented serving the corporate wellness program. Finally, a survey is conducted to explore the employees' opinion concerning using paid wellness vacation as a part of the corporate wellness program offered to them by their employers or firms. Data analysis verifies their acceptance to the idea and willingness to participate in such programs. Results also show that the employees want to be healthy and live a healthy lifestyle but need the effective corporate wellness strategy that can help them in achieving that goal.

Key Words: Wellness tourism, corporate wellness, lifestyle management, well-being, incentives

Introduction

Wellness is the optimal state of health of individuals and groups. In 1948 the World Health Organization [WHO] defined health as: "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (Wellness Tourism Worldwide, 2011, p.7). The WHO expanded this definition afterwards to include broader issues of wellness and lifestyle management, stating that health involves: "The extent to which an individual or a group is able to realize aspirations and satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living; it is a positive concept, emphasizing social and personal resources as well as physical capabilities" (WTW, 2011, p.7). This definition is one of the most widely-accepted definitions of health. However, it corresponds more to what is known now as Wellness.

In the 1950s, a US physician, Herbert Dunn, observed that as life gets more complicated, patients are more at risk from getting diseases caused by lifestyle factors. Dunn used the term wellness as an opposite to the term illness and his idea of wellness was that it involves physical, social and spiritual well-being. Twenty years later John Travis emphasized the need


for individuals to take responsibility over their own health.

The term wellness originates from the combination of well-being and wholeness. It addresses the human health in a comprehensive sense and assumes that each person will actively participate in protecting his own health (WTW, 2011).

Thus, wellness nowadays refers to a state of health that involves an overall sense of wellbeing including body, mind and spirit. Lifestyle and self-responsibility for health are essential for achieving a better quality of life and achieving well-being (WTW, 2011). There are two focal concerns of wellness:

- The realization of the fullest potential of a person physically, psychologically, socially, spiritually and economically.
- The fulfillment of the person's expected role in the family, community, workplace and other settings on the long-term.

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Recent studies confirmed that tourism can enhance individuals' well-being and quality of life. In the past, a vacation meant for many people: too much eating and drinking and too little sleep, leading individuals to get weak and less healthy. Now, more people are choosing destinations that can help them become healthy. They currently expect to enjoy a well planned vacation that can improve their health and lifestyle, especially, if the main purpose of the tourism vacation is to reduce stress and attain the body strength and if it is done regularly. The change experienced during such trip accompanied with the relaxing moments and enough sleep can improve the individual's mental and physical health enhancing his work productivity and preventing chronic disease (Chen, 2013; Yeung, 2013; WTW, 2011).

Consequently, wellness tourism has emerged and various modern forces are driving its speedy expansion such as the rise of chronic disease and the increase of stress. In addition, Western medicines are no longer regarded as the only solution for all diseases. Many people are following the path of alternative and complementary medicine after ordinary medicine has failed to cure or improve their stress-related illnesses.

Thus, the demand on destinations and vacations that deliver physical, emotional, spiritual and environmental health along with enjoyment is increasing dramatically every year (Global Spa and Wellness Summit ; 2013; Chen, 2013; Gregoire, 2014; Saudi commission for tourism and antiquities, 2014).

In respond to this growing market, tourism providers are offering services and options that meet the wellness travelers' needs such as hotel brands providing their customers with healthy rooms, better meals, well-equipped fitness centers and even yoga classes (Yeung, 2013).

Wellness tourism is currently expected to continue growing as a fast multibillion dollar business attracting various types and categories of tourist demand for years to come. Among this new demand is the corporate segment that will possibly make use of wellness tourism and its benefits to increase the employees' productivity, acquire their peak performance at work and minimize health care expenses, thus, it is presumed that the corporate sector is may soon regard wellness tourism as a worthwhile investment and start offering it to employees (Geib, 2014; Medical Tourism Congress, 2014).

This study assumes that using wellness tourism vacations on behalf of business firms within the corporate wellness strategy that they apply with their employees is considered to be an effective way to

introduce the employees to the healthy lifestyle methods and motivate them to attain the health goal. The following section demonstrates the wellness tourism definition, market, aspects, trends and practices.

Wellness Tourism

The definition of wellness tourism

As mentioned before, the term "Wellness" refers to the integration of mind, body and soul. It is the best possible well-being state that can lead to achieving ones goals. Thus, this state requires continuous learning and changes to maintain and enhance wellness.

Wellness combines seven dimensions of well-being into a quality way of living to achieve true health and hence, true wellness. These dimensions are: The physical, intellectual, emotional, social, occupational, spiritual and environmental aspects of life (Prem, 2011; Hoheb, 2013; Philippine medical tourism institution, 2014).

Travelling to seek healing was one of the earliest ways that people used to achieve wellness. Literally, wellness tourism has been initiated by rich people who used to make long distance trips to improve their wellbeing through engaging in traditional practices. Ancient Greeks and Romans used to practice wellness tourism by travelling to thermal springs and spiritual temples to improve their health. In modern days, wellness tourism involved travelling specifically to improve or promote ones health and wellbeing through physical, psychological or spiritual activities (Prem, 2011; Dimon, 2013).

Currently, wellness tourism refers to trips aiming at achieving a state of health that features the harmony of the body, mind and soul through self-responsibility, physical fitness, beauty care, healthy nutrition, relaxation, mental activity, education, sociability and environmental sensitivity (WTW, 2011). One of the most inclusive definitions that describes wellness tourism states that "it is the sum of all phenomena resulting from a journey by individuals whose motive in whole or in part is to maintain or promote their health and wellbeing, and who stay at least one night at a facility that is specifically designed to holistically enable and enhance people's physical, psychological, spiritual and/or social well-being, and that ideally also takes into account environmental and community wellness in a sustainable manner" (Voigt, 2013, p.26). Thus, wellness tourism involves the stay of health-seeking tourists in a particular destination where they will be provided with various health-promoting physical activity, relaxation methods, and nutritious food in a comprehensive

package. All the expenditures made by these tourists during their trip, including lodging, food and beverage, activities and excursions, shopping and transportation are included in the wellness tourism economy (Prem, 2011; Global Wellness Institute, 2013; Chen, 2013; Isroelit, 2013).

The Key stakeholders involved in wellness tourism include (WTW, 2011):

- Government agencies [ministries of tourism, ministries of economic Development].
- Tourism organizations and related businesses [destination management organizations, associations, travel agents, hotels, resorts, cruises, airlines, spas].
- Facilities focused on personnel well-being [business firms, insurance Companies, higher educational institutions other interested parties].
- Health providers [fitness related businesses, hospitals].
- Companies and organizations focused on sustainability.

Among the above mentioned stakeholders, this study addresses business firms' employees to investigate their opinion about using wellness trips on behalf of their employers as a part of their firms' wellness policy.

Wellness tourism Market

A study released in 2013 at the Global Wellness Tourism Congress [GWTC] reveals that wellness tourism is a \$439 billion market representing 14% of total global tourism revenues that is \$3.2 trillion. It also shows that domestic wellness tourism is significantly larger than the international wellness tourism representing 84 % of wellness tourism trips and 68 % or \$299 billion of expenditures while the international inbound wellness tourism represents \$139 billion, 32% of the total expenditures (Isroelit, 2013; Chen, 2013).

The Global Wellness Tourism Economy report 2013 and The World Travel Market 2014, assures that the wellness tourism sector is growing at a phenomenal pace and is expected to increase on average 9.9 % annually over the next years reaching \$678.5 billion by 2017, nearly 50 % more growth than global tourism overall (Global Wellness Institute, 2013; Chen, 2013; Bevan, 2014).

Concerning the inbound/outbound wellness travel, Europe and North America drive the outbound international wellness tourist segment from five countries: the United States, Germany, Japan, France and Austria, representing 63 % of the global market. The countries that drive the most inbound, interna-

tional wellness tourism arrivals are: the United States, France, Austria, Germany and Switzerland. The countries that drive the most domestic wellness tourism trips are: The United States, Germany, Japan, China and France (Gregoire, 2013; Hohmeyer, 2013; Global Wellness Institute, 2013). However, it is predicted that the Asian, Latin American, The Middle Eastern and North African countries will be the fastest-growing wellness travel destinations, with an estimate of over 50% of growth in wellness tourism through 2017. The Southeast Asian countries, India, specifically, is expected to be number one globally over the next years (Isroelit, 2013; Chen, 2013; Gregoire, 2013; Global Wellness Institute, 2014).

With regard to the wellness tourist: There are two types of wellness tourists; the first type includes those whose primary purpose of travelling is to maintain and improve their health and wellbeing. These tourists usually head to health resorts and destinations popular for their wellness services and resources. The second type addresses health and wellness as a secondary purpose for their trip. Meaning that their primary goal for traveling could be business or recreation, however, they want to keep up with their healthy habits during their trip. Thus, they practice some form of wellness activity or take advantage of healthier options offered to them during their stay such as taking exercise classes on a cruise or booking a hotel that offers healthy menu. Surprisingly, these secondary-purpose wellness travelers make up a much larger proportion of the market, accounting for about 86 % of all wellness trips. However, the primary-wellness tourist spends more than the secondary-purpose wellness traveler (Chen, 2013; Global Wellness Institute, 2013; Yeung, 2013; Schensul, 2014; Global Wellness Institute, 2014).

Furthermore, as mentioned above, domestic wellness tourism is significantly larger than the international wellness tourism that is because wellness tourists from America, the number one ranked wellness tourism market and destination, as well as those from Canada, prefer the wellness tourism short-domestic trips, weekend trips, and city breaks (Hohmeyer, 2013).

Wellness tourism aspects

By the year 2000, health motivated travel became very popular ranging from travelling for medical reasons to travelling for wellness purposes (WTW, 2011).

Despite the overlap between wellness tourism and medical tourism each one of them is different in nature and objectives (Voigt, 2013).

This study focuses on the aspects and types related to wellness tourism.

Wellness tourism resources

Wellness tourism relies on the following resources (Hoheb, 2013; Voigt, 2013):

- Natural resources: sun, water, climate, greenery and other resources that drive multi-sensory experience of nature.
- Cultural resources: certain heritage places.
- Alternative medicine: alternative or integrative medical systems such as massage, acupuncture, cupping and detoxification.
- Mindset and wellness related lifestyle: depending on healthy nutrition, physical health and appearance, relaxation and re-establishing self-esteem.
- Wellness-related events: including community health events and fitness conventions,
- Human resources and competencies: going beyond wellness with other activities and offerings such as healthy cooking classes and recreational services offered by wellness tourism providers.

Wellness tourism therapies

This section discusses the treatments and therapies that contribute to attain wellness.

The wellness therapies can be divided into two categories. The first category includes the most common and popular *Complementary or integrative medicine treatments*. Some of these therapies have been known and used for ages in certain areas of the world. These therapies can be encompassed within a tourist package such as:

Massage, Yoga and Meditation, cupping, detoxification, aromatherapy, acupuncture and acupressure, hydrotherapy, chromotherapy and music therapy (PMTI, 2014; Tourism Product Development, 2014; Prem, 2011; Aroma Web, 2014; Wong, 2014; Wise Greek, 2014; ProAcuMed, 2014; Scott, 2014).

The second category of wellness is based on the idea that nutrition, physical activity, stress, anxiety, tobacco and alcohol abuse are all key drivers of health and can have dramatic risks for chronic, costly health conditions. *Wellness management* programs referred to this category help individuals to improve their health through maintaining the healthy lifestyle as an ongoing process (Integrated Wellness, 2014).

The current study focuses on the tourist trips dealing with this category of wellness and how these trips can be used as a method of promoting the healthy lifestyle among employees. This category of wellness involves:

- **Nutritional therapy:** nutritional therapy is based on the fact that the faulty diet can be a main cause of any illness or disorder. The proper nutrition and dietary supplements improve energy and strength, maintain health as well as treat and prevent various diseases (Prem, 2014; Hohmeyer, 2013).
- **Weight management:** this is done through a combination of exercise, Yoga and dietary modification to help prevent life threatening diseases and maintain a good body image (Prem, 2011; Gregoire, 2013; Hohmeyer, 2013; Integrated Wellness, 2014).
- **Physical fitness and sports:** fitness and workout programs for maintaining health, blood circulation and energy level as well as improving pre-existing health conditions and preventing many chronic diseases (Hohmeyer, 2013; Foundation for wellness education, 2014).
- **Stress and anxiety management:** training programs that focus on positive psychological well-being and address stress; the number one complaint that reduces productivity and affects health (Gregoire, 2013; Hohmeyer, 2013; Integrated Wellness, 2014).
- **Tobacco consumption programs:** programs for encouraging and helping smokers to quit. Other similar programs address alcohol and other drugs misuse (Integrated Wellness, 2014; University of New Hampshire, 2014).
- **Sleep management:** Addressing ways and techniques for getting better night's sleep (Integrated Wellness, 2014; University of New Hampshire, 2014).
- **Health-related education:** This involves sessions and workshops given by wellness educators and counselors providing individuals with information about wellness and how to manage their daily life to attain the healthy lifestyle (Burgess, 2014; University of New Hampshire, 2014; Foundation for wellness education, 2014).

Wellness tourism trends and practices

Wellness tourism has become one of the fastest growing niche markets among the international tourism these days. It has gained its popularity as a response to the unhealthy lifestyles, work pressures and stress of modern lives causing serious complications and various imbalances in the body's functioning. Even the travel process itself adds more pressure on individuals and their health from the hassles of airports to the high-season crowds, jet lag, poor sleep and over scheduling. All the above have driven people to make serious lifestyle changes to live healthier (Schensul, 2013; Wellness Tourism, 2014; Global

Wellness Institute, 2014). Wellness tourism is considered one of the main methods that provide individuals with a range of experiences that help them achieve a healthier state. People now actively seek out tourism packages that include a range of wellness treatments. Healthy diet, quality sleep, stress reduction and moderate exercise are essential components in a wellness tourism program (Hoheb, 2013; Schensul, 2013; Wellness Tourism, 2014).

The new trend of wellness and healthy lifestyle based services is dramatically increasing and this is not expected to change in the next 5 to 10 years (WTW, 2011; Hoheb, 2013; Schensul, 2013).

Wellness tourism trends can be divided into demand-related and supply-related trends as explained in this section.

Demand-related trends are these trends associated with the customer or the tourist and his wellness desires during his trip. Some of these trends are:

- Mind matters: wellness tourists seek mental restoration on vacations where they can learn techniques for managing stress such as meditation, yoga and journaling (WTW, 2013a; Geib, 2014).
- Exploring local life and healing traditions: wellness tourists are interested in exploring the local communities during their wellness vacations and knowing more about their life and traditions, especially, their oriental healing practices, for example The Turkish Hammam and the Hawaiian herbal medicine (Hoheb, 2103; WTW, 2013b; Geib, 2014).
- Culinary Tourism: During the wellness trip, tourists attend cooking classes to learn about proper nutrition, how to prepare healthy meals, in addition to local and tradition dishes (Tourism Product Development, 2014; Geib, 2014; Prem, 2014).
- Prescribed Travel: wellness trips are now prescribed by physicians as a preventive method and a cure in certain conditions (WTW, 2013a; Geib, 2014).
- Slow travel: travelers are tired of feeling like they need to rest after their vacation as a result of rushing to explore as many experiences as possible. Now they are slowing down during their vacation, giving themselves the chance to relax and restore (Hohmeyer, 2013; WTW, 2013a).
- Customer awareness: wellness consumers are concerned about their health and the treatments they receive. They always need evidences and proven researches that the treatments and therapies they will receive are safe and beneficial such as healing waters, mud, herbs, nutrition and more. Hence, this should be met by more awareness and knowledge on behalf of the wellness providers and practitioners. In addition, customers are more aware of the value of green and organic aspects and products. Thus, this should become a norm rather than an exception in wellness

facilities (WTW, 2011; WTW, 2013b; Geib, 2014; World Medical Tourism & Global Healthcare Congress, 2014).

- Wellness tourism is a starting point to long-term well-being: the wellness tourist expects to experience a healthy vacation where he practices and learn healthy tips and techniques that he can carry out when he gets back home. These healthy tips and practices would help him manage his lifestyle to achieve wellness through the rest of his life. The current study focuses, specifically, on this kind of wellness tourism and tourist packages that provide the individual with the tools and techniques that would help him manage and change his lifestyle to reach a healthier model (Hoheb, 2103; WTW, 2011). Regarding the supply-related trends, those are involved with the wellness tourism providers and their response to the demand side expectations.
- Wellness flights: Airports and airlines started integrating wellness services for enhancing the wellness tourist experience and meeting his demands. This involves spas, fitness options and private napping cabins at airports, in addition to providing passengers with healthy fly tips based on seated yoga and meditation and providing healthy meals during the flight.
- The Wellness travel agent: as a result of the wellness tourism fast growth in the market and the increase in the demand for wellness trips, a new term or specialty has emerged in the tourism industry “The wellness travel agent” (Geib, 2014, p.1). This indicates the increasing acceptance, credibility and value of wellness tourism among consumers and providers and the expansion of wellness tourism as niche tourism (Figuroa, 2011; Hoheb, 2013; WTW, 2013a).
- Secondary market: as mentioned before, many tourists the primary goal of their trip is business or recreation or any other reason rather than wellness, specifically. However, they wish to maintain their healthy lifestyle during their trips. In order to attract these travelers, air transit and hotels have been investing in wellness amenities that would meet the demand of these customers (Yeung, 2013; Geib, 2014; Schensul, 2014).
- Various wellness tourist demand: with the expansion of targeted segments in wellness tourism, travel agents, hotels and resorts are likely to start offering a variety of the wellness products and packages that can suit each targeted segment. For example offering budget or affordable spas for young and middle income wellness seekers and offering wellness packages for business firms to motivate employees and manage their health which is the main subject addressed in the current study (WTW, 2011; Hoheb, 2013; Tourism Product Development, 2014).

- Wellness hotels: more hotels are turning to the wellness path and providing real wellness services to their customers not only adding something healthy for marketing purposes. For example, some hotels pump oxygen into the guests' rooms and rooms are designed to eliminate germs and water chemicals (Caribbean Export Development Agency, 2008; Yeung, 2013; Hoheb, 2013).
- Plug or unplug wellness: some wellness resorts unplug all aspects of technological communication during the wellness vacation as a stress reduction method. This process is called "digital- detox" or the "unplug program" (Hoheb, 2013, p.3). Others made use of technology in their wellness programs by including wellness applications in the rooms to create healthy experiences for their guests. An example for this is The Four Seasons Hotel, Los Angeles that integrates customized in-room fitness program for its guests to work out privately while the rooms are equipped with the required fitness kits and workout mats (CSME, 2008; Schensul, 2014).
- Reconnecting with nature: watching nature helps lowering blood pressure, pulse rate and relaxing muscles giving a sensation of an overall wellbeing. Wellness destinations and resorts started to develop and enhance their landscapes to meet their customers' need to enjoy and relax outdoors (Hoheb, 2013).
- Wellness resorts closer to cities: wellness resorts are relocating to be close enough to big cities in order to be accessible to more wellness-seekers even during short periods, weekends and day use. Even the one-day visit that does not include accommodation can provide the visitor with education programs, fitness programs and healthy meals, in addition to spa and beauty treatments (Schensul, 2014; Tourism Product Development, 2014; CSME, 2008).
- Taking sleep seriously: lack of sleep affects the immune and metabolic systems, the brain functioning and increases stress, that is why wellness and tourism providers, such as hotels, resorts and airlines, started to focus more on sleep products and services offered to their wellness-seekers' customers (Hoheb, 2013; CSME, 2008).
- The importance of spas: spas account for about 41 % of all wellness-travel activities and the fastest growing segment of the hospitality industry is hotels with spas (Schensul, 2014, p.1). Hotels with a spa facility will become an even bigger factor affecting the tourist's choice. In other words spas will be a deciding factor rather than an amenity offered at hotels or resorts. However, despite the importance of spas in the wellness industry, wellness is much more than just spas. Other wellness hotels and cruises; baths and springs; fitness, yoga and lifestyle retreats; nature parks and preserves; organic and natural restaurant

represents 59 % of the wellness tourism market. That is why spas are trying to rebrand themselves as wellness providers that target various customer segments, not just the wealthy, to be able to become a part of the wellness tourism market (Global Spa Summit, 2011; Chen, 2013; Geib, 2014; Tourism Product Development, 2014; CSME, 2008).

- Wellness education: wellness tourism providers are offering now weekend workshops and sessions about wellness in specialized resorts and spas where wellness-seekers learn tips and techniques for a healthy lifestyle. These workshops include healthy nutrition, fitness, stress management and more, represented by specialized instructors (Hoheb, 2013; Foundation for wellness education, 2014; University of New Hampshire, 2014),
- Top ten surprising wellness destinations: The top ten wellness destinations to be are Bhutan, Colombia, Croatia, Ghana, Lithuania, Morocco, Nicaragua, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam (Schensul, 2014). The following section discusses the corporate wellness, its meaning, impacts and the most popular strategies or programs involved in it.

Corporate Wellness

Over the last decades a wave of lifestyle related diseases has been developing. Certain behaviors have been identified as primary causes for chronic disease: inactivity, poor nutrition, tobacco use and frequent alcohol consumption, in addition to stress, causing diabetes, heart disease and other chronic conditions that lead to decreased quality of life, early death and disability. The number of working-age individuals having chronic diseases has been increasing dramatically over the last ten years. This directly affects productivity as a result of frequent absence from work and reduced performance. With the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases among the working-age population, employers started to get concerned about the impacts of this on productivity and employer-sponsored health coverage costs. Thus, they have started adopting health promotion and disease prevention strategies aiming at preventing the occurrence of the disease or at least help diagnose and treat the disease in an early stage before complications. These health promotional strategies are known by corporate wellness or occupational wellness (Meydam, 2014; Mattke, Liu, Caloyeras, Huang, Van Busum, Khodyakov & Shier, 2013).

The definition of corporate wellness

There is neither a universally accepted definition for corporate wellness nor a specified list for the benefits that go under its label. However, corporate wellness

can be defined as the wellness programs and services offered by business firms to their employees to improve their health and lower their risk of getting chronic diseases (WTW, 2011; Mattke *et al.*, 2013; Bundrick, 2014).

Corporate wellness impacts

Studies reveals that the return on investment [ROI] of corporate wellness programs is 3:1 for direct medical cost and 3:1 for absenteeism (Mattke *et al.*, 2013, p. 3). This has led many employers to consider wellness programs as an efficient method for controlling health care costs and apply them as an effective business strategy.

Currently, about two third of companies with 199 workers or less and [94%] of companies with 200 workers or more offers such programs to their employees (Bundrick, 2014, p.1).

Significant improvement has been observed in exercise frequency, smoking behavior, weight control, improved attitudes and knowledge about health, improvement in blood sugar and cholesterol levels, blood pressure, tobacco use reduction and higher quit rates (Mattke *et al.*, 2013).

The following section demonstrates briefly the most popular wellness programs used by companies focusing mainly on the incentives offered to employees to encourage the implementation of these programs.

Corporate wellness programs

Employer wellness programs initially just involved having a gym at the office, placing posters on the wall, encouraging people to take the stairs instead of the elevator. Currently, with Companies facing higher health care costs, companies are more concerned about the health and wellness of their employees providing them with a variety of wellness activities (Wieczner, 2013).

The main wellness programs and activities offered nowadays by companies to their employees include the following:

Screening activities: This usually involves biometric screening to collect data about nutrition, physical activity, weight, height, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, blood glucose levels and resting heart rate. (Mattke *et al.*, 2013, Wellness Corporate Solutions, 2014).

Lifestyle management programs: Also known as preventive intervention that involves programs designed to help employees make positive changes in their health-related behavior and lifestyle to reduce health risks. These programs offer proper nutrition, physical fitness, stress management and smoking

cessation. They can be provided to all employees through health-educational events and resources or individualized according to the employee's need or health-weakness or risk through counseling (Mattke *et al.*, 2013; University of Rochester, 2014).

The current study focuses mainly on this category and how to offer it to employees in the form of wellness tourism packages.

Health promotion activities: This involves benefits that aim at encouraging healthy lifestyle behavior. These activities or benefits are available to all employees such as healthy food options at the workplace cafeteria and vending machine, on-site staircases and walk paths for informal exercise, on-site gym or free or reduced gym membership (Mattke *et al.*, 2013).

Incentives for the overall health strategy implementation: Due to the low participation rate in the corporate wellness programs, employers started using incentives as a way to encourage their employees to participate.

Incentives are typically framed as rewards in corporate wellness programs rather than penalties. 84% of firms offering corporate wellness programs in the USA use rewards only as a form of incentive, 2% use penalties only and 11% use both (Mattke *et al.*, 2013, p.73).

A recent study shows that about 90% of employers offer wellness incentives, or financial rewards and prizes to employees who work toward getting healthier. That's up from 57% of companies in 2009. The incentive's amount have also increased from \$260 per employee on average in the year 2009 to \$521 per employee as employers feel that if they pay more they will get better results (The Experts, 2014, p.1).

Types of incentives used in corporate wellness programs

Employers are exploring different types of incentives to decide which of them works and can encourage the employees to improve their health, and consequently lower health care costs and get better return on wellness investment (The Experts, 2014).

The different types of incentives examined by employers today are:

Cash incentives

This includes:

- Cash for screening activities:

At least \$100 incentive is needed per employee to get 75% of the screening activity done. Screening helps in introducing employees to their health risk factors, however, this does not

necessarily lead them to take action (Wieczner, 2013, p.1; University of Rochester, 2014).

- *Cash for screening completion and lifestyle management program participation:*

In this model, employers link the cash incentive to both health assessment completion and action taken in response to results to change the unhealthy behavior. Rewards typically range from \$250 to \$350 (Wieczner, 2013, p.1).

On the other hand, some employers use a monthly payroll surcharge as a penalty on employees who do not take action to change their unhealthy lifestyle. Although this incentive leads to action, it does not encourage healthy behavior beyond the completion of the required programs (Wieczner, 2013; Mattkeet *et al.*, 2013).

- *Cash for out-comes:*

Employers offer rewards for taking steps to reach best benchmarks for cholesterol, blood pressure and weight. This needs enrollment in lifestyle management program to achieve the goal. Typically an employee would be rewarded with \$100 for reaching a healthy weight, \$125 for hitting the other biometric benchmarks and \$200 for quitting smoking (Wieczner, 2013, p.1).

This model financially motivates employees to complete the task and thus, improve their health, however, there are certain legal precautions about it which will be discussed later below (Wieczner, 2013, University of Rochester, 2014).

Non-cash incentives

This includes

- *Cash equivalent rewards:* Employees can earn them when completing screening activities or participate in a lifestyle management program or even make progress in achieving the health goal. These cash equivalents can even help in encouraging and attaining the healthy lifestyle as they can be a discounted gym membership, a free massage or a paid time off that can be spent on a healthy purpose (Mattkeet *et al.*, 2013).

The current study suggests using paid wellness vacations under this category of cash equivalent incentives for participation in lifestyle management programs where the employee would have the opportunity to get introduced to health aspects and behaviors and start the program.

- *Novelty items:* Another non-cash form of rewards offered to employees typically for health screening completion or lifestyle management program participation. This includes T-shirts, mugs, gift

cards, tickets for events and similar gifts or items (Mattkeet *et al.*, 2013; Hendrickson, 2013).

Health plan premiums

In this model, the employer links health plan premiums to the health risks of the employee. The healthiest workers pay less than the riskiest. The employer offers lower premiums or share health costs and copayments with the employee as a reward for participating in a lifestyle management program and taking serious steps towards eliminating his health risks. Achieved health goals are rewarded by the same way and by lowering health plan premiums. On the other hand, the employee who does not take action to minimize his health risks and achieve the health goals can be penalized by higher premiums and increased copayments (Wieczner, 2013; Bundrick, 2014; Scott, 2014).

There are certain legal precautions on this model too that will be explained later below.

Challenges confronting the use of certain Incentives

Some laws and regulations impose limits on using certain incentives in corporate wellness programs. Thus, employers are very careful in choosing the incentives that they may integrate in their corporate wellness programs and choosing the actions to be incentivized.

As mentioned previously in this section, Employers are very cautious in applying incentives to reward wellness programs out-comes such as, actual change in health-related behaviors or health goal attainment, due to legal restrictions. The law, for instance, restricts that an employee be penalized or have a reward withheld due to certain health conditions such as severe obesity for food. In this case, the employer cannot offer one of the previous types of incentives for achieving a certain weight. That is why incentives are used more for program participation rather than for rewarding results and health goal attainment (Wieczner, 2013; Mattkeet *et al.*, 2013; Scott, 2014).

Additionally, some regard the health assessment as illegal due to its inquiries about personal medical histories and non job-related lifestyle. Accordingly, it is illegal to reward or penalize the employee for accepting or refusing to take it (Bundrick, 2014).

Besides that, the health plan premium model that assigns lower or higher premiums and copayments according to the employee's health risks and responsive action to reduce these risks, this model is criticized for being discriminatory and decrease access to health care. As legally employers must offer workers who do not hit targets an alternative way to earn the

incentive, such as a doctor's note or program participation (Wieczner, 2013; Bundrick, 2014; Scott, 2014).

Furthermore, certain regulations limit the use of cash as an incentive in corporate wellness programs. In this case, employers use cash equivalent rewards and novelty items as incentives in their wellness program. The most effective and directly related to the utmost goal of the wellness program, which is to achieve and attain a healthy lifestyle, are those incentives that encourage increasing healthy behavior such as paid time off for fitness and other wellness-related activities or attending health education classes (Mattkeet *al.*, 2013).

Finally, some believe that participation in corporate wellness programs should not be incentivized financially but instead the strongest motivator should be the desire to be healthy and fit. Thus, the real motivator for changing a person's lifestyle to be healthy has to be internal. However, corporate wellness programs can help employees to achieve this desire by building up their awareness about healthy lifestyle, provide them with the necessary resources to help them stay healthy and fit, promote and facilitate their participation and access to healthy activities. (Mattkeet *al.*, 2013, Scott, 2014).

The following section explains how wellness tourism can serve the corporate wellness and be incorporated within the business wellness strategy.

Employing wellness tourism in corporate wellness programs

It is expected that businesses will start integrating certain wellness tourist services in their corporate wellness programs to promote employees' health and productivity and to lower medical costs. For example, firms arranging spa visits to motivate employees and manage their health. In addition to firms offering their employees holiday vouchers, as an incentive, redeemed at certain designated wellness hotels. These holiday vouchers are co-financed by both the employees and their company (WTW, 2011; Tourism Product Development, 2014). Besides that, private health insurances are expected to play a more important role in providing policies that cover wellness travel. Some of them have already started offering health plans that covers wellness tourism and services (WTW, 2011, Cleveland Clinic, 2014).

The following section demonstrates a proposal for how the wellness tourism package can be designed and implemented serving the corporate wellness program.

Cooperating with a tourism company

The firm should choose to work in this with a tourism company, tour operator or travel agent that can help in designing and implementing a wellness package trip for the firm's employees. The trip can be to a wellness destination or to a wellness resort according to what is agreed upon between the firm and the travel company taking into consideration the budget and the objectives. The advantages of cooperating with a travel company in this field involves, organizing an all inclusive wellness tour package that involves all wellness components and services needed to achieve the firm's target; arranging the needed wellness services with certified experts and specialists; helping the employees and the firm representative to only focus on the wellness target while the travel company takes care of their needs such as the transportation, accommodation and related programs (Saudi commission for tourism and antiquities, 2014).

The firm should set with the tourism company the goals of the wellness vacation, its components, the needed services and the assigned budget for implementing it (Wellness Source, 2014).

Dividing the firm's employees into small groups

This can be done according to any criteria of the employer's choice. For example, it can be done according to the health risk assessment results if the company applies biometric and health screening in its wellness program or it can be done according to the work needs and priorities. Each group will take the wellness trip at a certain time of the year. This process can be all year round or in a certain season or time of the year according to the firm's size, number of employees, needs and capabilities. Each group of employees will take the trip as a paid time off or vacation for practicing health-related activities.

Identifying the objectives of the trip

The wellness trips can be implemented under various objectives all of which serve the same ultimate goal of being healthy.

First: The introductory phase: in this phase the employer would introduce the idea of changing his employees' unhealthy lifestyle behavior through this wellness trip. The employees would gain awareness and education about wellness, participate in wellness classes and workshops, learn about wellness techniques and practices and have advises and help from wellness experts and coaches concerning how to change unhealthy habits to healthy behaviors and how to maintain wellness. This introductory phase would be provided to all the firm's employees.

Second: The incentive phase: This include an encouraging wellness tourism vacation for a tempting

place or would include additional luxury services for those employees who succeeded in applying what they learned in the introductory trip and attained the health goal. This phase would be offered to those who achieved the objectives assigned in the first trip.

Third: The amendment phase: a concentrated workshop or very short trip to a wellness location to those who failed to attain the health goal. This has two advantages as it encourages those who did not achieve the health goal to try once again, help them identify the obstacles and challenges facing them and try to solve it with specialists and coaches and at the same time it avoids the legal restrictions by offering those employees an alternative to earn the incentive but in a practical, positive way that serves the health goal and help them achieve it next time.

Fourth: The maintenance phase: This can be applied through organizing periodic wellness trips every now and then according to the firm's decision, very short wellness trips that would refresh the employees and reinforce their motives to be healthy and retain their well-being.

Arranging the components of the trip

The trip should include the basics of the tourism package: transportation, accommodation, food and beverage and tourist activities. The activities in the wellness tourist package may involve the following:

Health awareness and educational workshops: these workshops would give the participants information about wellness; the importance of exercise, proper nutrition, and good night's sleep (Foundation for wellness education, 2014).

Stress management: participants would be introduced to various techniques to manage stress and minimize its negative effects on the body. These techniques may involve yoga, coloring therapy, journaling and massage. (Foundation for wellness education, 2014; University of New Hampshire, 2014).

Proper nutrition: informing participants about the impact of proper nutrition on energy levels and overall health; teaching them techniques for weight control and biometric levels control; giving them healthy eating tips through culinary classes (Burgess, 2014; University of New Hampshire, 2014; BWell Health Promotion, 2014).

Fitness and exercise: teaching participants exercises and physical fitness techniques to be active and control blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels. These techniques may include as well some "Desk-exercise" to prevent the negative impacts of sitting on desks and in front of computers for long times (University of New Hampshire, 2014; Foundation for wellness education, 2014).

Smoking cessation: some firms may put such a program on their priority list and some may not during the wellness vacation (University of New Hampshire, 2014).

Excursions: This may involve visiting tourist attractions in the region and greenery location; spa and beauty practices; certain culinary classes; learning about the region's community and interesting traditions (Saudi commission for tourism and antiquities, 2014).

Assigning the personnel implementing the trip

This includes: the tourism company representative who runs the program and makes sure it goes smoothly; the firm's representative who evaluate the overall trip and report its results to the management team; specialists and experts who are typically assigned through the tourism company according to the wellness trip objectives and components, for example : the trip can involve a nutritionist for nutritional therapy, a fitness trainer for exercise, a psycho-specialist for stress management. It may also include a cook for culinary classes and a tour guide for sight-seeing and community tours. Additionally, it should include an integrative or wellness specialist for workshops and educational purposes (Foundation for wellness education, 2014).

Implementing the trip

The success of the wellness tourism package requires the care of the service providers, especially, the travel company and its representative who needs to monitor and run everything encompassed in the package smoothly (Saudi commission for tourism and antiquities, 2014).

Evaluating the trip

From a tourism perspective, the effect of single wellness services is less important than the overall effect of the wellness vacation and the overall experience (Voigt, 2013). Evaluating the wellness vacation can be done through the travel company representative and his monitoring to all the services and wellness programs while they are applied during the vacation and it can be determined by getting the feedback after the trip from both the firm's management and its employees who participated in the program. Accordingly, the travel company needs to work with the firm's management team and the wellness resort and the assigned specialists to develop and improve the provided programs (Saudi commission for tourism and antiquities, 2014).

The advantages of using wellness tourism programs in corporate wellness

Using wellness trips in the sequence the current study proposes does not interfere with any legal restrictions: First, the wellness trip can be used as a lifestyle management program that is provided to all the employees without being held from anybody. It is offered to them in the form of paid time off or a paid vacation, thus, this would probably encourage them all to participate without feeling that they are forced to do an undesirable thing, but instead have a change, a relaxing, refreshing vacation without paying.

Additionally, when the wellness trip is used as an incentive, it is not considered a cash incentive but instead, it is considered as a non-cash alternative that serves the health goal of achieving and attaining a healthy lifestyle. Besides that, the incentive model offer the employees who do not hit targets an alternative method to earn the incentive through the amendment phase in a way that helps them overcome their challenges and encourages them to achieve the target next time.

The Wellness trip can be planned within the budget the employer assign to each employee as an incentive: As mentioned before, the budget or the incentive amount assigned from employers per employee as an incentive for applying the corporate wellness program has reached \$521 on average in 2013 and increased to reach \$594 in 2014(The Experts, 2014; Fidelity Investments, 2014).

The price for a 5days/4nights package in some wellness resort is \$480 per person in a double room. which fits to the budget range perfectly including: accommodation; 15 optional fitness classes ; three healthy cuisine meals daily; snacks and beverages; use of resort facilities; weight training and informative evening programs. This price gets even lower off season and they offer special discounts on groups of eight persons or more (Auvil, 2014; The Oaks, 2014). Putting into consideration that travel agencies and tour operators can even get better deals and prices as they need to fit all the wellness and tourist services agreed upon in the package within the assigned budget. In addition, it has been mentioned before that employers are ready to invest even more money on their employee's wellness if the incentive used and the wellness program implemented really works and helps in reducing the overall health care costs.

Thus, according to the available information, it is possible to have a vision about the budget range needed for each employee in each of the wellness trips or phases mentioned previously.

First: The introductory phase: It can be something like the 5days/4nights package mentioned above. Duration can be even extended to a week in-

stead according to the price given through the travel company or the discounts given to groups or if the reservation would be made during the low season or in a new resort that is far from tourists' scenic locations (Auvil, 2014; The Oaks, 2014).

Second: The incentive phase: It can be a 2 night package for \$240 per person in double including: all the above services plus the choice of a relaxing massage or a facial treatment for less than \$100 (The Oaks, 2014).

Third: The amendment phase: This can be either a 2 night package for \$240 to review and concentrate on the specific techniques the employee needs to follow to achieve the health goal or it can be just a fitness day package for \$180 (The Oaks, 2014) giving him an intensive course in a very short time.

Fourth: The maintenance phase: This can only be a fitness day package for \$180(The Oaks, 2014). All these prices are only an example and it can be even lower according to the deal or contract with the travel company. On the other hand, from the above outlook it can be observed that the introductory phase is the only phase that needs a somehow high budget. This is logically as it is the investment that everything is built on it afterwards.

The study

This section involves a study investigating the view of employees concerning the use of wellness tourism within the corporate wellness programs offered to them by their employers.

Methodology

A survey has been conducted to investigate the opinion of different employees about using wellness tourism packages on behalf of their employers as a method for introducing employees to wellness practices and encouraging them to switch to a healthier lifestyle.

Businesses were divided into four main fields according to the 2007 NAICS (Mattke *et al.*, 2013, p.7): heavy industry such as agriculture, mining, construction and manufacturing; trade such as retail trade and warehousing; service such as information, finance, health and education; and finally public administration such as governmental institutions.

In addition, the firms were classified according to their size, depending on the number of employees, into five categories (Mattke *et al.*, 2013, p.8) firms including from 50 to less than 100 employees, firms from 100 to less than 1000 employees, firms from 1000 to less than 10,000, firms from 10,000 to less than 50,000 and firms including 50,000 or more employees. Very small firms having less than 50 em-

employees were excluded as it is assumed that most of them probably would not have a sufficient budget that can be specified for offering their employees paid wellness tourism vacations.

The survey method

A questionnaire was designed to explore the employees' view concerning using paid wellness vacation as a part of the corporate wellness program offered to them by their employers or firms.

It investigated the wellness services that they would be interested in and if they would be motivated to continue practicing the healthy lifestyle techniques they have experienced after returning from the wellness vacation. Additionally, the questionnaire asked about the employees' opinion regarding whether receiving such vacations on a periodic basis is considered useful or not as a motivator to keep on the healthy lifestyle. Furthermore, it inquired about whether the firm already has a corporate wellness strategy, the wellness programs included and the incentives offered to employees if any. Finally, it examined the employees' preferences among the following cash equivalent incentives to maintain wellness: discounted gym membership, paid healthy lifestyle workshop, paid wellness vacation or free massage.

To assess the questionnaire before using it as the survey instrument for the study, it was distributed on a random sample of five employees to examine its easiness and efficiency. The five employees confirmed its simplicity.

The Sample and Data collection

It was chosen to distribute the questionnaire on firms representing two fields from the four business categories mentioned above: the trade field and the service field. Furthermore, to verify that the sample represents the different sizes of the business firms, it was chosen to distribute the questionnaire on companies of various sizes according to the number of employees working in each of them. Hence, the employees representing the sample of this study were assigned according to the business field of their firms and the firms' size.

A management staff member from each firm was met in person first to explain to him the objectives behind the study and take permission to distribute the questionnaire among the firm's employees and take their opinions. After taking the approval to carry out the survey in the firm, hard copies of the questionnaire were left at each firm for the employees to fill out. Duration of three weeks was given to fill out the

questionnaire. Telephone calls were made to follow up the process.

The questionnaire was initially distributed on five firms from each of the designated business fields representing the five different sizes of firms according to the number of employees. Thus, the total was 10 firms: 5 from the service field and 5 from the trade field.

Only the employees of four institutions responded: two from the trade field and two from the service field.

Concerning the trade firms: the first one is a famous hyper-market in the United States with more than 50,000 employees and the second one is a big warehousing company in the USA with a range of employees from 1000 to less than 10,000. Regarding the service firms: the first one is a worldwide well-known American medical center with a range of employees from 10,000 to less than 50,000 and the second one is a recognized college in the USA with a range of employees from 100 to less than 1000.

In-person follow-up visits were done to these specific institutions to make sure that the number of employees participating in this study, from each firm, is not less than (30) employees to secure the minimum accepted sample number, according to statistical theories, in order to reach an acceptable level of precision (Bouma & Akinson, 1997).

Thus, the final sample participating in this research encompasses (120) employees: (30) employees from a hyper-market including more than 50,000 employees and (30) employees from a warehouse with a range of employees from 1000 to less than 10,000 both representing the trade industry. In addition (30) employees from a medical center with a range of employees from 10,000 to less than 50,000 and (30) employees from a college with a range of 100 to less than 1000 employees both representing the service field.

In the data analysis section, the hyper-market will be referred to as firm one, the warehouse will be referred to as firm two, the medical center firm three and the college firm four.

Data analysis

Results revealed that three firms apply a wellness strategy: firm one and firm two from the trade field and firm three from the service field. These firms are big in size according to their number of employees as they range from 1000 to more than 50,000 employees.

The wellness strategy applied in the three firms is almost the same as they all require regular biometric screening from their employees. If the screening shows a risk in certain health area the employee

is required to enroll in a health management program that addresses the health risk. If this enrollment doesn't happen or no effective results have been reached, the three firms apply the same incentive policy which depends on penalizing the employee by raising his health care premium, especially on employees who smoke.

The vast majority of the employees taking part in this study (90.8%) from the four firms are ready and willing to participate in wellness tourism vacations if it would be used within corporate wellness strategy. In firm one 73.3% of employees indicated that they strongly agree with the idea and 26.7% said they agree. In firm two 86.7% strongly agree, 10% agree and 3.3% have a neutral opinion. In firm three 70% strongly agree and 30% agree and firm four: 40% strongly agree, 26.7% agree, 23.3% are not sure and 6.7% disagree.

Regarding the employees' preferences to the wellness services they would be interested in practicing during the wellness vacation, These services can be ranked according to the mean value as follows: the physical fitness takes the first rank with a mean value (19.25), stress management takes the second rank with mean value (18.75), proper nutrition is the third (16.75), then comes weight management (12.75), yoga (8), meditation (7.5), spa (6.5) and smoking cessation (4.5) consecutively. It is very obvious the employees' preferences to the wellness services directly related to lifestyle management more than the ordinary wellness services that can be related more to luxury. It is also obvious that stress is really a serious issue in everyone's life these days as most of the employees agreed on their need to learn the techniques that can help them manage stress, beside their need to be physically active.

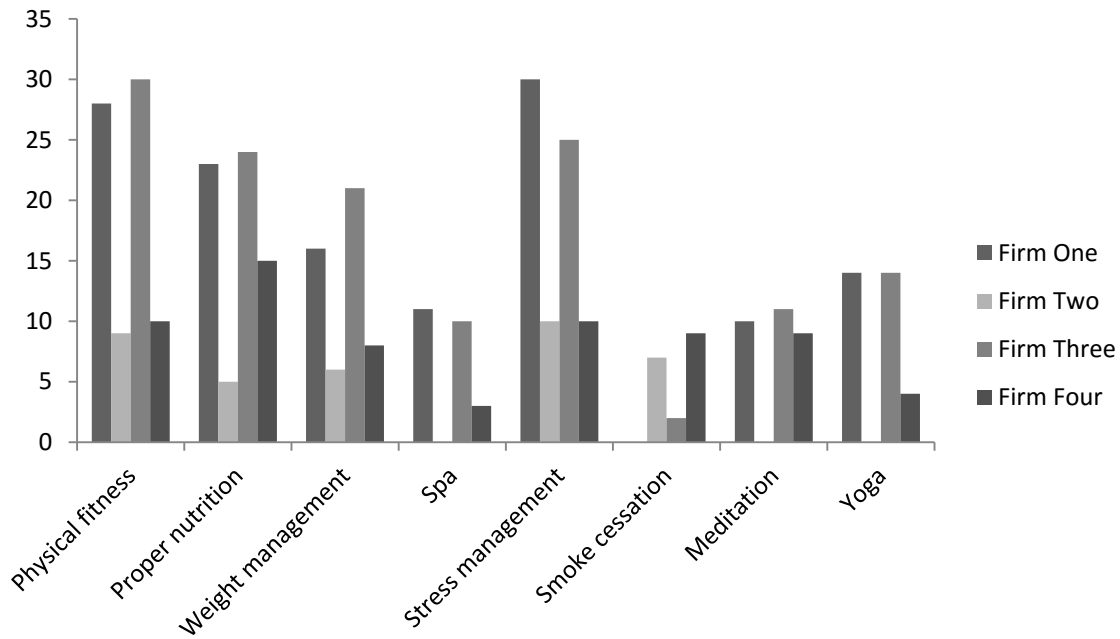


Figure 1. The employees' preferences regarding wellness services

The vast majority of the sample, (92.5%) from the four firms, are willing to continue practicing the healthy lifestyle and healthy techniques they would learn during the wellness vacation after returning to attain the health goal. In firm one 53.3% strongly agree with this and 46.7% agree. Firm two: 66.7% strongly agree, 26.7% agree and 6.7% are not sure. Firm three: 56.7% strongly agree and 43.3% agree. Firm four: 40% strongly agree, 36.7% agree, 16.7% are not sure and 6.7% disagree.

Most of the participants in the study (89.2%) from the four firms see the importance of having such vacations on a periodic basis to be always motivated to maintain the healthy lifestyle. In firm one: 56.7% strongly agree with the idea, 16.7% agree and 6.7% are not sure. Firm two: 70% strongly agree, 23.3% agree and 6.7% are not sure. Firm three: 70% strongly agree and 30% agree and firm four: 40% strongly agree, 30% agree, 23.3% are not sure and 6.7% disagree.

Most of the employees in the sample (70%) prefer receiving the wellness vacation as an incentive. Secondly comes the discounted gym membership with (22.5%) choosing it. A paid healthy lifestyle workshop comes in the third rank with (5.8%) choosing it and a free massage comes at the last rank with (1.7%) choosing it. This shows the employees' preference to wellness services and incentives that can help them achieve this goal rather than luxury short methods. More details regarding each firm: 66.7%

employees in firm one prefer the wellness vacation, 26.7% choose a discounted gym membership and 6.7% prefer a paid healthy lifestyle workshop. In firm two 83.3% prefer the wellness vacation, 16.7% a discounted gym membership and 6.7% a paid workshop. In firm three, 80% choose the wellness vacation and 20% the discounted gym membership. In Firm four: 50% prefer the wellness vacation, 26.7% prefer the discounted gym membership, 16.7% the workshop and 6.7% prefer a free massage.

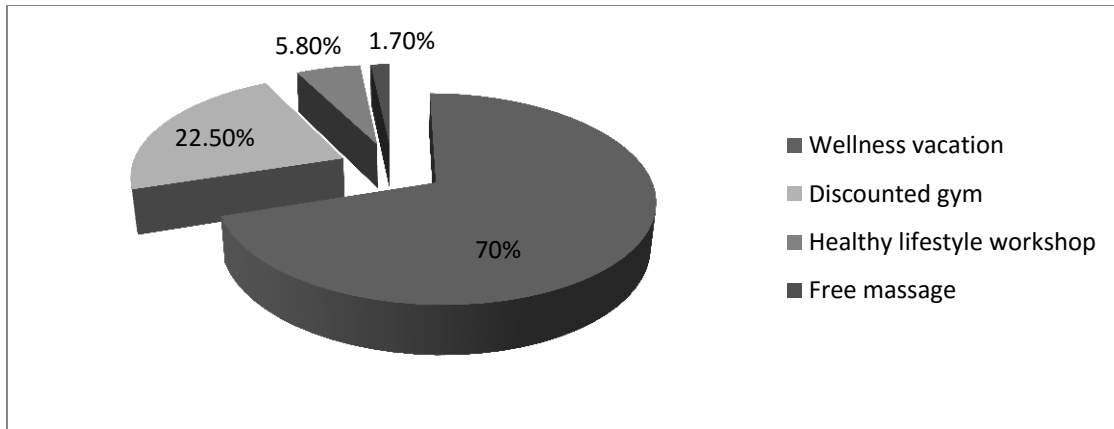


Figure 2. The employees' choices among cash equivalent incentives

Discussion

Results in the data analysis section supports the idea that applying wellness tourism vacations within the corporate wellness is considered to be an effective way to introduce employees to the healthy lifestyle methods and motivate them to live healthy.

In addition, the results show that the employees want live a healthy lifestyle. They only need the right method to introduce them to wellness; and show them the way to attain the health goal; and offer them the time dedicated to practicing the proper techniques under the supervision of wellness specialists. Since, the wellness tourism vacation can provide them with all that, therefore, they prefer it on other methods whether it is a wellness program integrated in the corporate wellness strategy or an incentive. This reinforces the study's main objective that aims at embracing wellness tourism vacations by business employers as an essential component of the wellness strategy that they offer to their employees.

Furthermore, the study reveals that there is no significant difference between the trade field and the service field concerning the wellness strategy and the incentive currently used to influence employees to attain the health goal. Also there is no difference be-

tween the trade field and the service field with regard to the employees' opinions about applying wellness vacations in the corporate wellness strategy and regarding their choices of the wellness services they would prefer to practice within the wellness vacation.

Conclusion and implications

This study explained the advantages of involving wellness tourism in the corporate wellness strategy. It suggested four phases for using the wellness tourism vacation as a lifestyle management program and as an incentive. It recommended planning these vacations through travel companies and proposed certain steps to be followed for arranging and implementing the wellness tourism package. Furthermore, the study explored the opinion of the employees about offering them wellness tourism vacations within the corporate wellness program of their firms. The vast majority of the employees participating in the study strongly agreed with the idea preferring the wellness tourism vacation on other wellness programs and incentives offered to them by their employers. Additionally, the study revealed the awareness of these employees concerning wellness as an ongoing process and a lifestyle for they preferred the wellness activities di-

rectly related to the healthy lifestyle on the wellness services leaning more to luxury and beauty; besides showing their willingness to maintain the healthy lifestyle after the wellness vacation.

Thus the current study proofed that implementing wellness tourism or wellness tourist packages in the proposed sequence is considered one of the best options for firms to integrate within their corporate wellness strategy. This will help firms achieve their goal of changing the employees' lifestyle to reach a healthier model by providing them with a lifestyle management program that they are willing to participate in and offering them incentives to attain the health goal within the assigned budget without interfering with any legal restrictions.

Future studies may involve investigating the willingness of business owners to embrace wellness tourism packages within their corporate wellness strategies; in addition to exploring the readiness and capabilities of travel companies and wellness resorts to fulfill the corporate segment demands in the wellness field.

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