For many companies, wellness programs have become just another check in the box, which is why the return on their investment is miniscule. But if the company has a wellness program that actually works the impact from engagement and cost savings can greatly surpass any investment to start it up.

“We’ve found that wellness programs actually help improve engagement and further connect the employee to the company and its culture,” says Bruce Elliott, manager, compensation and benefits at the Society for Human Resource Management or SHRM. “We started a wellness program about three years ago and engagement scores were somewhere in the low 80s and now they are in the mid to upper 80s.”

In this era of the Affordable Care Act and its focus on prevention, companies of all stripes have been embracing wellness program. According to Martin Rosen, co-founder of HealthAdvocate, the health care advocacy company, as of 2013 surveys found close to 90% of employers offer some version of a wellness program.

Many, however, are just lip service because the culture of the company isn’t in step with what the plan is aimed at doing. “What happens is a company (with a wellness program) will also have a free snack room with chips and soda and a culture where employees are working 12 hours a day,” says Kelly Walsh, president of 1 Smart Career 1smartcareer.com, the coaching firm. “They are not really creating a culture of wellness.”

While determining the return on investment or ROI may not be so cut and dry, companies who do it right do have a real dollar savings in terms of less absenteeism and a more present, engaged and productive workforce, says Walsh.

But before companies can start an impactful wellness program they first have to have a culture that backs it up. That could mean doing away with the soda and chips and replacing it with free water and fruit. It could mean giving employees the time to go to the discounted gym or take a walk at lunch time. It could also mean hosting a yoga class or line dancing in the cafeteria or offering employees access to a wellness coach.

So how can a company go about creating one that actually meets the need of its unique employees? According to Elliott human resources leaders can look at the company’s health plans and 401 (K) plans to determine where those needs lie.

“When mining medical plans for information to correlate back to a wellness program you won’t know who the employee is but you will get a number of instances such as the number of prescriptions that are written for hyper tension, cholesterol or any other symptoms related to heart disease,” says Elliott. If the instances of heart disease are high or if you found through biometric screening that a lot of your employees have high blood pressure or are overweight then you can design a program that addresses those problems, he says.
Wellness is also a state of mind and that’s where the 401 (K) plans come in. According to Elliott if looking at the 401 (K) shows a large number of employees are consistently borrowing against their retirement accounts then it may be a good idea to implement some lunch and learns about budgeting or managing your money. “The best approach is to take small steps and build on those steps and correlate it back to activity with the 401 (K) and medical plan,” says Elliott. “We introduced diet and exercise into the organization at the beginning of the wellness program and saw the average BMI down 10% in the first year.”

GE, through its HealthAhead program, has more than 475 work sites that are HealthAhead certified, which means they offer things such as subsidized healthy foods and fitness programs, stress and weight management programs, onsite screenings and tobacco cessation tools, says Kathy Sanchez, program leader for health services at GE, noting the program is well received by its thousands of employees. “One key to success for us has been tackling wellness from both the top down and the bottom up,” says Sanchez. “Our efforts have terrific support from senior leadership, and our volunteer site certification teams are the driving force behind local implementation.”

When it comes to creating a wellness program, Rosen of HealthAdvocate says to make it comprehensive. You don’t have to offer everything under the sun, nor do you have to spend a fortune creating it, but you do want to give employees some choices. Some of the things that should be considered for a wellness program says Rosen include biometric screenings, health risk assessment, fitness initiative, nutrition support, and incentives.

The goal of a wellness program is undoubtedly to reduce costs and increase productivity, but companies can’t expect it to happen overnight. They have to view it as a long term investment. “You have to be patient and you have to be able to measure the wellness program,” says Elliott.