



Digital Health Tools Are a Growing Part of Workplace Wellness Programs

by Lisa Zamosky, *iHealthBeat* Contributing Reporter

Thursday, July 31, 2014



Corporate wellness programs have been of growing interest to employers for years. Today, more than 90% of employers with 200 or more workers have some type of health promotion or disease-prevention program in place, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

"All of our existing interventions are now transforming into digital options," said Josh Klapow, chief behavioral scientist with ChipRewards, an Alabama firm that develops health incentive programs.

The Drive to Wellness

A few dynamics are leading to the greater use of workplace wellness programs.

First, employers see unhealthy habits such as smoking, lack of exercise, excessive alcohol consumption and poor nutrition as major contributors to "lifestyle diseases," such as diabetes and heart disease -- both of which are on the rise.

These illnesses often lead to higher health care costs for employers. Health care spending due to obesity, for example, is **estimated to be** as high as \$210 billion annually, or 21% of total national health care spending.

There's also a cost to lost productivity. According to a [2011 Gallup poll](#), overweight or obese full-time workers in the U.S. with other chronic health conditions miss an estimated 450 million additional days of work each year compared with healthy workers. That brings with it an estimated cost of more than \$153 billion in lost productivity.

The Affordable Care Act is also encouraging greater use of wellness programs. The law now allows companies to provide greater financial incentives for participation in workplace wellness initiatives -- up to 30% of the cost of insurance premiums, instead of the 20% maximum prior to the law taking effect. Meanwhile, smokers can face steep penalties, as employers can charge tobacco users up to 50% more than non-smokers.

Increasingly, employers are requiring workers to demonstrate some progress toward their health goals if they're to earn rewards and/or avoid penalties.

According to [a recent survey](#) by Towers Watson and the National Business Group on Health, about one in five employers use rewards and penalties to encourage employees to achieve certain goals, such as weight loss, lowering blood pressure or managing cholesterol.

In addition, 42% of companies say they currently reward or penalize employees based on tobacco use, a number that is

expected to climb to 58% by 2015.

Digital wellness tools, experts say, allow for more efficient tracking and can support employees' progress toward their health goals.

"Everybody is carrying around this massively powerful computer in their pocket and we can see their behavior digitally by using that device or things connected to that device," said Derek Newell, CEO of JIFF, a technology firm that provides digital health tools.

As more health behaviors, such as activity level and food intake, become passively monitored, Newell said it's possible to gain a better sense of an employees' digital health fingerprint. "We can watch that data and start to learn how to influence people's behavior in real-time. That's the big change employers are interested in," he said.

Diet and Exercise Go Digital

Experts say technology is influencing wellness through the use of applications and wearable devices that track physical activity, calorie intake and sleep patterns.

"What we found from our wellness scorecard data is that participation in physical activity programs is much higher than other wellness programs. We can't say for sure, but we attribute a lot of that to the use of technology," said Dannielle Sherrets, assistant director with the National Business Group on Health's Institute on Innovation in Workforce Well-being.

Sherrets points to another exercise-related trend she said is starting to emerge among large employers: Mobile apps and software packages that employers can put onto computer systems to remind people to get up and take exercise breaks. This is a response to a growing body of research about the negative health effects of sitting for long periods of time.

"Employers are starting to look for strategies to help encourage employees to get up and move throughout the day. Even a minute every couple of hours is beneficial," Sherrets said.

According to Newell, employers also are very interested in helping their workforce deal with stress and monitoring sleep patterns. "They want employees to be productive," he said.

Employees, it seems, appreciate these programs. A joint report by the National Business Group on Health and AON Hewitt, titled "[The Consumer Health Mindset](#)," found that 93% of consumers participating in a nutrition and healthy eating program say they or their family were helped. Eighty-five percent said fitness activity was useful, and 83% said they benefited from stress management programs.

Employers also offer more clinically based programs to help employees with chronic illnesses better manage their ongoing care. However, Newell said, "They are pretty basic. That class of devices to manage chronic illness is where [activity] device trackers were five years ago."

Sorting Through the Masses

With roughly 40,000 health and wellness apps currently available through IOS and Android, employers are inundated with a huge range of digital tools from which to choose to support employee wellness efforts.

"The problem, as with all new technology, is that so much is being presented to employers -- everything from health challenges to social media to game-based interventions to digital health coaching, to wearables and apps. What you have are all these digital means of delivering variations of sometimes the same thing," Klapow said. "This is the biggest concern I

see with employers."

A number of startups, including JIFF and SocialWellth, have entered the field to help employers evaluate and streamline their digital wellness offerings.

These companies curate available consumer health and wellness technology to help employers simplify the process of selecting and managing various app and device partners. They're also able to connect with tools employees may already be using.

Limitations Still Exist

Digital solutions are undoubtedly useful and allow for connections that were never before possible, experts say. But Klapow cautions employers not to rely too heavily on the notion that digital methods of delivering wellness programs will, on their own, save the day.

"Digital may not mean better. It may be more efficient, but that doesn't mean it will have the impact companies are looking for with regard to influencing health behaviors." The question for employers to ask, he said, is: "To what degree will removing the human factor help or hurt what I'm trying to achieve?"

Acknowledging its limitations, Newell sees a bright future for digital health solutions. "I think we're going to see some great solutions coming out in the next five years. It will be a revolution in how we think about digital health and how that integrates with both the health care system and especially in the employer environment."

© 1998 - 2014. All Rights Reserved. iHealthBeat is published daily
for the **California HealthCare Foundation** by **The Advisory Board Company**.