

Sponsored by



WHITEPAPER

Optimizing Digital Health Tools to Retain and Engage Employees

Employers should consider the full range of digital wellness solutions for a happier and healthier workforce.

Digital health tools give human resource departments proven, cost-effective and accessible care options for employees—particularly those managing chronic medical conditions. While these tools are often used to treat conditions such as diabetes and hypertension, they hold even more potential as part of a broader wellness solution to manage health issues such as stress, depression, smoking and obesity. Employers that take the time to implement comprehensive digital health programs and promote them effectively will ensure they not only have the right tools in place, but that their employees will also use them. The result: Happier, healthier employees and a suite of proven benefits that make it easier to recruit and retain top talent.

In October 2021, Arizent/Employee Benefit News conducted two surveys on behalf of Onduo, a Verily company: one of large employers and one of employees at large organizations. The findings point to how large employers are approaching wellness benefit offerings, including digital health tools, and how employer perspectives align or don't align with those of employees managing chronic conditions.

Digital health tools can make a big difference for employees

For those individuals experiencing ongoing health issues, managing those issues can be a real challenge. As such it's not a surprise that **at least 70% of employee respondents** find high stress, depression, asthma or diabetes disruptive enough to affect their everyday life, including work and other responsibilities. Employers capable of helping their employees manage these types of conditions have powerful incentives to do so: Healthier employees tend to be happier and more productive. Such support services can also positively impact recruitment and retention efforts, at a time when employers need ways to differentiate their benefits packages.

Fortunately, employers have access to digital health tools that can help employees manage common chronic conditions, and many are offering these in some form (84%). These types of tools are attractive to employers because they are competitively priced, easy to track and well-suited to meeting employee needs. However, many employers have yet to fully realize the potential impact of these tools.

Employees aren't getting the full benefit of digital health programs

Despite the cost and health advantages, employers report an average of only 50% utilization of their digital health tools by employees. "Right now, the people who have bought into digital health management have tended to be early adopters," says Chris Girardi, engagement and enrollment manager at Onduo. "We need a shift in mindset to increase utilization rates."

Employees across a variety of conditions say they don't have access to all of the comprehensive resources they need to manage their conditions. In fact, 35% of those with diabetes, 41% with hypertension, 42% with depression, 51% with asthma, 52% that are overweight and 65% with high stress report this very issue. When asked what forms of support they would need, responses include areas digital health solutions cover successfully, such as additional educational resources, access to individualized therapy and more affordable care.

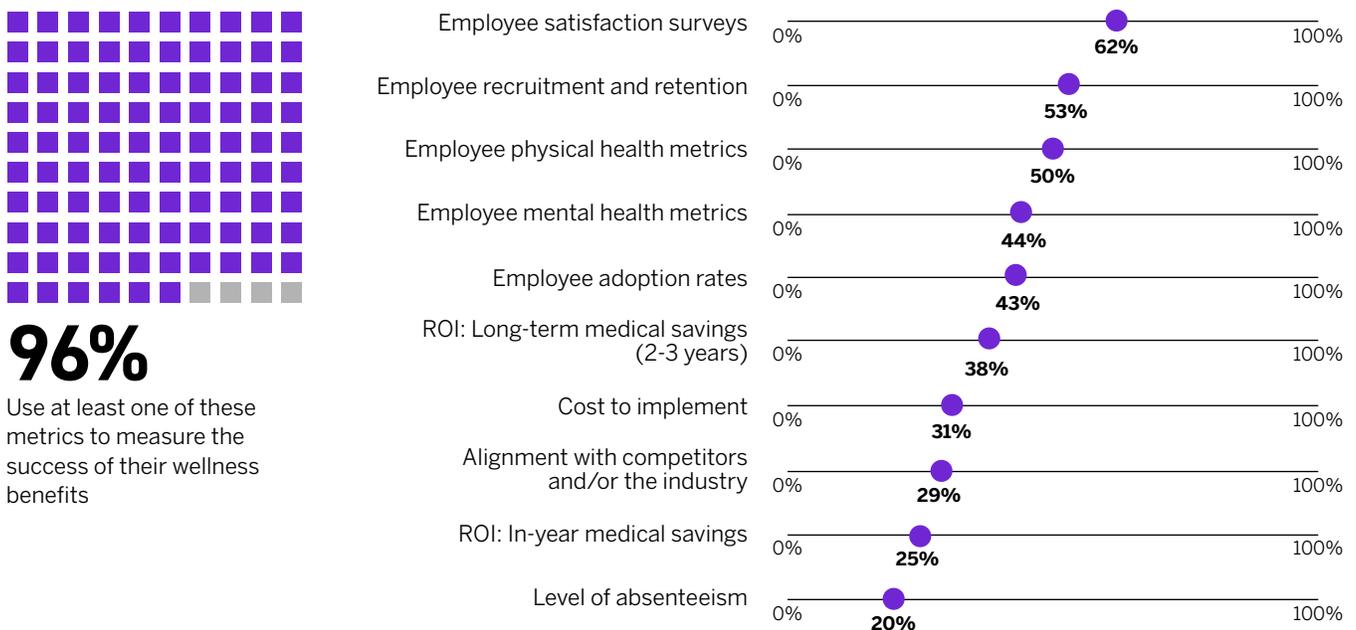
Employers have taken steps to drive increased utilization

The vast majority (98%) of employers who offer digital health tools are taking active steps to increase utilization. These efforts include peer-to-peer meetings, surveys and mass communications to employees to spread the word about the available offerings. But these efforts are falling short, in part because just telling employees about a benefit doesn't always translate into usage. If employees don't understand how the digital health offering works, they won't understand its value. And if they don't understand its value, they aren't likely to make use of it.

"Many HR departments assume people aren't engaging because they're not interested in these tools. But not understanding how the tools can help is a different problem," says Cassandra Rose, a partner at Meritarc and an employee benefits expert. She recommends that HR departments make a committed effort during onboarding to have employees load apps on their phone so they will be easily accessible when needed.

It can also be difficult for HR departments to determine how well they are actually doing when it comes to helping employees manage their health. Practically all (96%) employers measure the success of their benefits in some way. But no single metric tells the whole story. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Employer Metrics for Measuring Success of Wellness Benefits



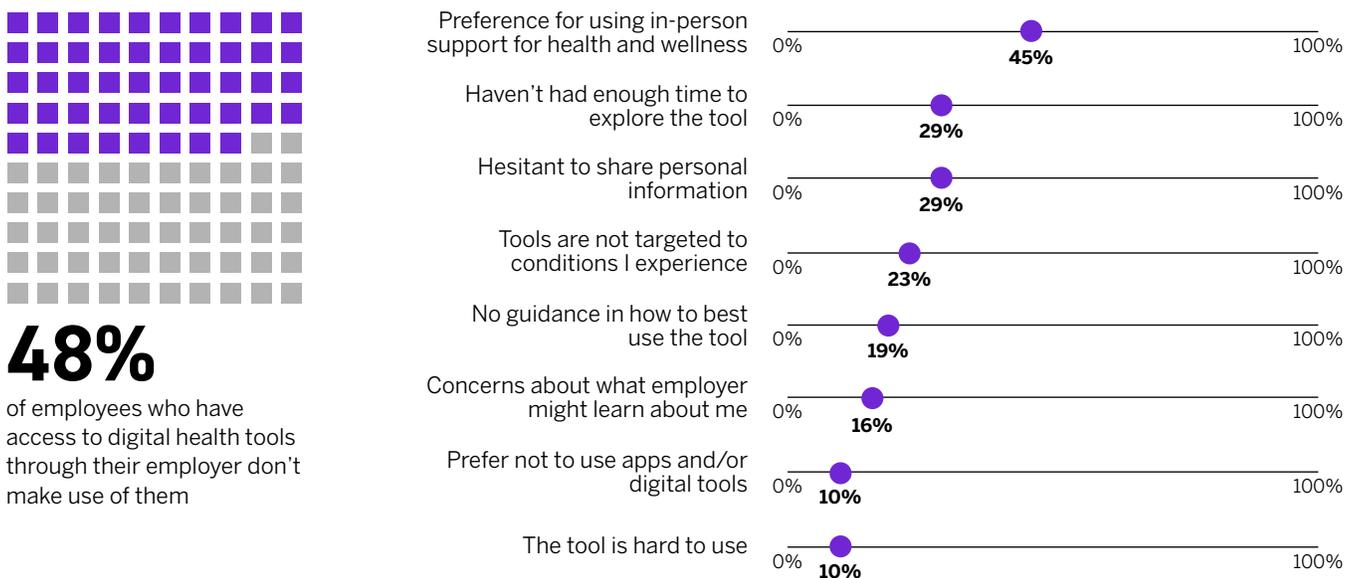
Source: Research commissioned by Onduo, conducted by Arizent Research/Employee Benefit News

No matter what metrics HR departments use, improving employee health is critical for supporting a number of broader goals, including employee satisfaction, recruitment and retention, general productivity and even environmental, social and governance commitments. “If you have commitments around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), it’s actually your mandate to ensure people truly understand what’s being offered, because health outcomes are a key part of DEI,” says Rose.

Addressing barriers to use

The employee data on barriers to use of digital health tools shows that employees need more education on usage and benefits—including convenience and cost savings (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reasons Employees Don’t Take Full Advantage of Available Digital Health Tools



Source: Research commissioned by Onduo, conducted by Arizent Research/Employee Benefit News

Privacy concerns can be especially problematic, according to Rose. People can be much more reticent to share information about their health when their employer is involved. When it comes to issues that could be linked to real or perceived social stigmas, such as mental health and addiction, the reluctance is even greater.

“It’s important to be specific, clear and transparent about what information HR gets,” says Rose. Letting people know what is collected, who has access to it and how that information is protected can go a long way toward putting employees at ease. If the only information HR gets about a program is how many people register for it, this is a key insight to share with employees.

As noted, another barrier is employees' lack of time to learn about and understanding of the knowledge about how digital health works. “Employers should not assume that everybody has the education to get what they need from a platform,” says Girardi. “Creating easily accessible communications or infographics as part of a broad vendor enrollment plan helps employees understand what they’re getting from a tool or service. This should be the minimum you expect from your vendor partners.”

Designing and delivering successful solutions

Third-party vendors can play an active role in helping employers implement and promote their digital health tools to make them more successful. “Employees don’t want to be told [by their employer] what to do all day long,” says Girardi. Offerings made under a third-party’s branding (rather than an offering that looks like it is developed by HR) tend to be more attractive to employers.

One of the most effective ways to keep health and well-being and affiliated tools top of mind is to include others beyond HR in the task of championing it. “If you can get buy-in from leaders at various levels of the company, it’s possible to create a cultural shift that periodically reinforces health benefits and opportunities,” says Girardi. Making health and wellness a more general part of corporate culture can increase the overall sense of community and bring attention to



Creating easily accessible communications as part of a broad vendor enrollment plan helps employees understand what they are getting from a tool or service.

—Chris Girardi, Onduo

the resources available without being too direct. For example, some companies use awareness months as an anchor for continuing education on various health and wellness topics.

Rose suggests thinking of offering these benefits around “moments that matter,” such as when someone is starting a new family or experiencing times of stress (e.g., an ongoing pandemic). “People don’t necessarily need all the details of all the resources

available to them when they get hired, but if they understand that they have a pool of resources available to them alongside their standard health insurance information, they will at least know where to look when the need arises,” says Rose.

These moments also include key milestones in the calendar that provide HR teams an opportunity to reinforce available digital health tools. “We know some individuals are interested in making healthy New Year’s resolutions such as being more active, while the holiday season is centered around family gatherings and may be a good time to reinforce mental and behavioral health benefits. Communications throughout the year help remind employees of available benefits to help them set and achieve goals to improve or maintain good health,” says Girardi.

“Another option is to offer incentives. These can be a useful tool for drawing attention to a digital health platform, but they don’t always increase employee usage. What tends to be more successful are programs that encourage employees to set smaller incremental goals and provide regular feedback on their progress, rather than those that track a single metric,” according to Girardi. For example, a weight-loss program never takes place overnight, so it’s critical that platforms encourage and support building new habits over the longer term—and follow through to ensure those habits remain in place.

Conclusion

There are many advantages to providing digital health tools as part of an overall benefits program to retain employees and attract new talent. It is also key for employers to be proactive in communicating the availability and the value of those benefits throughout the year, engaging the support of leadership to reinforce the company’s commitment to health and wellness.

Our research shows employees want flexible options that offer new innovative tools to treat their chronic conditions, but they demand more access, education and awareness to help them get started with a new program. A strategic marketing plan extends the benefits of your program to help drive awareness, enrollment and engagement. The right partner and/or technology vendor can help you drive employee engagement, mitigate rising healthcare costs and create better outcomes for your employees and/or clients, especially when program offerings support your employees’ unique needs.

Methodology

In October 2021, Arizent Research and Employee Benefit News conducted an online survey of 108 employers and 101 employees at organizations with 2,000 or more employees. For employers to qualify, they had to have at least moderate involvement in providing or recommending benefits for employees at their organization. For employees to qualify, they indicated they had diabetes or hypertension or were at least a little open to using a digital health tool to manage their depression, stress, or weight/obesity. The primary objective of the research is to understand how large employers are approaching wellness benefit offerings, including digital health tools, and how employer perspectives align with employees who are managing chronic conditions.



About Onduo

Onduo is a virtual population health solution that provides personalized, empathy-based care at scale. Enabled by technology built by parent company Verily, an Alphabet company, Onduo uses the science of “digital phenotyping” to understand an individual’s needs, conditions, characteristics, and drivers — matching the right care to the right person at the right time. Onduo delivers lifestyle and clinical interventions through innovative software, connected smart devices, and access to specialty care to drive engaging and impactful experiences for your employees and for you. The Onduo team is led by clinicians with real-world experience, including experts in behavioral science, user experience, predictive analytics, healthcare consumer marketing, public health, and health IT — all with a mission to revolutionize care delivery.



About Arizent Research

Arizent delivers actionable insights through full-service research solutions that tap into their first-party data, industry SMEs, and highly engaged communities across banking, payments, mortgage, insurance, municipal finance, accounting, HR/employee benefits and wealth management. They have leading brands in financial services including American Banker, The Bond Buyer, Financial Planning, National Mortgage News, and in professional services, such as Accounting Today, Employee Benefits News, and Digital Insurance.

For more information, please visit arizent.com