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Technology & tools for employee wellness

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5 MIN READ

Employee absence can be costly for employers, whether it's due to work-related illnesses and injuries or not. There are steps employers can take in areas ranging from physical fitness to behavioral health that can help make workers happier, healthier, and more productive on the job. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that employee absenteeism costs companies nearly \$1,700 a year per employee.

Most employers are on the lookout for ways to foster feelings of contentment and company loyalty to reduce turnover and absenteeism. A study last year showed that an employee assistance program, or EAP, can have a significant return on investment, from 3:1 for smaller companies to 9:1 for larger ones. Helping employees with legal assistance for life events such as adoption or guardianship, or mental health assistance when health insurance doesn't do enough—these gestures can make a huge difference in their lives and ultimately the employer's own bottom line.

In the same vein, employers are also often looking at proactive technology and tools that focus on health and wellness. Doing so can drastically reduce absence and insurance premiums, as well as increase employees' job satisfaction, productivity, and sense of community.

Physical fitness

The COVID-19 quarantine resulted in a more sheltered, sedentary lifestyle for many people, especially for people formerly employed in an office who transitioned to working from home. Gyms and fitness centers across the country were shut down for months, as were many outdoor venues like beaches, parks, and campgrounds. Government mandates kept most people from visiting friends or family, at least for a while. And many of us relied on home delivery and curbside assistance, even losing the simple exercise from walking around a store or to and from a parking lot.

Physical fitness intersects with many aspects of a person's health, including their overall mood, how well they sleep, and their ability to heal from injury. An August 2021 article from the Journal of Occupational Health concluded that long periods of sitting pose a high risk for decreased performance levels at work. Many employers are trying to help people get back into healthy habits by:

- Organizing virtual workouts on Zoom or Teams
- Automating reminders to stretch, take breaks, or go for walks

- Offering incentives or group challenges

- Behavioral health

Employees' mental and behavioral health can have a huge impact on their ability to function normally, as well as costs for their employers. Employers lose more than \$100 billion a year as the result of mental health disorders and substance abuse, with roughly one third of this due to disability claims. Other major costs include lost productivity and absenteeism resulting from employees who cannot make it into work or must leave early because they feel distressed, overwhelmed, or burned out. Many people are turning to unhealthy methods of coping with such feelings, such as drug and alcohol abuse. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 13% of Americans started or increased their use of drugs as a way to cope with COVID-19. Overdoses have spiked since the pandemic began in 2020. And there's a big uptick in home-based employees drinking on the job, according to multiple surveys. Companies can look at many avenues to address their workers' behavioral health:

- Including mental health coverage and EAPs in their benefit packages

- Offering courses in mindfulness or relaxation techniques

- Encouraging healthy sleep patterns by setting reasonable work schedules and goals, as well as using natural lighting when possible (exercise programs help with sleep too)

- Healthy nutrition

A study from Duke University Medical Center found that obese workers filed twice the number of claims as non-obese workers, had seven times higher medical costs, and missed 13 times more days of work. Many employee-wellness programs include strategies to educate employees on making healthier food choices, which can help prevent or treat chronic diseases and reduce the chances of developing them. A wellness program with strong nutrition focus can help employees make healthy decisions about what they eat, whether working on or off site. Some options include:

- Introducing apps that help with meal planning

- Reminding people to stay hydrated and rested

- Offering healthy options in vending machines and catered meals

A holistic approach

No one wants to be sick. Physical and behavioral health intersect in ways that can make someone feel like their world is spinning out of control. Feeling stressed or overburdened with work can contribute to poor sleep habits. Sleep deficits can lead to increased feelings of sadness or anxiety, making it harder for people who want help take care of themselves by exercising regularly. Unhealthy coping mechanisms like eating poorly, drug or alcohol abuse, bingeing on Netflix or social media instead of sleeping—all these choices exacerbate one another. For employers that want to take a proactive approach to help their workers and their own bottom lines, a whole-body approach is best. And there are many ways they can do this:

- Offering wearable tracking devices such as smartwatches and pedometers

- Organizing events like a 5K run/walk for charity

- Scheduling virtual workouts, walkabouts, dance classes, or mindfulness workshops
- Automating email reminders to stand, stretch, and drink water
- Promoting apps to track eating habits and exercise
- Setting up cooking or yoga classes
- Including mental health in employees' insurance benefits

A holistic approach to wellness takes into consideration an employee's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Employers that offer a more comprehensive preventative program, including activities that provide opportunities for social interaction, will foster engagement among employees while also improving the overall health of their workforce.



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