

THE BENEFITS OF WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone in so many ways. For many employees, the health crisis ushered in significant changes to the workplace, with a major shift to remote work. Further, with the heightened health consciousness and the increasing priority workers have placed on their health in the wake of the pandemic, another aspect of work that the crisis has impacted is corporate wellness.

More than **70 percent of** workers have described the pandemic as the most stressful time in their professional careers. From getting pay cuts, experiencing financial stress, losing a loved one to the disease to the challenge of juggling remote work with home responsibilities, the coronavirus pandemic has taken a toll on employees' mental and physical health.

These changes have pivoted corporate wellness, with a new focus to meet the health needs of the increasingly remote workforce. Consequently, employers need to modify their corporate wellness offerings, with more attention to three key areas:

More Virtual Wellness Offerings

With most employees now working from home and potentially adopting remote work in the post-pandemic era, the pandemic has revealed the need for HR leaders to offer virtual wellness programs. Corporate wellness programs will now include more online health solutions, such as virtual fitness classes, webinars, and mindfulness exercises to meet the needs of the growing remote workforce.

Best Buy, for instance, has a 16,000 square-foot on-site fitness center that serves its over 1,400 employees, with up to 15 weekly group exercise classes. However, with the patchwork of stay-at-home restrictions, the company quickly adjusted to making these offerings available online. Best Buy created a “Wellness Zone” on its Facebook page to host daily live group exercise classes, with the videos available to workers for on-demand viewing. Personal trainers also offer individualized workouts, connecting with employees via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. According to the HealthFitness program manager for the company, more than 1,000 employees now connect daily to participate in the workout sessions.

The pandemic has also led employers to leverage mobile applications and platforms that offer wellness solutions. Many employers partnered with wellness platforms, like Supreme Training, to provide personalized wellness solutions, including on-demand fitness classes, yoga classes, life coaching, and other health packages.

Employees will also likely have more access to telemedicine or telehealth services in the future. While telemedicine has been around for some time, the pandemic revealed its importance, as stay-at-home restrictions and suspension of non-COVID-19-related medical care precluded hospital visits. Even after the pandemic resolves, telemedicine will remain a more convenient option for employees seeking non-emergency care while also limiting exposure to health risks.

Greater Focus on Mental Health

Employee wellness programs in the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era will shift focus to offering more mental health initiatives to support employees in these unprecedented times. Although mental health programs have been a component of

workplace wellness, the pandemic has [revealed the need](#) to take it up a notch in the workplace.

The pandemic and the consequent loss of lives and economic devastation has had a toll on people's mental health. Many adults now report increasing indulgence in alcohol and drug abuse to cope with the stress associated with the pandemic, and those already suffering from mental health issues are finding it increasingly difficult to manage. Further, the public health measures to rein in the coronavirus spread, such as the stay-at-home orders and quarantine rules, may also accelerate the mental health impact of the pandemic.

Employees, therefore, need these mental health programs now more than ever. A key approach many employers are adopting is to make work more flexible. Many employers have extended their remote work policies to allow for more flexibility and a healthier work-life balance for their workers.

Another effective approach to improving workers' mental health is building a strong community. Employers need to check-in frequently with their workers and build an online community where workers can regularly interact from their various home offices. Effective communication also requires adequate training of HR leaders to be able to identify and handle behaviors that suggest mental health problems.

Further, employers will likely increase access to [employee assistance programs \(EAPs\)](#) that will offer mental health support and resources to employees. These programs will provide mental health support for remote workers struggling to cope with remote work and mental health treatment services for workers struggling with alcohol and drug abuse as an escape from the health crisis. These programs also provide access to resources, including counseling and therapy sessions, to employees with mental health concerns.

Greater Focus on Population Health Management

As the pandemic wears on, studies identify people with chronic diseases, including diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer, and heart disease, as one of the most at-risk groups of COVID-19 infection and complications. This heightened health consciousness and pushed many people to pay closer attention to their health.

Likewise, workplace wellness of the future will pay more attention to chronic disease. More focus will be on preventing, managing, and improving chronic disease in the workplace. Employers will increase healthcare benefits and access to medical services, particularly for these at-risk groups. Employers may also modify wellness offerings to offer more proactive initiatives, including on-site fitness classes, gym memberships, exercise breaks, tobacco-cessation programs, food wellness programs and corporate wellness curated retreats.

Further, employers now see the need to offer more in-office and home health screenings to identify people with or at risk of chronic conditions. The need for these screenings may also see a surge in wearable technology. More employers will invest in providing wearable devices and mobile platforms that allow employees to track their health and take proactive steps to mitigate their health risks.

As immunity became the buzzword during the pandemic, employers will also provide workers with resources and tools to help them adopt lifestyle and diet choices that promote immunity.

Final Thoughts

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed gaps in corporate wellness that employers can bridge to improve employee health and wellness. With many workers working remotely and struggling with the economic and mental toll of the pandemic, employers will pivot wellness programs to empower them to better cope with the health crisis and reduce their health risks amid the pandemic and beyond.