



TECHNOLOGY

Wellness Portals Help Fill Employee Need

By Lin Gensing-Pophal October 5, 2021



Employee wellness, particularly mental health wellness, has become an area of increasing concern for companies and their HR leaders during the pandemic, especially as many employees continue to work remotely.

After well over a year of dealing with disruptions to both work and family life, employees are under a great deal of pressure. That pressure can be exhibited in various ways, including ways that can be detrimental to organizations of all sizes.

Employers have long recognized the role they can play in providing resources and support for employee wellness—initially to manage rising health care costs, but there are other impacts as well. Successfully managing employee wellness can positively impact absenteeism, productivity and turnover.

Cheryl Brown Merriwether is executive director of the International Center for Addiction and Recovery Education (ICARE), headquartered in Orlando, Fla., and an HR practitioner with 25 years of experience. In May, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ICARE partnered with Global Health Metrics to pioneer a wellness portal called the Healthy Self Checkup, which measures employee mental fitness levels. "Managers and leaders are empathetic and aware of the fact that the workforce is struggling, and they're proactively making resources available," she said.

Because of these issues and the anticipation of a continued hybrid work model, there is a renewed interest among employers in wellness portals—online access for employees to do everything from track their wellness activities to participate in online classes and even have appointments with their health care providers.

Interest in Wellness Portals Growing During Pandemic

Ben Lamarche, general manager of Lock Search Group, a global talent management and recruitment firm, said, "I am proud to say that our company has a successful wellness program, and our informational portal has definitely contributed to this success." Over the years, he said, "employee wellness has gained prominence and become a crucial perk for attracting and retaining top talent. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, wellness became even more important given the uncertainty of the time and the overall anxiety caused by the pandemic."

Wellness portals can also help employers stand out in a crowded employer market, said Jon Hill, chairman and CEO of The Energists, an executive search firm in Houston. "Many of the companies we work with are eagerly seeking ways to improve their retention and hiring, and the increased control and access to wellness programs that employees can get from a self-serve wellness portal can be a beneficial part of this equation," he said.

Having a healthy workforce is critical for employers of all kinds. That importance has been particularly driven home during the pandemic, said Pouria Sanae, founder and

CEO of iXlayer, a health testing platform. "As a company's greatest asset is the health of its employees, many [employers] are now looking to implement new portals that will assist [employees] in better managing their health care moving forward," Sanae said. "Companies are increasingly looking to assist their employees as they navigate how to best manage their own health."

In addition to benefitting employees, Brown Merriwether pointed out, wellness portals can be accessible to others: "It could be a family member, a loved one, or someone close to them."

The pandemic has forced many employees to work remotely and increase their utilization of virtual and remote telemedicine platforms to manage their personal care and, in many cases, the care of their immediate and extended families.

Big Benefits

Andre Kazimierski is the CEO of Improovy, an on-demand home improvement service platform in Chicago. His company doesn't currently have a wellness portal, he said, but he's in the process of deciding whether it should. He recognizes the role that wellness portals can play, especially in terms of mental health.

"Wellness portals can help keep mental health in check when employers lack the ability to help," Kazimierski said. "They also demonstrate to employees that the company cares about them and wants them to be healthy, which can build a stronger team bond and build rapport overall."

Wellness portals make it easy for employees to access information and resources—wherever they are. They also minimize demands on HR staff, freeing them up to focus on other, more strategic responsibilities.

Employers are adopting wellness portals by necessity, Hill said. "A self-serve wellness portal is the best way to provide in-office and remote employees equal access."

Sanae agreed. "Health portals help facilitate self-care management by utilizing modern virtual and digital health technologies," Sanae said. "The portals provide a central and secure place to digitally house employees' important medical records and help coordinate appointments or lab tests. As telehealth takes off, having digital access to pertinent medical information makes managing your own health care easier."

That's important because it provides an opportunity to be proactive about seeking care and addressing both physical and mental health issues, Brown Merriwether said. Employees benefit from the information they can glean from health risk assessments

and other online tools. Employers can benefit from the collection of data to get "a snapshot of their aggregate workforce with respect to specific needs," Brown Merriwether added.

Potential Drawbacks

There are some potential drawbacks to the use of online wellness portals that employers and HR professionals should keep in mind. The portals can be costly for employers, and some employees may not have access to the Internet at home or be comfortable using technology.

Another problem is that people don't always want to sign up. "I have heard from others that some employees don't want to participate because they don't believe that information is necessary for their employers to have," Kazimierski said.

To encourage participation, Hill said, companies should look for a "straightforward employee interface that's easy to explain and use." If the portal is "clunky or complicated," he said, "it can actually decrease employee participation and access because they find it frustrating." That interface should be compatible with various devices—from desktops and laptops to mobile phones.

"The benefits of a wellness portal outweigh the downsides," Lamarche said. But, he added, "investing in a portal alone without implementing an effective wellness program will not yield you the desired results and may even discourage participation."

Start with seeking input from employees, Kazimierski said. "Ultimately, I think companies and their HR departments should speak with their employees first before deciding on using one of these portals. Ask them if they want one and if they would actually use it." This will vary from company to company, he said. Getting that input, though, can help companies make informed decisions about the functionality and features that would most appeal to their workforce and best meet both employer and employee needs.

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