

Employers Get Their Game On ^ HEALTH



We make health social.™

About the Authors



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Introduction

In a climate of rising obesity rates and increasing health care costs, workplace wellness has emerged as a way for employers to address the health and well-being of their employees. Although workplace wellness has existed in one form or another for well over four decades, advances in technology have recently and rapidly changed the way employee health promotion programs are delivered. In the past five years in particular, companies have begun adopting gaming technology in the service of wellness, making the achievement of healthy goals more approachable, engaging social and fun.



The Number-One Wellness Challenge: Employee Engagement

Today, depending on what source you cite, 50% to 75% of employers offer some type of wellness program in an effort to improve employee health, control rising health care costs, and increase productivity and engagement. These online and on-site programs typically break down into four main categories: health risk assessment, lifestyle management, chronic condition management and general health education. Employers have invested significant financial resources in these programs, typically 1% to 3% of their total employee health care budget, according to the ShapeUp Annual Employer Wellness Survey.¹

However, despite this large investment in workplace wellness, not all employers are gaining the traction they need. In fact, employers cite engagement as their single biggest obstacle to achieving healthy behavior change among their employees.² That’s reflected in participation rates, which for some programs are as low as 6%, according to the 15th Annual National Business Group on Health/Towers Watson Employer Survey on Purchasing Value in Health Care (see below). Employees aren’t participating in wellness programs because they find them irrelevant to their lives or are simply unaware that they exist.³ Even more troubling, some don’t participate because they don’t view managing their health as a top priority.⁴

Typical Employee Wellness Program Engagement Rates

Program Type	Typical Engagement	With Incentives
Coaching	6%	22%
Weight Management	8%	8.5%
Biometric Screening	22%	42%
ShapeUp	30–50%	50–80%

Sources:

15th Annual National Business Group on Health/Towers Watson Employer Survey on Purchasing Value in Health Care (coaching, weight and biometric data). Analysis based on an average company size of 7,500 employees with an average workforce age of 43 years, 55% male population and average industry distribution. **Note:** ShapeUp data based on book-of-business client experience.

Employers have responded to this lack of engagement with financial carrots and sticks. In 2011, the average incentive offered for wellness program participation was \$375 per employee.¹ At the same time, a growing number of employers expressed that they'll migrate from participation-based to outcomes-based incentives, an approach that ties rewards to measurable results, such as a lowered Body Mass Index. Twenty-two percent of employers plan to have this approach in place by the end of 2012.⁵ Going even one step further, some employers are already applying financial penalties for nonparticipation and unhealthy habits, such as surcharges for those who smoke, don't participate in disease management or lifestyle

behavior programs, or forgo a biometric screening. By 2016, 46% of employers expect to penalize employees in this way.⁶

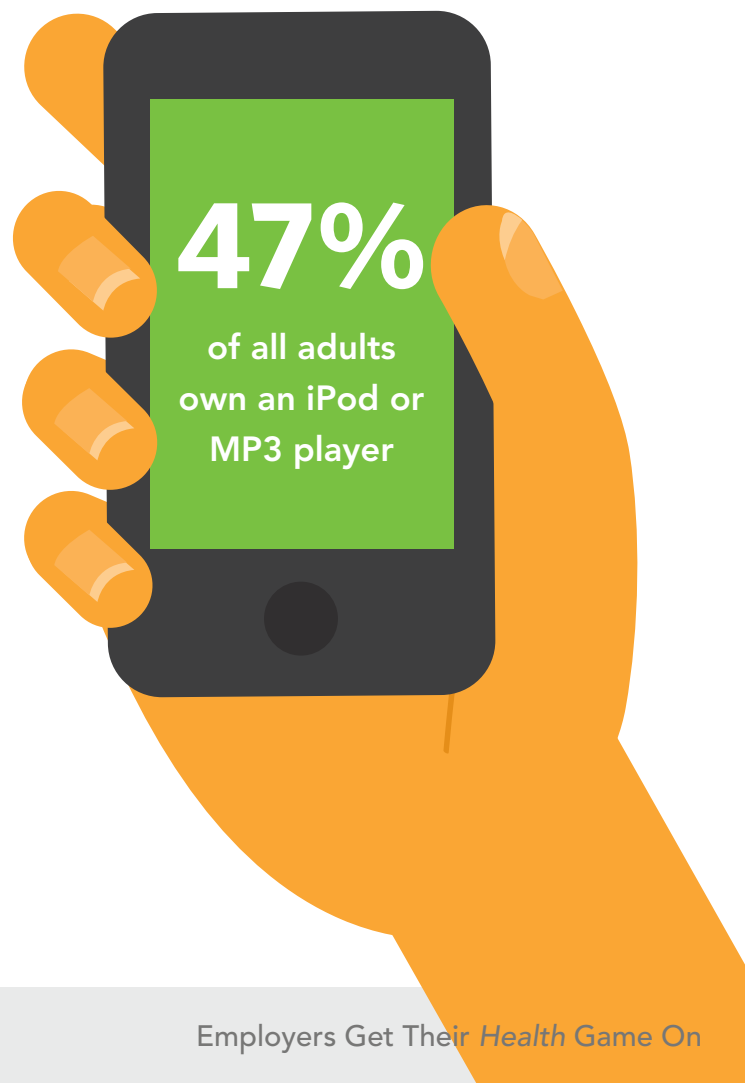
Despite such tough tactics and throwing so much money at the problem, employers continue to struggle with employee engagement. That's why many of them have begun to look beyond financial incentives to search for more effective, sustainable and affordable ways to motivate their employees to take control of their health. The most innovative ones have started exploring an entirely new strategy: using games to make wellness programs more fun and rewarding than they've ever been before.

Games—Everybody Plays

Games have existed since 2600 B.C., according to Wikipedia. Since then, they've continued to gain traction.

- 42% of all adults own a video game console (47% own an iPod or MP3 player)
- One in five Americans plays games on social networks
- Americans now spend more time playing games than watching movies
- The average social gamer is a 43-year-old woman

Sources: Pew, VentureBeat, Mashable and The NPD



It's More Than Just Fun With Games

As a way to make wellness programs more engaging, employers are turning to social health games that invite employees to join together to achieve healthy goals. These games place healthy behaviors within the context of a fun and easy-to-follow game, making difficult changes less intimidating and more rewarding.

The route to understanding the potential of social health games for employees came through seeing their power to solve public health problems. Researchers, game designers and entrepreneurs have been testing games for patients experiencing emotional trauma and chronic diseases. In one study, doctors

explored whether repeated exposure to virtual traumatic war experiences coupled with the opportunity to talk with others and explore emotions would help returning soldiers cope better with post-traumatic stress disorder. These doctors built a therapeutic game called Virtual Iraq and Virtual Afghanistan using the Xbox game Full Spectrum Warrior. Archimage, a design firm that's been studying health games since 2001, has created several games to address childhood obesity, type 2 diabetes and cancer. HopeLab, a nonprofit organization focused on children's health, created Re-Mission, a game for teenagers with cancer that improves their self-care through a first-person shooter game. And Dance Dance Revolution, a popular consumer exercise game, is being studied for its ability to reduce falls in patients with Parkinson's disease.

Studying the Effectiveness of Games



As games gather steam and more organizations and individuals use them, nonprofits have launched research programs and journals—as well as social networks, databases and conferences—to advance the understanding of their use and effectiveness. In 2005, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation pushed the field forward by funding a project that's become known as Health Games Research, an \$8.25 million national research program that studies and improves the effectiveness of health games and forges ties between the health and gaming worlds. The burgeoning field even got its own scientific publication with the launch in Fall 2011 of *Games for Health: Research, Development and Clinical Applications*, a peer-reviewed journal.

Early results for these social health games are promising. In one study measuring the impact of Virtual Iraq and Virtual Afghanistan, 16 of 20 soldiers who participated in this game therapy no longer met the criteria for PTSD.⁷ Archimage's Squire's Quest! game increased kids' intake of fruit, juice and vegetables by one serving a day. Re-Mission users more consistently adhered to their antibiotic course, maintained higher levels of chemotherapy, and demonstrated greater understanding of their disease and how their behavior affects it.

These games are effective because they assist people in overcoming barriers—even unconscious barriers. Jane McGonigal, a noted game designer, suggests in her book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* that games are effective not because they're fun, but because they require work. Games lead us to feel productive, competent, recognized,

socially prestigious and creative. Because multiple players can play simultaneously, social games also instill feelings of cooperation and community. "A good game," McGonigal writes, "is a unique way of structuring experience and provoking positive emotion. It is an extremely powerful tool for inspiring participation and motivating hard work."

Insurers and Consumers Adopt Health Games

Recognizing the power of games to engage people in their health, innovative insurers have begun offering social health games to their members and communities. Humana's Games for Health has launched several, including the Horsepower Challenge to combat childhood obesity. They continuously produce new games, building on trends and working through existing community centers. Their

KeyBank's Results With ShapeUp Social Health Games

Wellness engagement: 58% of employees actively participated

Target population: 33% of KeyBank's highest health risk population engaged

Increased activity: 2 million steps walked, 580,926 minutes of exercise

Improved health: 11% of participants lost more than 10 pounds each



game FamScape is a virtual and real-life game to promote healthy families, and Dancetown is a dance pad game designed to increase physical activity among senior citizens. Kaiser Permanente, also an early adopter of games for health, launched the Amazing Food Detective, a compilation of games meant to improve childhood nutrition, in 2007. In 2011, Aetna teamed up with Mindbloom to deliver the inspirational Life Game, where members can “grow the life they want.” Participants use Mindbloom to focus on physical health as well as lifestyle, financial, career and other personal goals.

At the same time, health games are steadily appearing on the consumer market. The wildly popular Nintendo Wii brings health games into the living room with Wii Sports and Wii Fit. And the Kinect, another game console that features social health games, set a Guinness World Record for being the fastest-selling consumer electronics device. Health games have even moved to the palm of our hand. Humana’s Colorfall, billed as a “puzzle game promoting cognitive health and physical activity,” is the first among many health apps the insurer plans to produce. Massive Health, a newer entrant to the space, saw users contribute two million food ratings in just three weeks using The Eatery, its social game where people share a snapshot of their meal and invite crowd-sourced nutritional advice. With the proliferation of smartphones, the number of mobile health apps—many of which are games—available in the U.S. is projected to reach 13,000 by the summer of 2012.⁸

Health Games Proliferate and Succeed in the Workplace

Given the fanfare and evidence driving the adoption of health games, as well as the

significant amount of employer health care dollars at stake, it’s no wonder wellness providers and entrepreneurs are turning their creativity loose on building social gaming solutions for the office. Over the past five years, numerous workplace wellness companies have launched solutions that replace more traditional information-driven health promotion approaches with ones ruled by game mechanics.

These mechanics are foundational in social health games because they create an enjoyable experience that keeps people playing. Friendly competition is a core methodology that most corporate health games leverage to use to drive engagement. Many corporate wellness games also incorporate points, levels, badges, and social support in the form of teams and other groups. Employees earn points and badges for completing health-related activities—for example, increased physical activity and improved eating habits. Their achieved status keeps them playing, as do their colleagues. Being on a team promotes altruistic behaviors, with team members supporting, encouraging and educating each other. Participating in a competition between departments or worksites motivates the teams to strive to achieve ambitious goals in order to earn bragging rights. In addition, being part of a company-wide challenge helps unite employees around the common goal of creating a healthier company culture.

Workplace wellness games cut through the bulk of employer problems, creating relevancy for employees who feel uninterested in their company’s wellness offerings, opportunity for those who feel powerless to affect their health, challenge and excitement for those who are unmotivated, and interest for those who haven’t previously participated. Far from

being a frivolous waste of time, these games actually drive employees to deeper levels of self-testing, positive thinking, camaraderie, and an overall sense of well-being and satisfaction.

Leading employers like the Cleveland Clinic, KeyBank, Raytheon and Sprint are deploying team-based games within their wellness programs and seeing dramatic increases in participation coupled with improved health outcomes. With up to 50% participation even without financial incentives, an average weight loss of seven pounds per employee and 90% employee satisfaction, employers are using social games to tackle employee wellness head-on and are achieving impressive results. According to Susan Rapoport, wellness manager at the Cleveland Clinic, which has been participating in social games on the ShapeUp wellness platform for the past three years, friendly competition “has inspired

thousands of Cleveland Clinic employees to get involved and get active.”

Over 75% of large employers today offer financial incentives to drive employee engagement in their wellness programs.¹ But a growing number are discovering that social health games can help them achieve better and more sustainable results by leveraging social incentives like friendly competition and peer support. As more employers join the fun, health games are sure to continue evolving over time. And they’ll keep improving as we learn more about how to take the same principles that make video games so immersive and addictive and apply them toward a healthy mission. We’re just beginning to tap into the potential of this approach to transform the well-being of large populations, but given the early results, it seems likely that employers will keep getting their (health) game on.



Footnotes

¹Annual Large Employer Wellness Survey, ShapeUp, December 2011

²15th Annual National Business Group on Health/Towers Watson Employer Survey on Purchasing Value in Health Care, March 2010

³Wellness engagement efforts must change; here’s how to make it happen, Employee Benefit Adviser, October 2011

⁴Employee Perspectives on Health Care, Part II: Employee Engagement, Towers Watson, February 2011

⁵16th Annual Towers Watson/National Business Group on Health Employer Survey on Purchasing Value in Health Care

⁶Aon Hewitt 2011 Health Care Survey

⁷Xbox Game To Help Combat PTSD, redOrbit, January 2011

⁸Report: 13K iPhone consumer health apps in 2012; mobihealthnews, September 2011

More Information

context

[communication consulting]

For help crafting your employee communication and change management strategy, visit contextcommunication.com.



To learn more about how you can use health games to supercharge your employee wellness program, visit www.shapeup.com.

