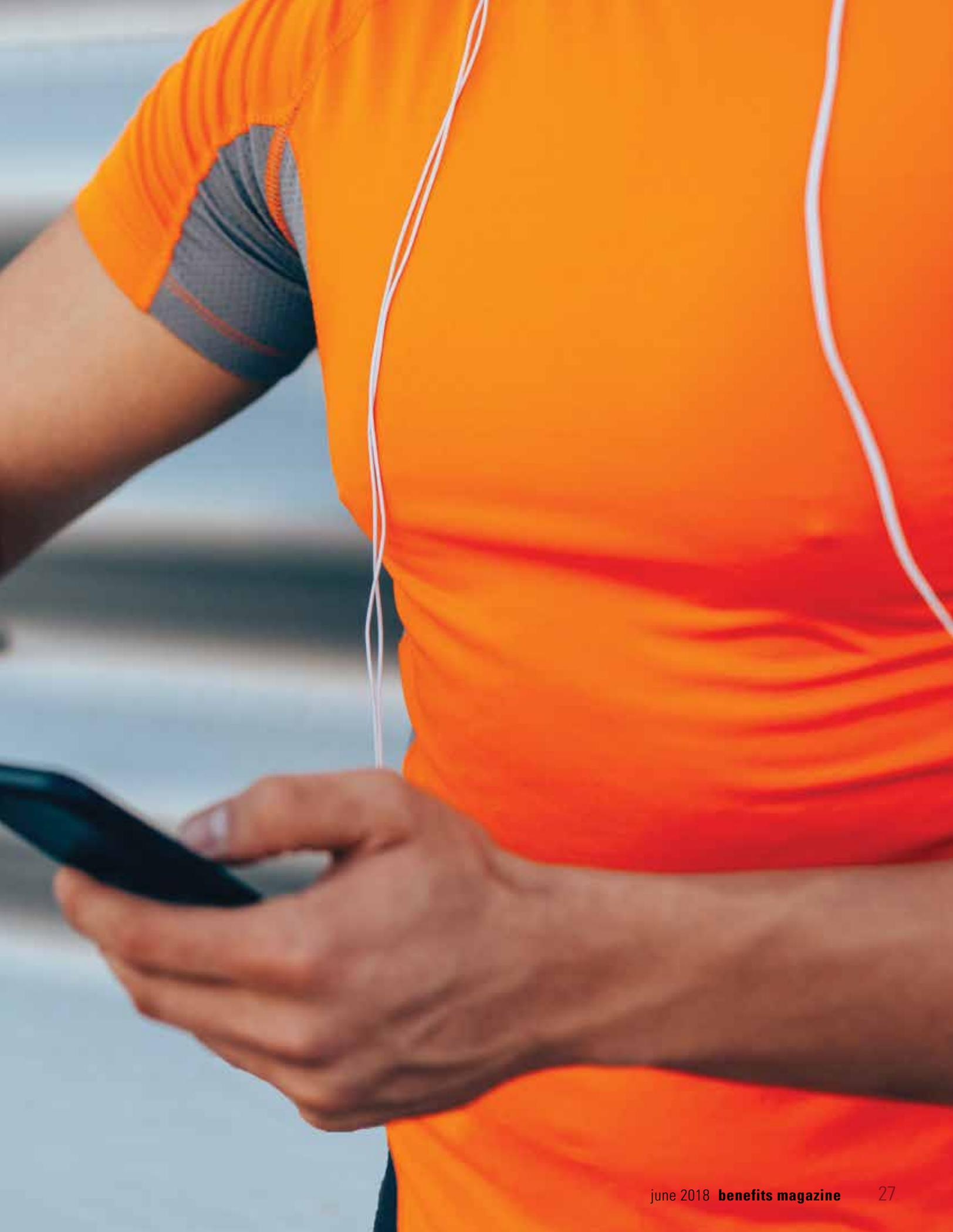


15 Technology Trends That Can Elevate Your Wellness Program

by | **Anna Mittag**

Technology such as wearables and wellness apps can boost wellness program participation and engagement. This article identifies 15 technology trends that have the potential to improve wellness programs.



When you envision the ideal wellness program, what comes to mind? Easy and immediate access to top health care providers? Incentives that are both desirable and affordable? A 100% employee participation rate? Most likely all of the above—and then some. Plan sponsors want to offer a program that’s robust yet cost-efficient, accessible yet secure. The latest breakthroughs in digital technology can make these goals more easily achievable.

Technology May Be One Answer to Several Problems

Budgetary constraints can be a significant roadblock to building an ideal wellness program. But that’s not the only issue. Organizations struggle to find quick and efficient ways to update and disseminate benefits information, especially when employees are scattered across vast geographical distances. It’s also challenging to provide a variety of wellness content that sufficiently addresses the needs of employees of different ages and cultural backgrounds and who may have specific mental and/or physical health concerns. Fortunately, advancements in technology such as cloud computing, wearable devices and on-demand streaming may offer a practical solution.

An increasing number of employers have already incorporated wellness apps, fitness devices, podcasts, chatbots and video content into their wellness plans. In fact, a 2017 study conducted by Springbuk revealed that 35% of employers are already using wearables in their programs, which is a 10% increase in just two years. This technology is starting to infiltrate the workplace because it’s relatively simple to manage, leverages technology that employees already own (smartphones, smartwatches, tablets, etc.), scales readily and delivers positive results. For instance, some employers are using wearable devices to prevent workplace injuries. When an employee attempts to lift a heavy object in a manner that might cause pain or injury, a device can warn them to stop. Regardless of what specific outcomes employers have in mind, the general trend is that employees who are engaged in their wellness program tend to have lower levels of stress and anxiety, take fewer sick days and are more productive at work.¹

What’s in Store for 2018

There’s no doubt that these technology trends will continue this year, alongside the emergence of new innovations.

Specifically, wellness benefit programs will be affected by technology in the following ways.

1. **Nonstop access.** Technology is allowing employees to bring workplace wellness home with them in the form of videos, podcasts, apps and other portable resources. This means they can continue to pursue their health goals outside of work and can even get their family and friends involved. Studies have shown people are more likely to maintain healthy habits if they have a strong network of support, so this ability to partake in a wellness program with loved ones will be a crucial development.
2. **More ubiquitous solutions.** The Internet of Things is amalgamating more and more aspects of our lives. Mobile phones, laptops, tablets, watches and even refrigerators can all “talk” to each other. As such, human resources (HR) and employee benefits professionals will be able to leverage this hyperconnectivity to collect increasingly accurate data and provide greater support. For example, transportation companies can use trackers to monitor the location of long-distance drivers and notify them through their mobile devices when they are close to a recreational facility so they can counteract the effects of sitting all day.
3. **Increased popularity of wearable devices.** The ball is already rolling in this field, and it will likely gain momentum in 2018. Fitness trackers and smartwatches make it easy for employees to receive real-time feedback regarding their health which, in turn, assists employers in determining the most suitable health resources to provide their staff.
4. **Rise of chatbots.** Another effective way of gathering accurate data while serving employees more efficiently is through the use of chatbots. *Chatbots* are automated tools that can answer general questions to point employees in the right direction. The information collected during those sessions can be used to gauge the effectiveness of communications and improve the selection of available benefits. For instance, if dozens of employees keep asking the same question about therapy coverage, HR may need to add more mental health services to their benefits package and/or better explain what types of therapy are covered.
5. **Integration across platforms.** Various facets of wellness programs, including contact information for

health care providers, resources regarding specific health conditions, benefits and coverage literature, and so forth, no longer have to be siloed. A couple of things are happening. First, organizations are starting to compile resources in one place to simplify access for employees. Second, providers are integrating their solutions with one another, so data can be exchanged more quickly and efficiently.

6. **Better support for off-site employees.** The rise of the gig economy is pushing employers to find new ways of supporting employees who don't work in a traditional environment. Telecommuters, freelance contractors and staff on flexible schedules can expect to see more engaging wellness options to help them feel more connected to organizations. More and more organizations are starting to incorporate live health web chats that employees can join from any location. In addition, digital HR solutions can help off-site employees receive feedback and resolve issues.
7. **Focus on mental health.** Forward-thinking employers are helping their workers reduce stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions by providing access to resources like videos, podcasts and tip sheets on these and many other topics. Digital technology is especially powerful when it comes to mental health because it offers employees complete privacy and anonymity.
8. **Prioritizing sleep.** An overwhelming amount of scientific evidence proving the importance of sufficient sleep is prompting employers to accommodate napping on the job. Similarly, sleep apps that track metrics like the exact amount of time spent sleeping, quality of sleep and so forth can provide employees with valuable insights on how to get better rest and, therefore, be more alert when they arrive at the office.
9. **Better incentives and rewards.** While cash and gift cards remain popular motivators, digital technology is opening the door to more options for driving participation and engagement, including a wider selection of memberships, passes, discounts and trips. It's also now easier for employee benefit and HR teams to distribute these rewards; there are several apps on the market that can handle the whole process.
10. **More gamification.** In conjunction with augmented rewards, gamification will keep growing as a tool for

boosting employee participation. Wellness technology will become more fun and engaging for employees to use by incorporating features like "unlocking" prizes and "beating" levels to foster feelings of competition, growth and achievement.

11. **Heightened personalization.** The types of content available to each employee will continue to become more customizable so that instead of being inundated with irrelevant resources, employees can choose to see only the information most pertinent to their lives. Well-being content is also growing increasingly specific, with entire programs dedicated to helping employees manage a single condition or disease. For instance, more programs are offering features like reminders to take medication or videos demonstrating stretching techniques to address a particular source of pain. This personalization isn't just for staff, either; wellness program providers are also adapting their solutions for different organizations based on number of employees, location(s), budget and staff demographics.
12. **More frequent communication.** Thanks to push notifications and alerts on mobile devices, it's now easier for HR and benefits teams to keep employees continuously engaged and aware of their benefits. While 62% of employers report that they provide wellness programs, just 40% of employees say their organizations offer them, according to the Transamerica Center for Health Studies 2017 consumer and employer surveys. Mobile and digital technology will help to bridge that gap. This should lead to more employees staying informed and, inevitably, to greater adoption rates.

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Laura Putnam. Wiley. 2015.

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takeaways

- Advancements in technology such as cloud computing, wearable devices and on-demand streaming may offer a practical solution for employers looking for a cost-effective and efficient way to increase wellness program participation.
- Wearable devices such as fitness trackers and smartwatches make it easy for employees to receive real-time feedback regarding their health and assist employers in determining the most suitable health resources to provide their staff.
- Digital solutions can be particularly effective in providing mental health resources because they offer privacy and anonymity.
- Gamification is expected to continue to grow as a tool to boost employee participation in wellness programs.
- Employers considering digital wellness tools should ensure they comply with data storage, security and nondisclosure regulations to protect privacy.
- Employees have varying levels of comfort with technology and should receive introductory and ongoing support in the use of digital wellness tools.

13. Trustworthy analytics. Gone are the days when HR and benefits teams were forced to rely on anecdotal data regarding employee perception and use of wellness programs. Digital technology allows for unparalleled precision in determining who is using which resources and where, how and why they access them.

14. Social interaction. Apps aren't just great for connecting staff to well-being programs; they're also a handy tool for connecting staff to each other. An increasing number of wellness apps encourage employees to share their progress and cheer each other on, whether it's a step challenge, a campaign to eat healthier or even Bring Your Pet to Work Day. Including social aspects in a well-being program increases engagement and camaraderie, which results in better health outcomes.²

15. Improved automation. Digital technology is putting the "human" back in human resources by automating the redundant tasks that distract from what the job is really about: helping employees. Communications, content management, rewards administration, answering frequently asked questions and so on can be handled by apps and chatbots to free up staff time.

If you're champing at the bit to start exploring various ways to incorporate technology into your wellness program, there are a couple of issues to consider first.

The first is security. Wellness programs almost inevitably require the collection and storage of sensitive employee data. Many of the trends previously mentioned rely on cloud computing and, as such, require ironclad cybersecurity provisions. Work closely with your program providers to ensure they comply with regulations surrounding data storage, security and nondisclosure so you can avoid putting staff at risk.

The best rule is to minimize the data flowing to and from third parties, so make sure any data you send a third party is absolutely necessary. You can also look for programs that don't require any personal data but still provide benefits to individuals. A great example would be a program that focuses on well-being education. If the program is robust and full of content on various wellness topics, users can search for information themselves. This eliminates the need to share data with a third party in order to push relevant content to users.

Another contingency involves figuring out how to keep employee well-being content up to date and how to communicate these changes to employees. This is an ongoing task and must therefore be approached in a sustainable and efficient manner. Turnkey wellness solutions are available on a price-per-employee basis to manage security, maintenance and communications.

Best Practices to Ensure Success

Don't assume employees will participate in well-being programs just because you asked them to. Research by the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans discovered 39% of survey respondents said finding time to use a wellness program was the biggest barrier they faced in taking advantage of their benefits. Make sure accessing your wellness program is as quick and painless as possible so employees enjoy the experience and willingly continue to use it.

Another point to consider is the fact that employees have varying levels of comfort with technology. Some will be able to pick up an app or a wearable device and run with it, while others will need hands-on training. Provide introductory and ongoing support to make sure all employees are fully educated on how the program works, and let them know they can always come to you for assistance.

Lastly, don't forget to keep track of usage metrics pertaining to which services are being accessed, when and by whom. Some wellness program providers will collect this data for you, and they can keep it anonymous to protect the privacy of employees. Knowing this information will help you understand which parts of the program are working well, which need tweaking and which might require a total overhaul.

For those employers wanting to promote usage and limit risks around compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), don't worry about who is accessing the program so much as how much the group overall is accessing it. By doing so, the anonymity alone might boost a person's likelihood of using the

program, and you won't have sensitive data on exactly who did what and when.

Employee well-being and HR technology is constantly advancing. Employers that incorporate more mobile and digital technology into their wellness programs may have a leg up in improving employee well-being, engagement, productivity and motivation while reducing turnover and absenteeism. 📌

Endnotes

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