A bout half of employees everywhere admit they don’t read the beautiful and well-written communications from the benefits office, and only 55% of them believe what they read, according to Kathryn Yates, global practice leader, communication and change management, at Towers Watson in Chicago, Illinois. Do the math, and it’s clear that benefits professionals are challenged to find innovative ways to reach and influence employees on their physical and financial well-being.

“When is the last time you heard employees say, ‘I like to hear about my benefits,’ ‘I have a greater appreciation for my benefits,’ ‘I have taken healthy actions?’” asks Dana Hurley, formerly a senior consultant for Towers Watson in New York, New York. At a FUJIFILM factory in Bedford, Massachusetts, 97% of those who completed a survey said they like to hear about benefits, 91% appreciate them more and 89% said they took healthy actions after a benefits game was introduced and immediately became popular.

Towers Watson’s research “tells us that for your employees, the way they feel about their benefits is a major influencer in how they feel about the deal of working at your company,” said Yates. “One of the top global drivers on sustainable engagement is an employee feeling that leadership has their well-being in mind, that they feel the company cares about them as a whole person.” That matters to the productivity of the company and attraction and retention of top talent.

Towers Watson has researched and consults with employers on how using marketing and storytelling, segmenting audiences, incentives, social norms and social networking, behavioral economics and entertainment, games and game mechanics can increase communication engagement.

Carolyn Gordon, director of benefits at FUJIFILM Holdings America Corporation in Valhalla, New York, said she was highly skeptical that social gaming could be used to engage employees in FUJIFILM facilities. But she and her team had a wellness program in place, communications and incentives. “We were doing everything else we should have been doing,” but the company’s workforce—older and diverse, from sales people to manufacturing all over the country—had many health problems. Historically, the company had high disability and catastrophic illness costs, and logistics also posed a hurdle. Some employees travel a lot and don’t eat well.

FUJIFILM is a Japanese company and tends to be more conservative in its approaches. “We’re definitely not the Yahoo of the world,” Gordon said. But she and her team saw statistics from other organizations that showed gaming worked and hired Towers Watson and Airbo to design a simple game.

The main goals were to increase participation in the health assessment, which stood at 17%, and promote the adoption of healthy behaviors and engagement in the incentive rewards program, Gordon said.

Among the challenges was that many people didn’t have smartphones or even flip phones.

FUJIFILM started small, piloting at the Massachusetts factory where the human resource (HR) manager is enthusiastic and has a good relationship with employees, Gordon said. “If she can’t get people to do something, it can’t be done.”

A very simple game called HealthFocus involved colored tiles with attention-catching headlines that in the pilot com-
communicated healthy behaviors and promoted the wellness program. Printed tiles were put up at different spots around the facility and could also be accessed online.

Employees received a postcard telling them three ways they could choose to play the game: text, e-mail or go online to report what was written on the tile—for example, “It pays to be healthy.” They would receive a health message back via text, e-mail or online and would receive points for playing. Gordon said it took only a few minutes—time well spent as people engaged in and learned about the health programs. Employees received knowledge in bite-sized pieces.

During the pilot, Gordon said 65% of employees played the game, and 60% were signed up by a fellow employee. They had more than 4,500 interactions about healthy eating, exercising, etc. “We’ve never gotten that kind of success. We usually are happy with 30%.” About 75% interacted with at least one piece of the communication, and 85% added mobile numbers to their accounts.

Many employees at that plant don’t speak English, but they took the game home and had their children help them. Gordon added that many employees are Vietnamese, and “everyone listens to the two people in the plant who speak English.” The company got good participation in the game from that group. Kiosks with computers are available in all facilities, people have e-mail accounts and nearly all have a computer at home. Many played the game on their phones.

“There was great buzz around this,” Gordon said. “We interacted with people in an entirely different way, and they appreciated it. And we could suddenly track how many people were actually looking at print communications.”

After the pilot, the game was rolled out to all FUJIFILM employees during the annual enrollment period. That round of the game focused on changes for the coming year and making sure people enrolled on time. Employees said they liked to use texting and appreciated the innovative approach.

The results of the first “all-employee” rollout in the fall of 2012 were that 1,047 new players joined the game, and 435 of them were signed up by a fellow employee. One-third of the eligible population participated and interacted with the game over 32,000 times. The health assessment completion rate jumped from 17% in 2011 to 54% in 2012. Women were slightly more likely to participate than men, and employees aged 35-44 were slightly more likely to participate, although employees aged 45-54 were the largest age group playing.

In January 2013, FUJIFILM did a wellness round for four weeks, with a different theme and topic for each week. This time, the game integrated short, simple videos created using an iPhone. The videos were of employees talking about the theme, and a link was sent with a game prompt to employees who could earn ten points for watching the video. People also could comment on the videos. A video of the receptionist was watched 817 times by 723 people. “She talked a long time, and people watched the whole thing,” Gordon said. “It created this spark that rippled through the whole organization.” About 1,186 employees participated and sent in 126,044 wellness interactions.

Gordon said FUJIFILM then did a four-week round on financial education, a topic in which the company generally couldn’t get much interest. The company partnered with Prudential, creating posters with game prompts. People received “push message” tiles promoting Prudential tools and resources. There were videos, tutorials and podcasts. The game resulted in 746 people clicking a link to a podcast, and 96% of those who responded to a survey said that after play-
ing, they had a greater appreciation for FUJIFILM’s retirement and planning benefits. In addition, 72% reviewed and updated their retirement contributions.

After eight rounds of HealthFocus, people were talking about it with friends, learning and having fun at work, Gordon said. Now, FUJIFILM is exploring ways to incorporate HealthFocus into everyday communications. For instance, if the HR manager in Bedford is planning a fitness walk, she could send out a tile about it.

Social gaming is part of what Towers Watson sees as a full communication strategy, Yates said. “It’s a way to bring a little fun and engagement into something that’s very difficult to get people to read and engage with.”

“You’d be surprised at who’s playing games. It’s not just for kids anymore,” said Brennan McCarthy, a director at Towers Watson. Two-thirds of American households play games, and 40% of all players are women. Adult women represent a greater portion of the game-playing population (33%) than boys aged 17 or younger (20%). In fact, 42% of heads of households report they play games on wireless devices.

Vlad Gyster, CEO of Airbo (formerly H.Engage) in Boston, Massachusetts, said he thinks gaming is affordable for small organizations with fewer than 150 people. Different employee cultures require different approaches. Early on, Gyster said, his firm learned what can happen when scores are made public. Yahoo wanted a game where everyone could see all the scores in a game, so Gyster built a huge scoreboard. The scoreboard “almost crashed our system because people were looking at it so much,” he said. Yahoo has 6,000 employees, but perhaps 200 of them were crashing the system. Some people are what gamers call “killers,” who will do anything to win and are disproportionately engaged.

“We found that a scoreboard was bad; it actually disengaged 97% of the population,” Gordon said. “So we gave the option that if people didn’t want to be on the scoreboard, they didn’t have to be. That’s important for introverts; they’re there to learn.”

The game at FUJIFILM helps introverts because there are all different kinds of incentives built into rounds. At the two-week point, people could win a prize. There was a grand prize for finding all the tiles, which rewards the behavior of going out and seeking knowledge. To spike activity midweek, push messages were sent weekly and people could win an umbrella. During the financial round, the company gave out calculators. Most prizes were worth less than $10.

Although iPads and high-value stuff work well, Gyster said that “things like the umbrella become a status thing.”

Gordon said that FUJIFILM had a −5% medical trend in 2013 and a 0% trend in 2012. The previous year, it had had a 12% trend. It has saved more than $5 million in its $565 million medical budget, and the company continues to see positive interactions.

Chris Vogel, CEBS, wrote this article based on a presentation at the 32nd Annual ISCEBS Employee Benefits Symposium last fall in Boston, Massachusetts. The 33rd Annual Symposium is September 7-10 in Phoenix, Arizona. Visit www.ifebp.org/symposium for more information.