

# Find the *Right Fit* for Your Employee Fitness Program

by | Carrie Donnell

Considering issues such as worker fitness levels, preferences, cultures and abilities can help employers design more inclusive and effective employee fitness programs.

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**W**orkers who are balancing work, family and personal time often struggle to make room for fitness. For many, the challenge isn't a lack of interest but finding programs that fit into their unique routines and energy levels.

Specific fitness programs may face employee resistance since not every initiative is a fit for every worker. Issues such as low engagement or accessibility concerns related to varying employee needs are common.

That's where flexible, inclusive and scalable fitness programs come into play. A scalable program can grow and adapt to meet both organizational and individual needs. For employers, scalability means they can start small and expand offerings as participation increases or budgets allow. For employees, it means being able to choose activities that match their personal fitness levels, schedules and goals. When programs scale in both directions, workplaces and the people in them see lasting benefits.

### Scalability and Flexibility

In practice, scalability doesn't mean offering *every possible option* but

rather selecting the mix of resources that works best for a given workforce. Some employers may lean on traditional choices, such as on-site fitness classes, online wellness platforms or discounted gym memberships. Others may find that a hybrid or rotating approach (combining virtual programs with in-person opportunities) better suits their employees.

For example, one company may run on-site classes and provide wearable devices to encourage healthy competition. Another may keep things simpler by offering a subsidized wellness app and periodic team step challenges. The mix doesn't need to be the same everywhere.

The key is flexibility: Employers don't need to provide all options at once but should ensure that there are accessible choices that meet varying employee attributes, while also addressing potential barriers.

### Varying Attributes

Every team is made up of individuals with unique characteristics and needs, including the following.

- **Fitness levels:** While some employees may engage in little to no physical activity, others may reg-

ularly participate in sports or attend the gym, and some fall somewhere in between.

- **Preferences:** Some employees thrive on group challenges, while others prefer solo activities or mindfulness practices.
- **Work model:** Many employers have adopted a hybrid work model, which means they might want to consider programs that allow workers to participate online and in person.
- **Culture:** Different cultures can influence how individuals perceive various activities. While some cultures may appreciate yoga or meditative practices, others may prefer dance or sports classes.

### Barriers to Participation

The varying obstacles that employees face should also be considered, including the following.

- **Time constraints:** Some employees may have fewer obligations, while others may have second jobs or children and aging family members to care for, which occupies a significant portion of their time.
- **Lack of access to facilities:** Employees without a car or those living far away from a facility that's part of their wellness program may be dissuaded from participating.
- **Financial limitations:** If the fitness program includes a discounted gym membership or spa treatment, some employees may not have the funds to afford these expenses, which means the program favors employees who earn more.

## takeaways

- Specific workplace fitness programs may face employee resistance since not every initiative is a fit for every worker. Issues such as low engagement or accessibility concerns related to varying employee needs are common.
- Employers don't need to provide all options at once but should ensure that there are accessible choices that meet varying employee attributes while also addressing potential barriers.
- Employee characteristics to consider when designing a fitness program include fitness levels, activity preferences, work model and culture. Employers should also take into account barriers to participation, such as time constraints, lack of access to facilities and financial limitations.
- Collecting data through health risk assessments, fitness wearables and apps, and surveys can help employers determine which fitness offerings will best serve their employees.

## How Workplaces Can Scope Employee Fitness Program Needs

To determine which fitness offerings will best serve their employees, employers can consider several options to help them gather personalized employee data, including the following.

### *Employee Surveys and Focus Groups*

Employers can distribute surveys or hold group sessions to gather insights into employee health and identify potential obstacles they may encounter to help them develop targeted solutions. Questions could include:

- Do they prefer a meditation group or a gym membership?
- What barriers (e.g., cost, time, accessibility) do they face in using the program?
- What are their goals? Would they prefer a wellness program that also supports their mental health and social well-being?

### *Anonymized Health Risk Assessments*

Voluntary health risk assessments (HRAs) allow employers to collect broad data on employee health status, lifestyle and behaviors to help shape a more relevant fitness program. These assessments are typically short, confidential questionnaires and sometimes include optional biometric screenings (e.g., blood pressure or cholesterol checks). Ultimately, an HRA is designed to identify common health risks and wellness priorities across the workforce.

For example, if many employees report high stress levels, the program could include mindfulness or stress-reduction support. If mobility concerns are common, employers might add adaptive or low-impact activities.

It's essential to ensure that HRAs remain compliant with privacy regulations, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the United States or the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) in Canada, so employees feel secure participating.

### *Wearables and App Integration*

With employees' permission, employers that offer wearable devices or fitness apps can passively track health data such as heart rate, daily steps or sleep duration. Many smartwatches and fitness platforms also integrate with wellness dashboards, allowing employers to more easily visualize overall trends.

## Emerging Trends in Workplace Fitness Programs

Employers should try to stay ahead of trends to keep their programs engaging and competitive. Key trends to watch include the following.

### **Micro- and On-Demand Workouts**

Short and easy exercises that can be integrated into an employee's fitness program can encourage movement without disrupting their work. Five-minute walks between meetings, standing leg lifts, or desk stretches can help improve muscle flexibility and reduce stiffness. Employers can encourage participation by building these breaks into the workday. Examples might include scheduling brief stretch reminders, having leaders model the behavior or creating lighthearted challenges that make movement part of the culture.

### **Holistic Wellness Integration**

Bundling fitness programs with holistic features, such as nutrition coaching, healthy tips or sleep tracking, helps encourage a whole-person approach.

### **Personalization Features**

Employers investigating virtual platforms might consider those that offer personalization options. For example, employees might set personal goals—such as increasing daily steps, logging mindfulness minutes or participating in a nutrition challenge—and choose the type of rewards they find most motivating, such as digital badges, gift cards or extra time off. By allowing employees to shape their own goals and incentives, participation and engagement naturally improve.

### **Gamification and Social Challenges**

Fitness programs incorporate various gamification features to encourage participation and competition. Leaderboards, badges and team challenges transform fitness into a social and engaging experience. Team members can compete against one another, promoting camaraderie and accountability as they work toward their goals. For example, employers might set up a step-count challenge between departments, a points-based leaderboard for completed workouts, or a friendly walking challenge where teams try to "walk" across a virtual map together.

As companies adopt these innovations, selecting platforms with robust data privacy and security safeguards helps establish trust with employees.



Aggregate data helps employers spot issues to target. For example, if employees are averaging 1,000 steps daily, employers could develop programs to increase the step count.

### Key Components of Inclusive and Scalable Fitness Programs

An inclusive and scalable fitness program should consider offerings that address accessibility and adaptability, financial constraints and cultural preferences to ensure that it benefits every employee and no one is left out.

#### *Accessibility and Adaptability*

The following options may provide access to fitness for any employee, whether they work remotely or have physical limitations.

- Virtual, on-demand and in-person options, such as recorded workouts, live-streamed classes or ergonomic desk exercises, made available either at the workplace or remotely
- Low-impact and adaptive activities tailored for employees with disabilities or chronic conditions offered on site or through accessible online programs
- Specialized equipment and assistive devices provided in workplace facilities or in the employee's home with purchases financed through employer subsidies or stipends. This would allow employees who use wheelchairs or have mobility limitations to take part in activities such as swimming, cycling or weight training, supporting both flexibility and independence.

#### *Financial and Logistical Flexibility*

Employers have several options for programs that can be adjusted to meet employees' different financial circumstances and can choose the level of support they provide

based on budgets and workforce needs. Examples include the following.

- **Subsidized gym memberships:** Employers can cover part or all of the cost, depending on what employees can afford and the employer's budget.
- **Reimbursements for fitness apps:** Employees can select their preferred app, with the option for partial or full reimbursement.
- **Home equipment stipends:** Employees could receive a flexible allowance (one-time or recurring) to cover purchases ranging from small essentials, such as resistance bands, to large needs, such as ergonomic chairs.

These options ensure that employees with limited financial resources aren't excluded, while giving employers room to tailor benefits to their budget.

#### *Generational and Cultural Preferences*

To engage broader demographics, employers may want to consider incorporating diverse activities and fitness options, including the following.

- **Dance classes:** Options including Salsa, Bollywood dance or Afrobeats can help reflect employees' cultural backgrounds and promote participation.
- **Sports leagues:** Older employees may prefer sports that have reduced risk of injuries, such as golf. While younger employees may enjoy golf as well, they may also choose more active, fast-paced sports, such as pickleball.
- **Walking challenges:** Unique walking challenges, such as a "scavenger hunt" walk, are ideal since walking is an easily accessible form of fitness.

### Mental Health Integration

A fitness program is beneficial for ensuring employees remain in good physical shape, which can help prevent issues associated with prolonged sitting, such as hunched posture and back problems. Incorporating a mental health component, such as stress reduction activities (e.g., mindfulness breaks or relaxation techniques), can further the impact of the fitness program.

### Encouraging Participation

Even the best-designed program requires engagement strategies. Employers can promote adoption by integrating activities into the workday, offering small incentives (such as wellness points or gift cards), and encouraging leaders to

## learn more

### Education

**35th Annual Health Benefits Conference & Expo (HBCE)**  
January 20-22, 2026, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida  
Visit [www.ifebp.org/hbce](http://www.ifebp.org/hbce) for more information.

### Annual Wellness Summit

**July 28-30, 2026, Nashville, Tennessee**  
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participate alongside employees. Showing employees how the program benefits them personally is often the most effective driver of participation.

## Implementing and Measuring Success

Once businesses implement a fitness program for their employees, they can track its success and gather feedback to make improvements. The key methods for measuring success and making adjustments include the following.

- **Employee surveys and feedback loops:** Surveys or focus groups (similar to gathering initial data for implementing a fitness program) allow a regular assessment of needs and preferences.
- **Data-driven adjustments:** Key engagement metrics, including participation rates, progress analytics, leaderboards and satisfaction surveys, help guide program changes and enhancements.
- **Leadership buy-in and communication:** Employers can observe whether employees respond well to leadership discussing and actively participating in the program, or if they respond better to company-wide, custom challenges sent to their emails.
- **Return-on-investment (ROI) considerations:** Employers can look at whether they are seeing reduced

bio



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absenteeism, lower health care claims and improved morale.

## Building a Fitness Program for All

The modern workforce is more diverse than ever, spanning generations, cultures, abilities and work arrangements. Traditional, rigid fitness programs often fail to meet employee needs, leaving many behind due to financial barriers, cultural mismatches or accessibility gaps. The solution may lie in flexible, inclusive and scalable fitness programs that prioritize personalization and adaptability. 📌



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