

benefits

MAGAZINE

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Many workplace fitness programs were already in need of a makeover as employees' needs and tastes have changed. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shift to remote work also should be considered when designing a program.

Stretch and Strengthen Your Employee Fitness Program

by | **Jason Von Bank** and **Jen Zygmunt**

The American workplace is evolving. Millennials make up the largest portion of the workforce, but the mix of other generations along with growing national and ethnic diversity means employers have to be thoughtful about everything from workplace culture to well-being benefits. Simply put, the way employees address their health is changing, and keeping up with that change requires a growing level of flexibility from employers that want to foster a healthy workforce.

Fitness or exercise programs are one aspect of workplace well-being that may not have a one-size-fits-all solution. To drive long-term engagement with fitness, employers may want to consider an approach that works as well for Baby Boomers who are used to hitting the gym as it does for younger employees who have grown accustomed to using technology to call a ride, order a burger or find a date, all on their own schedule. Initiatives need to appeal to both men and women. And they need to reach employees at a wide range of income and interest levels. Employers may also want to consider whether their programs serve the needs of the increas-

ing number of employees who are now working from home due to COVID-19.

Designing a program that fits all of these needs is a significant task, but as workplace diversity has grown, so too has the range of options available to employers. A growing number of fitness options address a diverse set of interests, but that leaves employers with the unenviable task of determining which options truly drive engagement and which are as appealing as the odor of a well-used gym bag.

Tried and True

Maybe the most familiar of these options is the gym membership reimbursement. Whether employers pay memberships outright or reimburse employees who hit the gym a set number of times each month, the reasoning is simple: Exercise is foundational to well-being because it benefits the mind as much as the body, but people sometimes need a push to exercise more. By tying membership reimbursement to gym attendance, employers hope to provide that push.

The reality is somewhat more complicated, however. Consider, for example, that 43.7% of gym members work

out fewer than four times a month after six months of membership.¹ Or that gyms simply aren't what they used to be in the eyes of employees. Younger generations are more likely to forgo free weights and rows of treadmills in favor of more specialized options, from kickboxing to cycling-specific studios to yoga, boxing or barre.² Those employees might work out four times or more a month, but they might do it in four different places. What's more, reimbursement programs offer no benefit for employees who prefer to get their exercise by biking or running outdoors.

As a result, gym reimbursement doesn't often work out as well as employers hope. Anecdotally, the authors know that such programs generate only 2% to 5% engagement. So, while reimbursements may work for smaller populations, such programs may be ill-suited for reaching the majority of the workforce with a solution that fits their lives.

All of that is true in the best of times. However, the COVID-19 pandemic complicated and changed many aspects of workplace well-being, including fitness, nutrition and mindfulness programs. Consider that as recently as late April, a majority³ of people in the United States said fitness clubs should not reopen, and half⁴ said they would not return even if facilities did open their doors. If that reluctance lingers or if clubs are forced to close again due to a second COVID-19 surge, gym reimbursements may further suffer as an effective tool for engaging employees in their well-being.

Workday Workouts

For employers with the space and the money, offering an on-site fitness

takeaways

- The range of fitness options available for workplace wellness programs has evolved.
- Gym membership reimbursements are a popular option for worker fitness programs but may not meet the needs of employees who want a variety of fitness options, those who choose to bike or run outdoors, or employees with disabilities.
- On-site fitness facilities help employees fit workouts into their daily routine but can be expensive.
- Technical tools such as fitness trackers can help motivate employees and help employers measure the success of their fitness programs.
- On-demand virtual fitness programs can help people exercise on their own schedule and incorporate options such as mindfulness and nutrition. They also can address the needs of employees who are working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

facility is another popular—and often effective—option. By one estimate, 92% of employers that offer on-site fitness centers say the facilities help them stay competitive when it comes to attracting and retaining top talent, and 40% to 45% of employees who have access to on-site fitness choose to participate.⁵ There is clearly an audience for such amenities. Nearly 78% of employees say they would work out more if they had access to a gym at work, and 40% say they would even enjoy mandatory workday exercise breaks.⁶

An office gym takes some of the scheduling pressure out of getting a workout in, which removes one of the most common excuses for not working out.⁷ And midday exercise has benefits beyond weight loss. Workday workouts may help relieve workplace stress and help build social connections between employees.⁸ They can even boost productivity.

But office gyms have a cost, both in the space they take up and the expense of buying and maintaining equipment. Employers that want to offer group fitness classes may have to hire instructors and offer enough variety to appeal to employees who likely aren't all interested in the same types of classes. There are ways to address those challenges, of course. With just a screen and a stable internet connection, employers can use on-demand, virtual fitness classes to give employees access to hundreds of workouts presented by engaging, expert instructors. That means employers could offer yoga on Monday, high-intensity interval training on Tuesday and mindfulness on Wednesday, all without the hassle or cost of hiring multiple instructors.

Virtual instruction also means employers can make workday classes accessible to the approximately 36.8% of employees with at least a bachelor's degree who work from home at least part of the time.⁹ With many companies considering making remote work the new norm, that number is likely to grow, making virtual instruction even more important.

Tech Tools

The growth of on-demand, virtual fitness mirrors an overall growth of technology use in the population's workout plans. In fact, an estimated 60% of employees say they use some form of technology to manage their fitness.¹⁰ That includes fitness trackers like Fitbit bands or Apple Watches that give users detailed pictures of their overall health or even high-tech clothing that records fitness data. Those tools also have the benefit of generating data that employers can use to measure employee participation in well-

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being activities, providing hard data for measuring program engagement.

Some employers have even started offering fitness trackers and other technology tools to employees to encourage participation in well-being efforts, but such programs tend to be very expensive.

Employees' interest in fitness technology carries through to the way they choose to work out. Increasingly, employees are turning to virtual solutions to manage their overall well-being.¹¹ In other words, brick-and-mortar gyms are being replaced for many by on-demand, virtual options that allow users to work out anytime, anywhere.¹²

That level of flexibility might be the most important consideration for building a fitness initiative. People want to exercise on their own schedule and in ways that make sense for them. As fitness options expand, it has become increasingly difficult for people to find everything they want in one place. Because of this, organizations that want to foster improved employee well-being would be well-served to support employees with fitness that fits their daily lives. That may mean looking beyond lung-burning workouts to include options like mindfulness and nutrition, finding workouts that are available in the middle of the night, even finding ways to extend well-being benefits to spouses and other family members.

Employees are connecting with virtual fitness offerings in large numbers during the pandemic. Examples include a company that launched a virtual fitness program in April and

tied participation to a \$5,000 corporate donation to the Red Cross. The employer saw 40% employee engagement in the first week. Another saw 4,768 employee log-ins and 10,048 class minutes in the first week after launching its virtual fitness program in late April. A third expanded a virtual fitness program to all employees after previously offering it only to those who worked remotely and saw more than 4,000 app downloads in the first week after expanding eligibility.

Making Workouts Work

Ultimately, there are a few trends to consider for any workplace fitness initiative. Whether they choose to reimburse gym memberships, set up a workout room in the office, or offer employees fitness trackers or a virtual fitness app, these elements will help employers design fitness that works for the greatest number of employees.

Mix It Up

Gym memberships are a great option for people who are dedicated to lifting free weights or who always have the flexibility and time to attend group fitness classes. But most people want more variety than the typical fitness facility can provide. And it can be hard to find something for the entire family—on the same schedule—at the gym. For example, what are the odds of finding the perfect spin class that aligns with a child’s swim lessons and a spouse’s HIIT class?

Variety is key to keeping people from burning out on their fitness plan.¹³ Giving employees access to a broad selection of activities means they will always be able to find something that makes sense for them. Virtual, on-demand fitness content makes it possible to stream video nearly anywhere on earth, helping employees maximize their schedules. In other words, they get the benefits of group fitness without having to rework their schedule to attend. And should they choose, they can create their own group.

Virtual fitness has options for everyone from children to seniors. There are even classes families can take together.

Sweat Isn’t Everything

All-out exercise has its place in a fitness plan, but sticking exclusively to high-intensity activities is a short path to burnout or injury. It’s important to give employees options that address the whole person. For example, stress management classes can help users relax after a challenging workday. Stretching classes help keep muscles and joints ready for or

able to recover from those hard-charging workouts. And nutrition instruction helps users avoid undoing their workout progress with poor food choices. Finally, quick work breaks can help employees stay focused, jump-start creativity and maintain a balanced mood at work—all of which can make them more productive. Employers may also want to consider options that address mental and emotional well-being. Such options are particularly important now, when nearly half of Americans¹⁴ say COVID-19 is harming their mental health, and adults are eight times¹⁵ more likely to screen positive for serious mental illness than they were in 2018.

Make It Personal

The right workplace well-being program meets employees “where they are” on the health improvement continuum. This is also one of the keys to creating a successful fitness program. Employers should look for programs that help workers and their covered dependents make fitness personal by helping them find activities that match both their interests and their ability level.

That’s where machine learning comes in. Machine learning is the “magic” that makes it possible for a fitness app to customize each user’s experience by recommending content or classes that users might like, based on their profile or classes they’ve completed. This makes it easy for people to keep completing classes they enjoy, while steadily progressing to the next level in their fitness journey. These apps also ensure that the journey looks different based on the interests of each employee.

The personalization made possible by this integration of machine learning and similar technology makes sense for the modern workforce. Most employees are already used to getting recommendations from Netflix and other streaming platforms about what to watch next. They can use those same machine-learning capabilities to make sure their workouts truly fit their needs.

Involve the Family

Employee well-being isn’t just about the employee. Given that spouses account for about one-third of costs¹⁶ in employer-sponsored health plans—despite making up just one-fifth of users—extending well-being benefits to family members can have a significant impact on program participation and outcomes. What’s more, past research has shown that individuals are more likely to change their health behaviors

when their spouse makes similar changes.¹⁷ It's easier to commit to a fitness routine, after all, if you have someone at home to keep you accountable. That puts a premium on identifying fitness options that extend beyond the workplace, to the home and community. That might include activities like cooking classes that the entire family can do together. It could also include classes designed to get kids ready for soccer or basketball season, or even meet physical education requirements when COVID-19 has made homeschooling the norm.

Keep Track

Gone are the days of offering gym reimbursements and hoping employees participate. Any well-being resources that employers consider today need to offer seamless integration into the company's benefits or employee portal. This allows employers to track activities completed and wellness incentive points earned while motivating employees to keep working and pushing forward by showing them how far they have come. When participation is easy to measure, it's easier for employers to demonstrate that their workforce is taking advantage of the well-being options available to them and easier to show the value of the company's investment in employee health.

This push for variety and flexibility may seem daunting at times, but keep in mind that the goal remains the same as always: Give employees the tools they need to get and stay healthy. As tools change and technology evolves, providing an increasingly diverse workforce with the options it needs to meet those goals might actually be easier than ever. 🎯

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