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Featured Article

Can Social Media Produce Wellness Results?

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For years, [Chilton Hospital](#) tried to get employees to take better care of themselves.

The northwest New Jersey hospital's human resources staff launched diabetes and other disease management initiatives to improve employee well-being and reduce health care costs. But the resulting behavior changes were minor, and the programs only covered a small number of employees.

That changed, though, when Chilton switched gears to a wellness program that asked employees to get social and competitive.

In March 2011, Chilton entered a countywide fitness challenge where employees vied in teams of six against other local businesses to see who could eat the healthiest, walk the most or drop the most weight. During the 100-day challenge, competitors logged onto a private, Facebook-like social network to share results and cheer each other on. To get employees to participate, the 256-bed hospital offered \$150 to each member of the winning team and \$500 to the employee who shed the most pounds. All told, 56 teams signed up, about 37 percent of the staff. In the end, though, it wasn't the money that drew the workers in. It was the online camaraderie, and the challenge. "People wanted to be on the winning team," says Julie McGovern, Chilton's vice president of administration and HR.

Experiences like Chilton's are playing out across the country as companies rebuild their employee wellness programs on Internet-based social networks that are equal parts health journal, fitness challenge and online support group.

Companies hope the programs will curb escalating costs for health care benefits. In 2008, the first year American Financial Group, or AFG, ran a social media-based walking program through vendor [WalkingSpree](#), the insurance company saved \$9.27 in employee health care costs for every \$1 spent on the program. The insurance company's health care premiums stayed flat that year because employees were healthier, according to a testimonial from AFG, which continues to use the program.

Aside from cutting costs, online-based wellness applications can help retain talent. The programs generally make employees feel better about themselves, and by extension, with the place they work, so they'll stick around longer.

"Employers are starting to recognize that incorporating elements of social media into a wellness program can boost participation and engagement and help create that buzz and culture around health and wellness that traditional engagement" methods aren't generating, says Kristie Howard, a vice president at [Longfellow Benefits](#), a Boston-based benefits consultant.

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Social wellness games represent a confluence of some of today's most significant online and workplace trends. One of the biggest is "gamification," or adding gamelike features to software and other business processes to make them more fun and engaging. Technology analyst Gartner Group predicts that by 2014, [70 percent](#) of the 2,000 largest companies in the world will use at least one "gamified" enterprise software application.

With more companies using internal social networks such as Yammer and Socialtext to improve workforce collaboration, [replace email](#) or streamline other aspects of work, it's easing the way for workplaces to adopt Internet-based platforms for wellness games and challenges. When wellness tech vendor [ShapeUp Inc.](#) polled 351 U.S. corporate wellness executives this spring, 56 percent said that they were using some type of online competition or challenge, and another 40 percent were considering it. "It's a natural migration for wellness programs," says Shawn LaVana, ShapeUp's marketing vice president.

Like other tech innovations that started out as consumer products before migrating to the world of work, many social wellness services had their roots in the personal health care apps that appeared after the iPhone and other smartphones became commonplace. Software as a Service-based internal networks such as ShapeUp let employees chart their progress toward losing weight or getting fit, or to record their standings in team or group challenges. Others such as Walkingspree work with pedometers or other devices that employees wear while working out, and then plug into a PC to download data to an online fitness journal.

As more employees bring smartphones to work, it has become easier for employers to offer wellness games and other social media-based content that can be accessed from a mobile device or laptop or desktop computers. But apps don't have to be that sophisticated. Employees can use ShapeUp, for example, to receive fitness-related text messages on a standard cellphone, a selling point for companies with large contingents of blue-collar workers who don't or can't use a smartphone on the

job.

Enough companies are interested that industry organizations, such as the Society for Human Resource Management, are holding sessions on social media-based wellness programs at various 2012 annual conferences.

Although some companies stick to Facebook and Twitter or corporate blogs for wellness tips and to promote challenges, more employers are paying monthly or yearly subscription fees to outside vendors to run online programs for them.

To run its social wellness program, Chilton chose [Keas](#), a 4-year-old online game platform co-founded by the former head of the now shuttered Google Health. The platform lets employees create profiles, share updates to a Facebook-like news feed, take online health quizzes and keep tabs on their teams and challenges. Wellness program managers use the platform to generate reports on participation, physical activity and other statistics.

During the hospital's first 100-day challenge, 336 employees used the platform to track losing an aggregate 1,230 pounds, eating 8,918 additional servings of fruit and vegetables and putting in 1,274 extra days of exercise, according to McGovern, the facility's administration and HR vice president. "It wasn't just exercise and eating better," she says. "People made a commitment to stop smoking, take stress management classes and control ongoing diseases."

The hospital's already committed to hosting two more challenges this year. But it will take time for the program to affect the hospital's bottom line. To gauge that impact, Chilton is doing free biometric screenings—height, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and body mass index—once every six months for employees who participate in the challenges. "Because if people can keep the weight off, it will ultimately be a positive thing," for them and the company, McGovern says.

Elsewhere, reception of the new generation wellness programs has been strong. In ShapeUp's survey, 75 percent of companies offering some type of online fitness challenge said it had improved employees' perception of their corporate wellness program, and 71 percent said employees were using more wellness resources because of the programs. "It's getting people to take ownership of their health," says Fran Melmed, an employee wellness communications consultant who conducted the survey for ShapeUp.

For some companies, social wellness programs are already paying off. Sprint Nextel Corp. [estimates it saved approximately \\$1.1 million](#) through a companywide fitness challenge launched in 2011 as employees' healthier lifestyles led to fewer medical claims. In the company's first 12-week Sprint Get Fit Challenge, run by ShapeUp and benefits provider OptumHealth, about 16,000 employees in teams of up to 11 lost a collective 41,000 pounds, took more than 4.8 billion steps and logged nearly 22 million exercise minutes, according to the company.

Other employers and social wellness vendors are still calculating the return on investment such products can have. Traditional wellness programs such as Weight Watchers have a head start because of their longevity, Melmed says, but new vendors are taking steps to quantify how well their programs work. ShapeUp and Healthways Inc.'s [MeYou Health](#), for example, are doing studies to compile hard data, she says.

A weight-loss study that ShapeUp conducted in 2009 is one of the first analyses of online-based employee-wellness programs to be published in a peer-reviewed medical or scientific journal. The results are based on data from 3,330 overweight or obese people in 987 teams that completed a 12-week online challenge. The results, published online in March by [Obesity](#), a research journal, support the theory that online programs that let people work out with teammates can help workers lose weight, according to the report.

Despite the advantages social wellness programs offer, some employees worry about their personal information being compromised, says Howard of Longfellow Benefits who helped start the [Worksite Wellness Council of Massachusetts](#) last year. Howard isn't aware of any breaches, "but due to the potential for issues with HIPAA privacy, social media is an area employers and wellness vendors should approach cautiously," she says. Also to avoid privacy issues, social wellness product vendors are being careful to use their platforms to share health and wellness information but not dispense personalized health care advice, Howard says.

Melmed agrees. "Employers should look to insurers and other third parties to help them expand their programs with sensors or devices," she says. "That way the employer gets a better sense of movement, activity or engagement but doesn't get into how many steps Suzy or Jack took today. It makes for an easier, cleaner message to the employee as well."

It may be easy to get employees excited about an eight- or 10-week weight-loss challenge or a one-time companywide biometric screening. But for long-term success, social media-based programs need to be part of a larger commitment, wellness experts say.

In addition to online challenges, a wellness program has to foster ongoing discussion of healthy lifestyles, whether through a digital network, blog, e-newsletter or old-fashioned print materials, says Jennifer Benz, founder of a San Francisco-based employee wellness communications consultancy. Companies also need to offer a healthy work environment, one with fitness facilities, nutritious options in the cafeteria and a culture that doesn't prize overtime at the expense of its employees' well-being, says Benz, who partnered with wellness application vendor Limeade on a wellness app platform called *Limeade GreenLine*. "You have to address all those structure things that get in the way of people achieving their optimal health," she says.

Chilton Hospital has taken that advice to heart. Since that first 100-day challenge a year ago, the hospital put a walking path around campus and organized walking groups and a hiking club. McGovern scaled back the prizes she's offering for signups and winners because workers no longer need as much persuading.

McGovern says she believes that the combination of the online wellness challenge, biometric screenings and running a separate disease management program will eventually help the hospital cut health care costs. The social media wellness campaign is a major part of that, especially because so many of the facility's employees who don't sit at a desk all day can use it. And they are—everyone from nurses to the cleaning crew and cafeteria staff. "They're finding ways to use it on their breaks, or on their smartphones at home," she says. "To have so many people participating, it shows you how much they want to do it."

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