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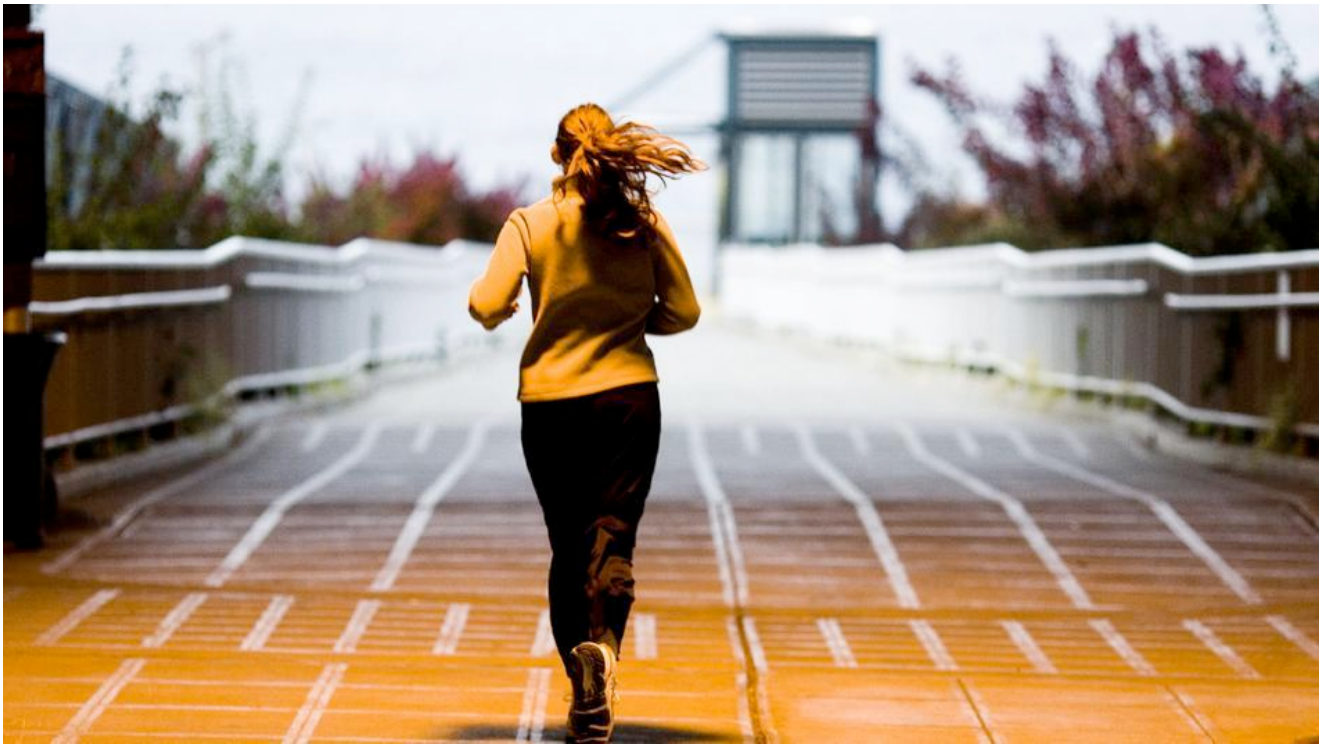
5 Social Apps To Encourage Employee Health and Wellness

By Sharlyn Lauby | Feb.10, 2013



This post originally appeared on the American Express OPEN Forum, where Mashable regularly contributes articles about leveraging social media and technology in small business.

Health care is a huge subject right now, regardless of your views on the Affordable Care Act. And for good reason. According to the Kaiser Foundation, the cost of employer-sponsored health coverage for families has increased nearly

100% during the past decade. In addition, total health spending accounted for approximately 18% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2010.

Bottom line: Staying healthy not only costs a lot of money but requires an investment of time. The investment pays off in employee productivity, morale and high performance. Smart companies are starting to direct energy to educating employees to maintain a healthy lifestyle. It's good for employees, and it's good for business.

What better way to encourage employees to take care of themselves than by using social tools? After all, we have our phones and tablets with us all the time. Here are some ways you can take full advantage of the connectivity.

1. IBX Wire: Provide Information for Better Decisions

A person's health is a private matter. We have laws such as HIPAA that protect an individual's medical information. Any effort by an employee or company to use social tools for tracking health-related data will need to be secure.

Matt Gillin, CEO of Relay, a mobile interface that provides a simple and secure way for businesses and customers to communicate, shared how his customer, Independence Blue Cross (IBX) is using Relay to increase the level of service it delivers to members.

"The IBX Wire will help members access information and support via a private, digital space, allowing them to more easily get things done — including staying on top of need-to-know personal health details, completing transactions and receiving one-to-one support exactly when they need it.

Through IBX Wire, the health insurer will deliver practical and usable account- and service-based information to members in real time through their private, customized message boards. This direct connection will give members a faster, easier way to stay on top of the status of their accounts, maximize plan benefits, learn ways to save money and get the support they need from IBX. When information is posted to a member's personal Wire, a notification is sent to the member's enrolled mobile device."

Gillin says future upgrades will include more interactive communications, such as the option to submit questions and get a response via this secure, HIPAA-compliant message service.

2. Endomondo: Stay Motivated

Regular exercise and activity is good for our health. We all know this. The challenge occurs when we have jobs that keep us from moving. Or, we can't find

time to visit the gym. Some call those reasons excuses. Others say the issue is staying motivated.

The Endomondo Sports Tracker app turns GPS-enabled devices into a personal trainer and social motivator capable of tracking workouts, analyzing performance, and can aid in the discovery of new routes, activities and insights into fitness so people become and stay active. The app is being used by companies including Harley Davidson, Kimberly-Clark and The Coca-Cola Company.

Mette Lykke, co-founder of Endomondo, explains how the app works:

> "The Endomondo Sports Tracker mobile app can record data from almost any type of physical activity, and provides valuable feedback on everything from calories burned to hydration required after exercise. But Endomondo stands apart from other activity tracking apps because it incorporates aspects found in leading social networks. It helps users connect with like-minded fitness fans so experiences and support can be shared. Users can send friends' real-time pep talks while they exercise, offer valuable route maps, compete against friends for fun, challenge co-workers, and share it all on Facebook, Twitter or across the Endomondo social network."

One feature of the app is called "pep talk," in which users can send short, real-time messages to friends that are read aloud by the app during workouts. It is designed with the goal of keeping users more engaged, therefore spending more time exercising.

3. Hotseat: Create Healthy Games, Competition and Team Sports

Plenty of employees will tell you they're motivated. That's not the issue. Their challenge is staying focused and on track. For many, exercise needs to be fun and have variety.

Arriving in Q1 2013 is a new app called Hotseat. The app uses nudges, social accountability and gameplay to create easy and fun two-minute office activity breaks. Using their smartphones, employees can select physical activities they're comfortable with and capable of completing at the office. Then Hotseat inserts a rotating daily selection of activity breaks into a user's calendar, based on availability. In addition, employees can compete in collaborative or competitive challenges.

Fran Melmed founder and CEO of Context Communication and consultant to Hotseat, said simplicity and flexibility were key factors in the app's design. "I know what a priority it is for employers and for us as a nation to increase our physical activity overall, but to also increase our regular movement throughout the day to lower our risk of heart disease, kidney disease, cancer, obesity and diabetes." Because 30 minutes of gym time doesn't counter the effects of too many hours sitting — and 10,000 steps might be unachievable for some people — Hotseat makes it easy. "I worked with the creative design folks at MadPow to create a tool that has a simple, playful look while at the same time provides a baby step toward greater activity for those currently less active," says Melmed.

4. Digifit: Set Healthy Goals

Turning an activity into a habit is the key to success. It's not just exercising; it's incorporating exercise into our daily routines — just like brushing our teeth. When we can see progress, it helps us stay motivated and focused. We want to do more because we are seeing a positive outcome.

Digifit offers a suite of fitness-tracking apps including iCardio, iBiker, iRunner and Spinning, which give users the ability to track and monitor activities while motivating them to be healthier and adopt healthy habits.

Christopher Means, marketing director at Digifit, Inc. says the key to developing good habits is starting out on the right path. Digifit offers users a series of fitness assessments that help establish fitness level, allowing users to be smart in developing an exercise routine. "Digifit's fitness assessments were developed by experts and include a range of tests for beginners to advanced athletes including Beginner Cardio, Rockport Walking Test and the Cooper Running Test," says Means. Beginner assessments, such as the Rockport Walking Test, establish a baseline of fitness. The more-advanced tests establish "accurate low-end lactate thresholds used to calculate personalized heart-rate training zones," which helps users train at the right intensity to achieve their fitness goals, explains Means. "The assessments can be completed with a variety of activity types, including running, walking, cycling, spin or even custom cardio activities like elliptical."

Digifit also tracks other biometrics like weight, sleep, daily activity, nutrition and blood pressure to give users a comprehensive view of how multiple aspects of their lives are affected by other aspects and the choices they make. For groups,

Digifit allows challenges to be set up with leaderboards and other inspirational activities or incentives based on a customizable set of criteria.

5. FitBit: Implement a Program at Work

With all the choices available, companies have a big task ahead of them. Veterans United Home Loans the national's number one dedicated VA lender, decided to create a Life Balance Department to support the health and wellness of its 1,200 employees.

Kate Quinn, life-balance coordinator at Veterans United Home Loans, said the company recognized the need to incorporate a technology-based solution in their wellness plans. "Our summer Fitness Challenge introduced employees to the FitBit ultra tracker. The tracker allowed them to keep track of their calories burned and even their sleep patterns. Using the FitBit app, the employees were also able to log food, activities and more."

While the task of creating a program is major, Quinn shared that the results are worth it. "The program has over 40% participation. The beauty is each employee has the ability to focus on his or her individual goals, while at the same time providing motivation and support to co-workers."

In addition, the app's progress reports opened the employee's eyes. Quinn explains, "Awareness of their activity level has been the biggest takeaway from the use of the tracker. Many employees 'think' they are active until they see the pie chart that shows their daily activity levels with more than 50% of their time spent sedentary. This simple bit of knowledge is a big motivator!"

Both employees and employers are looking to "get healthy and stay healthy" in 2013. The good news is, lots of options exist to help with your organization's wellness goals. The key is finding tools people will use, because that's the key to staying motivated, engaged and getting results.

Is your company encouraging healthy living using social tools? Let us know in the comments.

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