the gamification of employee wellness

SERIOUS FUN. SERIOUS SCIENCE. SERIOUS RESULTS.
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redrawing the employee wellness roadmap

Over the last decade, innovative research has completely redrawn the roadmap for successful employee wellness initiatives. It’s turned the traditional focus of employee wellness—“How can we motivate people to change?”—on its head.

Yet this outdated and ineffective approach to wellness persists in many employee wellness programs. And employers know it isn’t working, according to a survey conducted by Healthiest Employers (a privately-held technology company focused on corporate wellness). Over 50% of respondents say their top concern is lack of engagement, which demonstrates the need for a new approach. Employers overwhelmingly report that they’re searching for a way to increase their employees’ engagement because the outmoded programs they’re using aren’t capturing their employees’ attention.¹

But engagement isn’t the real problem: It’s the approach that isn’t working.

Historically, wellness programs assumed that if you simply told people what they needed to do to be healthier, they’d do it. If they didn’t, the problem was a lack of motivation and personal responsibility.

This pattern of thinking reaches back to the earliest wellness programs² that were established in the 1970s when wellness professionals first began telling employees to “get more exercise and pay more attention to what you eat.” Since then, we’ve seen a flood of email tips, lunch-n-learns, health risk assessments, biometric analyses and various other educational and data-gathering initiatives—all of which reflected the assumption that simply providing information would indeed result in change. Spoiler alert: it doesn’t.

Health and wellness professionals were well-intentioned but not particularly successful during this era. America’s growing obesity problem is the clearest evidence of their ineffective approach. Fortunately, our understanding of how people actually change to healthier behaviors has grown in leaps and bounds over the past few years. Without our new insights, previous attempts at figuring out the best ways to help people change their lives was really just a guessing game.

real world: higher engagement

Goldenwest Credit Union chose hubbub’s wellness gamification platform to meet its goal of an individualized employee wellness program that blended real-time data tracking and rewards with fun, social networking features that appealed to employees. It also had to be accessible to employees in over 20 locations. Goldenwest’s implementation of hubbub achieved spectacular engagement rates: over 80% in the first year alone.

what we’ve learned in the last decade

Most employees already know that healthy lifestyle habits are important and most can easily rattle off a list of those behaviors. Many don’t even lack the motivation or an inclination to change. What they need are tools and strategies to help them successfully make those changes in their daily lives.

You wouldn’t teach someone to play golf by telling them to hit the ball with the stick and leave it at that. You’d break down everything from tee placement to putter grip, demonstrate, encourage and help them refine.

Wellness works the same way. It’s no wonder that broad direction like “pay more attention to what you eat” achieves little.
the science of healthy behaviors

In recent years, fresh evidence-based insights into behavior change have dramatically expanded our knowledge of what does and doesn’t work in employee wellness.

The following three critical areas of research have fundamentally altered our understanding of how to help employees make healthier choices:

THE FOGG BEHAVIOR MODEL:
SETTING EMPLOYEES UP TO SUCCEED

Research by Stanford University’s Dr. B. J. Fogg3 revolutionized the thinking about employee behaviors and motivation. His findings demonstrate that successful behavior change happens when people chain small, new, easily-implemented behaviors to existing habits.

For example, say you want to eat more fruits and veggies. Translate that big-picture goal into a very small new behavior like having an apple as a mid-afternoon snack (instead of pulling out a candy bar). The trigger for the new behavior is the mid-afternoon restlessness/munchies; the new action is eating an apple; the motivation is adding more fruits and veggies into your diet.

It’s worth emphasizing what might seem obvious: that employees must actually have the ability to easily implement these changes. “Ability” includes factors like sufficient time, money and physical ability. Eating an apple mid-afternoon is easy for an accounting clerk; yet a sales rep flying to a different city every day may not have instant and predictable access to an apple after lunch.

WHY IT MATTERS

Most employers focus only on motivation. But Fogg’s research shows that it’s actually the last thing you need to worry about. Most people already have things they’d like to change; they’re simply stuck on how to make it happen—they need help connecting the change to an existing habit.

behavior = TRIGGER + ABILITY + MOTIVATION

The Fogg Behavior Model: Setting Employees Up to Succeed

THE FOWLER/CHRISTAKIS SOCIAL NETWORK PROJECT: HOW CONNECTIONS CHANGE BEHAVIOR

Harvard’s Dr. Nicholas Christakis and Dr. James Fowler of University of California, San Diego, are leading researchers in the science of how people form strong connections, both face-to-face and online. They’re looking into how these strong connections influence the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of everyone in a network, not only the people who directly know each other.4

WHY IT MATTERS

In the wellness context, posts, tweets, comments and conversations about healthy behaviors influence everyone in a social network who reads them—including lurkers, newbies and even those who already embrace a healthy lifestyle. Further, studies show that if our networks—or circle of friends—includes primarily sedentary and overweight people, we’re more likely to be sedentary and overweight ourselves. If we’re active, our friends and people in our networks are more likely to be more active. Like begets like and people with similar mindsets and behaviors flock together. Our behaviors affect and are affected by what we and our networks think, do and say.


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MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS: HOW MOTIVATION REALLY WORKS

Dr. Abraham Maslow’s research into motivation provides the final piece of the puzzle. His research reveals that once people feel sure that their basic human needs like food and shelter and employment will be met, they’re motivated by the desire to feel respected and successful as a contributing member of a larger community. This, Maslow argues, provides people the opportunity to realize their potential to its fullest and feel personally fulfilled.5

WHY IT MATTERS: People want to feel that they’re respected and appreciated members of the formal groups (company department and neighborhood association) and informal groups (marathoners who post their progress in online communities and people who raise money for cancer research) to which they belong. By creating a community of people with similar interests a “virtuous circle” is created. It invites initial engagement and draws people into deeper engagement as they build and share knowledge and experiences that enhance the positive feedback and affirmation they get from other group members.

MOTIVATION: THE PROGRESSION FROM GROUP AFFIRMATION TO PERSONAL FULFILLMENT

summary: The contributions of these scientists are pivotal; yet understanding the factors that truly influence behavior change is only part of the answer.

The ultimate solution requires translating these deeper insights into employee wellness programs that drive actual behavior change and lasting improvements in health.

real world: measurable improvements
First, interactive marketing firm NextJump added gyms to its offices. Then, it introduced an application that let employees check in after each workout and awarded incentives to top participants. But what really made the difference was turning fitness into “serious fun” with gamification features like teams, leaderboards and competition. The payoff: 70% of NextJump employees exercise regularly, up from about 12%.6

→ the big aha: social gamification
The big “aha!” that’s revolutionizing employee wellness is the recognition that games promote the same principles that work for changing human behavior.

For example, imagine winning a round of Bingo in a room full of fellow players. Bingo is a fast-moving game that requires a bit of concentration, is exciting, competitive, provides a quick payoff and easily rolls into another match. Translate that experience into a wellness context—players vie for the top spot in a leaderboard in a week-long challenge to eat the most servings of veggies. As the days unfold, the top spots shuffle as people bust out the kale at lunch. Players are focused on adding veggies to their diets and they have an inherent human desire to win. The challenge ends, to the victor goes the spoils—bragging rights, maybe a prize—and the challenge rolls over into a rematch the following week.

Dr. Michael Wu, a social scientist, describes the principles of social gamification as: “engagement, interaction, competition, collaboration, awareness and learning.”7 It’s no coincidence that these principles strongly resemble those that Drs. Fogg, Fowler, Christakis and Maslow identified as supporting motivation and behavior change. The principles of gamification are a natural fit for the wellness arena because of their symbiotic relationship with behavior change. Working together, social gamification and cutting-edge behavioral research provide a potent wellness solution.

Notably, these principles go far beyond the traditional incentive programs already in place in approximately 75% of respondents in the Healthiest Employers annual survey.8 Additionally, the availability of affordable and far-reaching technologies like the Internet, social media applications, and anytime/anywhere access via a multitude of devices provides incredible flexibility. These technologies allow us to implement these principles in highly individualized ways that scale to support the largest employers and the most diverse and dispersed workforces.

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The "social gamification of wellness" is the integration of the following factors into a wellness program that makes healthier living easy and fun—making them the natural and progressive extension of day-to-day activities that people already do:

- Deeper understanding of how people actually make lasting behavioral changes
- Technology like smartphones, web portals and public and private social networks that make it easier than ever to cue or track behaviors and to connect with like-minded individuals anytime, anywhere
- Game mechanics and design techniques—concepts like individual and group challenges, rewards, points, leaderboards, badges and the like, many borrowed from video game design
in action: the “meatless monday” challenge

A challenge from hubbub, an online wellness solution, urges participants to try “Meatless Monday” for two consecutive weeks. Those who joined the challenge checked in and posted their progress, comments and questions (“does meat in a salad count?”) in an online conversation. A leaderboard showed who was in 1st place and participants got credit if they observed Meatless Monday twice in two weeks.

NOTICE THAT THIS CHALLENGE:

- Applies Dr. Fogg’s principle of small steps—try it twice, rather than challenging people to immediately go 100% vegetarian
- Provides a comment area which encourages discussion and mutually supporting behaviors like those identified by Dr. Fowler and Dr. Christakis in their social network research
- Provides the sense of belonging to a group that Dr. Maslow identified as a motivator
conclusion: gamification can lead to better health

The world of wellness has gained a great deal of insight into human behavior and motivation over the past decade and it comes at a critical moment. Obesity is quickly becoming one of our nation’s greatest problems, impacting our productivity, longevity, quality of life and even our national security. Military recruits are unable to pass basic fitness tests. Sports stadiums are adding bracing to seats to accommodate obese fans. MRI machines are growing in size because users are growing too. It’s clear that people are in dire need of wellness programs that are effective, addictive and sustainable. By incorporating the proper triggers, motivators and engagement strategies, employers can invigorate their workforce, improve their employees’ health and improve their bottom line.
choosing a wellness solution

Integrating the science of human behavior with gaming principles and supporting technology is the most successful approach available for driving employee adoption of healthier behaviors.

As you evaluate wellness providers, note that some offer components, as described to the left, while others offer complete solutions.

Base your selection on what’s right for your company and your employees. Do you want to handpick individual components from several vendors and integrate them into a solution yourself, or do you want a one-stop-shop turnkey solution that can be implemented quickly?

questions to consider

IMPLEMENTATION AND INTEGRATION

1. Can the platform be fully implemented within a business day?
2. Does the platform integrate with Apple, Android and Windows smartphones?
3. Does the platform integrate with health devices like FitBit?
4. Will implementation and support require commitment of employer IT or HR resources?
5. Can the platform easily support HQ and remote locations including virtual/home offices?
6. Is a long-term commitment required?
questions to consider CONTINUED

ACTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATION

7. How easy is it to invite friends, family and others to participate?

8. Are individual, team, invitation-only and sequential challenges available?

9. Are new and creative challenges and activities added frequently?

10. Can participants create their own challenges?

11. Is health coaching easily available through a variety of channels like Skype or email?

12. Does the program include a wide array of incentives and rewards?

WELLNESS KNOW-HOW

13. Are the activity objectives realistic and achievable?

14. Are the activities comprehensive and balanced?

15. Is the initial health risk assessment focused and immediately actionable?

16. Is the platform directly linked to a behavioral science model?

17. Does the system adhere to strict privacy guidelines?

ADMINISTRATION

18. Is administration and funding of incentives automated?

19. Is management reporting and analysis simple and focused on key metrics?

20. Does management reporting make it easy for you to determine wellness outcomes?