

Wellbeing at work: adopting personalised offerings, including apps and trackers

When Moodbeam launched a silicone wristband to tell managers if their workers were happy or sad in early 2021, it provoked a mixed reaction. The wearable technology consists of two buttons; an employee presses yellow if they are happy, and blue if not. Throughout the week, the wristband sends data to an online dashboard so managers can track the wellbeing of their teams. The company claimed this would create a vital connection between colleagues at a time when the majority of the workforce is working remotely. Critics described the wristband as a gimmick that employees would refuse to use and an intrusion into their personal lives. Whatever your stance on its usefulness, it's part of a rapidly growing market of wellbeing apps, wearables and platforms that organisations can choose from to support their staff.

The global workplace wellbeing market is growing at a rate of around 7% a year, according to consulting firm Deloitte, expected to reach a value of \$90.7bn (£66.4bn) by 2026¹. It covers a vast range of interventions, from workplace benefit platforms and fitness subscriptions to innovative wearables that can track employees' movements and even their sleep. There are solid commercial reasons to prioritise wellbeing: Deloitte figures show a return on investment of £5 for every £1 invested in mental health, for example². Many employees already use smartphone health apps or own smart watches, making them an easy sell-in and reducing the need for training. During the Covid-19 pandemic, offering a broad range of wellbeing benefits became a way for employers to be proactive about supporting employees and showing they are valued. Almost two-thirds of organisations increased support for staff across mental, financial or physical wellbeing during this time, according to Grid, the industry body for group risk protection³.

"Pre-pandemic, employers were already making strides in this market as the world was changing fast and people were struggling to adapt to that change," says Mike Blake, director of health and benefits at consultancy Willis Towers Watson. "The pandemic has accelerated that. Wellbeing support has become part of what's expected from your employer, but the tricky thing for organisations is sorting out what to implement when there's so much available."

There has also been a subtle shift in the perception of wellbeing 'ownership', believes Jim Woods, co-founder and CEO of Betterspace, a digital marketplace for wellbeing products and services. Where once potential recruits might look for a subsidised gym membership, they increasingly seek out support on everything from mindfulness to giving up smoking. "Historically it's been regarded as 'your' issue: we pay your salary and you look after your own wellbeing," he says. "But over the last decade we've started to see employers engage more with it, driven by the need to increase productivity and to attract and retain talent." The impact of the Covid-19 crisis has also influenced employers' budgets and investments, with many organisations pivoting in-person services such as gym classes to virtual programmes and tools. Debra Clark, head of specialist at Towergate Health and Protection, explains: "Before, they might have offered a selection of benefits but didn't delve into the detail as much. The problem is how do you get to everybody, not just those with an interest in wellbeing already? With a multi-generational workforce, you need to think about communicating with people in different ways."

Data can make all the difference between a generic but underutilised menu of wellbeing options and something more personalised and impactful. Every wellbeing touchpoint in an organisation, whether it's how many mindfulness classes an employee takes or how often they use a virtual GP service, offers employers the chance to analyse data and spot trends. This means they can tweak the benefits or tools they already offer, build a business case for investment in more, or identify potential issues around burnout or stress before they become unmanageable. (According to analyst company Gartner, 22% of companies worldwide track employee movement data, for example). "At an aggregated level, an employer can get a deep insight of the real wellbeing needs of staff," says Martin Blinder, CEO and founder of Tictac, a wellbeing engagement company. "You can see what percentage are engaging with different wellbeing tools and content, in what locations. This is powerful because employers only have a finite budget but can begin to understand staff's wellbeing needs much better."

Better personalisation means higher engagement, adds Woods at Betterspace. "Before they might choose a few things that would appeal to as many people as possible but then only see 2% to 5% uptake for some things. Stepping into a personalised or on-demand model where apps or services are tailored to employees personally can drive engagement levels as high as 80% or 90%," he says. Law firm Linklaters has a 94% engagement rate with the tools its employees access through Betterspace, and claims to have seen a 70% improvement in employee mental health as a result. However, as the reaction to the Moodbeam wristbands showed, there's a fine line between collecting data to get an idea of wellbeing trends and intruding on employees' personal lives.

In 2016, health insurance giant Aetna ran a study where it rewarded employees \$25 for every 20 days they reported more than seven hours sleep, asking staff to sync their FitBit or other health tracker to the company's wellbeing platform⁴. The company rebutted claims that it was intruding into their personal lives because employees self-reported the data and opted-in. In fact, more than 49,000 employees took part. Most platforms collect data at aggregate level so individual employees cannot be identified, but asking employees to opt-in to data collection is good practice, as is transparency over who will process the data and for what reason.

One of the key drivers is what HR or managers plan to do with the data: if they identify that people in certain roles are showing signs of burnout, what measures are put in place to stop that happening, or do they offer support? Katharine Moxham of GriD says follow-up is crucial: "It's great to see that employers are stepping up to the plate: not only do the majority understand that they have a great responsibility for the wellbeing of staff but many are also implementing practical changes to make a tangible difference. However, we urge businesses who have either not made any changes or who have decreased support to take stock. Employees have long memories and their loyalty can be quickly won or lost during times of adversity so all employers should be playing their part in supporting staff wellbeing."

The Aetna example touches on one of the key drivers for engagement with wellbeing tools and services: the lure of an incentive or reward. While in this case it was financial (the company also paid out when employees recorded a certain amount of exercise), it's important to highlight other incentives, says Blinder at Tictac. "You don't necessarily want to pay people to get healthy, but because they enjoy the experience," he says. You could offer the chance to win something, a discount on something or a free coffee." Yulife, a new health benefits platform, gives members currency, known as "Yucoin" for every mile they walk or cycle, or how many minutes of mindfulness videos they watch. The system links to employees' wearables such as FitBits and Apple watches and Yucoin can be exchanged for Amazon vouchers and other retail outlets. But tangible benefits aside, Yulife also provides leaderboards so employees can compete against their colleagues, and there's a 'universe' where they can make their own avatar and complete various challenges.

“Gamification creates more social cohesion and interaction, counteracting the fact there’s so little engagement with many wellbeing programmes out there,” says Sammy Rubin, Yulife’s co-founder and CEO. The thinking behind Yulife’s platform draws heavily on Stanford University behavioural scientist BJ Fogg⁵, who argues that two of the key drivers of behaviour change are sensation and belonging. “You’ll have people who just want to get the miles in and achieve, then others who are motivated by doing things with other people. Creating an emotional response can trigger someone into action,” adds Rubin. Organisations can amplify this sense of ‘nudge’ or community by linking wellbeing programmes to social or collaboration platforms such as Yammer and Slack, particularly now many employees are working remotely, adds Clark from Towergate. “Previously, you might have shared with people in the office that you used a physio and made a recommendation, but now this needs to happen virtually,” she explains. “If someone shares a success story with others, colleagues are more likely to share their own next time or feel motivated because they’ve helped someone. This creates momentum and keeps engagement levels going.”

In the future, aggregating data across not just single organisations but beyond could help healthcare companies preempt issues such as burnout or tweak the support on offer to reflect a wider need. “This market will be quantum times more efficient in the next 10 years than it is now,” adds Woods from Betterspace. Being able to offer a comprehensive and personalised wellbeing package will become a point of difference when it comes to attracting talent, too. “Millennials and Generation Z employees really care about employers that can provide holistic support - they want to work there, stay with them longer, and be more productive while they’re there,” he concludes.

Build a bespoke wellbeing tracker

While many wellbeing platforms offer data analysis and dashboards so organisations can track different aspects of staff health, another option is to build a bespoke wellbeing tracker. This could take a similar form to an engagement survey, asking users questions about aspects of the wellbeing provision they use and the value they bring.

Building a tracker for your own organisation means you can ask tailored questions about specific aspects of employees’ lives such as mental health or financial wellbeing. It also means you can create baselines specific to aspects of wellbeing that are relevant to your organisation. Questions could cover a number of areas, such as:

- Which wellbeing services have you used in the last three months?
- How does [name of service] improve your mental wellbeing?
- How does [name of service] improve your physical wellbeing?
- How satisfied do you feel with your mental/financial/physical wellbeing at the moment?
- How would you rate the support given to you on [aspect of wellbeing] by your manager or employer?
- What wellbeing services would you like to see added to what the company offers?

By adding a numeric scale (1 to 10) or asking employees to choose from a Likert scale (the term used to describe survey questions with a scale of options such as ‘highly satisfied’ to ‘very unhappy’), it’s possible to

track their levels of satisfaction over time and identify trends in particular teams. Furthermore, there are several free or low-cost options such as SurveyMonkey to distribute questions, so it's a viable option for those on a budget. Alternatively, you could use your engagement survey tool to ask specific questions around physical, mental or financial wellbeing.

Five key takeaways

- Personalise your wellbeing offers through data: what tools and services are used, and how could they be improved?
- Start small with a limited number of tools and build evidence for their efficacy: the choice of programmes and apps can be bewildering
- Consider building your own wellbeing tracker, or incorporate questions on wellbeing into other survey tools, as this can be cost-efficient
- Be mindful of how data on employee wellbeing is used: process it at an aggregate level so it is not intrusive
- Make it social: a sense of belonging increases engagement with wellbeing tools and services

References

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