



SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Combining Technology and the Human Touch to Succeed

By **Marc Giguère**

Given the state of public health care, employee health risks, and programs included in employee benefit plans, there is clearly room for improvement. And yet in recent years, studies and surveys have shown a shortage of targeted employee health programs, a lack of communication, and high costs. According to a survey by GoodLife Fitness published in January 2016, 62% of employers believe that health and wellness programs do not reflect employee

needs. A similar percentage of employees (61%) believes participation would be higher if the programs were better suited to their needs. So the question arises: how do you combine accessibility, communication, and personalization at a reasonable cost?

Technology to the rescue

Technology facilitates access to health information, in addition to offering more affordable solutions. Health navigation platforms promote a prevention-based model

CASE STUDY: FINDING THE RIGHT TOOLS



John (fictional name), a man in his fifties whose job involves physical tasks, used the coaching program after answering the questions in an online symptom evaluator, accepting the invitation, and completing the electronic call-back form. John went to the health platform's portal to find information about his joint pain, which was starting to affect his work. He wanted to find a miracle remedy to alleviate his pain and solve the problem. He was dissatisfied with recent consultations with a dietitian and a kinesiologist and had little confidence in his endocrinologist.

During an initial evaluation, the nurse noted that, while musculoskeletal issues were what had prompted John to seek help, he also had comorbidities, including obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. The file was active for seven months, and around twelve hours of intervention were required with

a variety of health care professionals. The nurse was the main coach in the case and coordinated the needs identified during coaching sessions, acting as a bridge with other professionals during the process.

After seven months, John was sleeping better and had more energy, and his joint pain had significantly diminished. He said he was better equipped to manage his situation, and there was marked improvement in his understanding of his health and how to manage it. John found that his health problem had less of an impact on his work, and he was more motivated to pursue lifestyle-improvement goals.

The positive environment encouraged John to take charge of the situation. He got the information he needed, and was never judged when he was unable to achieve or maintain certain goals. He learned the importance of doing his own research, using the information and resources to find the right tools.

that combines technology and health programs into a single hub. Employees and their dependents can receive the level of support and intervention they need. This can include permanent content, online videos, referrals to public or private health services, or support via email or a help line, with the goal of offering the right level of support at the right time.

In a previous article (*Avantages*, September 2014), I dealt with two basic principles of a health navigation platform: targeting a broad spectrum of needs and providing centralized access. In order to offer programs suited to the needs of employees, identifying the risks that could lead to an absence is crucial. This approach allows employees to address their risk factors before they lead to a prolonged absence or disability claims.

Health coaching and support programs have only recently become available for employees in Canada. Some affordable programs are available online, with automated messages to help people reach their health goals. Other programs offer personalized support and

coaching by phone, with a range of intervention models.

A 2011 study by Lippincott Williams & Wilkins showed that offering affordable online programs can be a savvy business decision. However, the data from the study and from others like it tend to show that a combination of online self-management, goal-setting, and coaching tools with an offline service offer delivers the best of both worlds. This formula can have a positive impact both on health costs and on employee productivity.

Reach and target potential candidates

With health navigation tools, employees and their dependents can learn more about their symptoms and identify the right resources for their condition. This approach lets them take charge of their health and take action (see text box for a case study).

By integrating a platform of health self-management tools, articles, promotional banners, and a symptom evaluator, the strategy draws employee attention to the help available for





managing their condition. Whether employees use the Internet or call the help centre for information, the goal is always to encourage them to seek coaching that makes sense for the health situation.

The purpose of identifying both symptoms and the employee's motivation for taking action for his or her health is to drive empowerment and the call to action. From the sponsor's point of view, this can be key to controlling costs associated with the coaching program, disabilities, and benefits. Coaching goes beyond health navigation and online tools, offering phone guidance from a professional (nurse, psychologist, social worker, etc.) who can figure out how to generate motivation so employees can improve their health.

The more integrated content and programs are within the platform, the more online traffic will increase, and the greater the possibility of influencing users to take charge of their health and obtain the services they need. And with a more targeted model, the invitation for coaching can be triggered when employees receive the results of a health risk evaluation questionnaire to maintain the momentum of the call to action.

The evolution of group insurance practices through the use of a group-level data also makes it possible to identify health-risk targets. For example, by studying the use of drugs and paramedical care, a more targeted service offer can be created. Better use of coaching services can have a positive impact on employee productivity and the cost of the group insurance plan.

Health coaching: an art in and of itself

It is worth noting that, beyond the clinical aspect, employees can have glaring coaching needs to get the help they need from health care professionals. Many employees report negative experiences with health care professionals: they don't feel they are

being listened to, or the interventions do not reflect their needs. In most cases, they abandon their efforts, and their health situation is unchanged or risks deteriorating.

We shouldn't forget that employees with a diagnosis aren't the only ones who need help. A coaching program should identify the health risks for employees likely to present problematic symptoms and encourage them to take part in the program. The above-mentioned study showed that employees experiencing certain symptoms are more likely to get sick and work less productively, even if their condition is not serious enough for a clinical diagnosis. Thus, it is important to target symptoms associated with the main causes of disability, i.e., musculoskeletal disorders, stress, anxiety, depression, diabetes and pre-diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and back and neck pain.

Even within a well-defined framework, including motivational interviews and goal-setting, coaches have to adapt their approach to the employee's psychosocial context. It is just as important to press employees to get involved in efforts. The role of the coach becomes critical in improving the health of employees and helping them reach their goals. Interventions and support must therefore be carefully adapted and coordinated if other people have to intervene in the case management.

Technology provides access to health information and attracts employee attention to topics of interest, while prompting them to take action for better health management. But the human touch, design, and methodology for this type of program are essential too. It's the combination of technology and a personal approach that creates the recipe for success. 

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