Games for Wellness—Impacting the Lives of Employees and the Profits of Employers

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The typical process to commercialize new products and services goes something like this:

- Concept
- Research
- Innovation
- Practical applications
- Demonstration of efficacy
- Commercial trials by early market movers
- Broad acceptance

Of course, when it comes to products and services that are regulated, such as medicine, the demonstration of efficacy can be quite extensive.

When we researched the market for the Games for Health Journal, it was evident from much of the research funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that an inevitable obstacle to the success of health games designed to overcome disease and illnesses such as diabetes, autism, obesity, and cystic fibrosis as well as conditions such as substance abuse, physical and psychological healing from burns, and so on would be to objectively demonstrate efficacy to physicians who prescribe the game activities and to health insurers who pay for them to be broadly used by patients.

We all know that the process for gaining approval of pharmaceuticals is long, difficult, and costly. It stands to reason that something as unorthodox in health care as games used to change the behaviors and outcomes of patients would pose an unusual and probably greater challenge for approval as prescriptive remedies. While Pam Kato’s article in the first issue of the Games for Health Journal addressed the need and means for demonstrating health games efficacy, it is only a start to standardizing the process and criteria for regulators, physicians, and insurers to prescribe and pay for them. Thus, it can be expected that it will be sometime before health games will have a major impact on the well-being of individuals and the population suffering from ill health.

However, another pathway based on employee well-being and productivity is accelerating the pace of health game development and usage in a way that bypasses the regulatory and prescription sanctions. According to the author of the Program Profile in this issue of the Games for Health Journal,

In the United States, most employers pay twice for the poor health of their workforce. Obese and dangerously overweight employees comprise about 66% of the United States—about 240 million people. These unhealthy employees represent a significant part of the $7,000–$10,000 employers spend per employee every year in healthcare costs. Poor health costs employers an additional $1,000–$4,000 per year in productivity from lost or subpar labor.

According to HEALTHWAYS Well-being Journal, one of the five game changing developments in health care is recognition by large employers of the expanded value of improved well-being, to reduce medical costs and improve individual and company productivity and performance. Such bold steps will require change in organizational thinking and doing in order to succeed.

In a recent survey of employers by Towers Watson (also featured in this issue) and the National Business Group on Health, about 9% are expected to use online games in their wellness programs by the end of this year, with another 7% planning to add them in 2013. By the end of next year, 60% said their health initiatives would include online games as well as other types of competitions between business locations or employee groups.

Anna Wilde Mathews of The Wall Street Journal stated,

A growing number of workplace programs are borrowing techniques from digital games in an effort to encourage regular exercise and foster healthy eating habits. The idea is that competitive drive—sparked by online leader boards, peer pressure, digital rewards and real-world prizes—can get people to improve their overall health.

Henry Albrecht, CEO of Limeade, Inc., a wellness service provider, says,

Beyond their ability to entertain, games are now recognized for their potential to produce benefits outside the game itself. Steven Berlin Johnson, author of Everything Bad Is Good for You, notes, for example, that immersion in video games can enhance cognitive and spatial skills. Game designer Jane McGonigal, author of Reality Is Broken, suggests that much of what people do in their daily lives could be enhanced by turning it into a game. The result is a rise in the “gamification”—addition of a light overlay of gaming concepts like points, badges, and levels—of ever more areas of our lives. Games have the power to engage people at a deep level and shift their priorities toward the behaviors rewarded by the game. When used in the context of a company-sponsored wellness program, games have the power to enable players to achieve lasting effects.

Employers often award prizes and financial incentives to winners of the games, which typically also have digital rewards like badges. Game companies say they’ve seen prizes...
as big as cars, as well as extra days off, preferential parking spaces, and cash, but often employers offer health savings account contributions.

Mathews says,

Some companies prefer to hold competitions where there’s proof of an employee’s work, usually in the form of pedometers or heart rate monitors. This is particularly true if the incentives being offered are of significant value. Of course, this approach has downsides. At Monsanto, they decided instead to keep their prizes small and take the employees at their word.5

External rewards are apparently motivating, but the most successful wellness programs incorporate games that present themselves as in the service of the player. These are activities supported by technologies that enable individuals to engage in things they’ve personally wanted to do, but were never able to adequately prioritize in the short term.

Albrecht from Limeade says that games must be contextual, relevant, and social. Wellness games don’t exist in a vacuum; they succeed or fail within the physical, cultural, technological, and social context of their players. He states, “A game that works for active employees of high-performance, dispersed companies may be very different from one that works for healthcare employees within a single setting, or a diverse group of businesses, each with their particular mix of employees.”6 Relevance also means the games are designed to put each player in contact with people they already know and with which they interact regularly.

Although the benefits of health game activities come to the individual participant, compliance and commitment appear to be enhanced through teaming individuals and creating healthy competition within and between the teams. Early research by wellness game providers and the companies using them indicates that team-based programs increase the level of effort expenditure and the duration of participant usage of the game activities and therefore increase the health benefits and productivity goals of the wellness programs.

Productivity Incentives

Clearly the investment of time, materials, facilities, and so on must have rewards to the companies that fund wellness programs. Advocates claim that employees in good health are more productive, have fewer absences, and incur fewer accident and healthcare costs. With the cost and availability of health care rising and uncertain, it seems employers are motivated to be proactive in reducing the incidence and seriousness of employee health issues.

Early Adopters of Health Games for Improved Wellness

With much of the healthcare industry on the outside looking in at the health game validation and approval process for treatment, they certainly are active in using health games to improve the well-being of their employees and the resultant healthcare costs savings and benefits. As we will see, this is true from major health insurance providers such as UnitedHealth Group (UHG), Aetna, and Humana as well as healthcare service providers such as Kaiser Permanente. Even pharmaceuticals are using health games to improve wellness of employees.

For example, InPharm.com.news reports that the pharmaceutical industry is starting to use wellness initiatives to promote disease awareness campaigns. Some of the industry leaders are looking at designing new games to promote health without any commercial agenda—and there are already several established apps and games out there to promote healthy living via gaming.

In another approach to health gamification, Kaiser Permanente’s Garfield Health Care Innovation Centre is researching games to help doctors and other medical personnel improve their skills, and reduce errors.

UHG has been exploring ways to infuse videogames and gaming elements into health and wellness activities for consumers in order to boost people’s engagement with their health and improve their well-being. As illustrated in the first issue of the Games for Health Journal, UHG’s efforts are focusing on three areas:

- Gameplay, which leverages games that people can play to improve their health
- Gamification, which incorporates game mechanics and psychology to make health and fitness more engaging and fun
- Game technology, which explores how technologies and devices traditionally built for videogaming may be used in nontraditional ways to improve patient care and condition management in clinical and home settings

“UnitedHealth Group’s innovations demonstrate that the health care industry, like the video gaming industry, can be extremely effective at engaging people,” said Bud Flagstad, senior vice president, software innovation and technical product services at UHG. “Our work with video gaming is to continue to find new ways to better engage people in their own health and to improve patient care.” To those ends, UHG recently conducted a survey of 1,015 adults, 18 years of age or older, and found that nearly 75 percent of respondents believe that videogames should include a component that encourages physical activity. Also, 70 percent said that physically active videogames—defined in the survey as videogames that require body movements to control the activity on the screen—can complement or supplement traditional exercise. More than half (54 percent) said that physically active videogames would encourage them to be more active, while 60 percent of survey respondents with children in the household said children should be encouraged to play physically active videogames as a complement to traditional exercise.

Humana earlier this year kicked off a nationwide event to promote wellness at golf tournaments. Fans were given the opportunity to experience the Humana co-branded (with Microsoft) Xbox Kinect “Your Shape” game that demonstrates how being healthy can also be fun.

Market Acceptance of Health Games and Wellness Initiatives

Employers are accepting well-being as a means to healthier, more productive employees and the diverse benefits of improved health. Few companies have the internal wherewithal to develop effective wellness programs, and entrepreneurs have emerged to provide wellness programs and services. For example, Limeade is an enterprise wellness platform provider that strives to build “happy, healthy, high-performance workforces” through integrated, cohesive user
experiences, including games. The Company’s clients include Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For, healthcare providers, and large, high-performance employers such as REI, Intuit, and GroupHealth.

A similar service company, HealthPer, is featured as a Clinical Brief in this issue of the Games for Health Journal. The Company offers a social network game-based service client’s employees to be their personal “health-helper,” offering fun ways for them to engage in healthy behaviors. Participants choose their games, each designed to help them achieve their personal goals, thus paving a personalized path toward healthier living.

Large human resource consulting firms such as Mercer, Ernst & Young, Deloitte, and Towers Watson are recognizing an opportunity to improve wellness and hence financial performance of clients also. Christine Owen, Mercer’s Health Consulting Leader, Asia Pacific, said that many employers acknowledge the value of promoting and maintaining the health and wellness of their employee populations. She remarked,

Unhealthy behaviors result in risk factors that lead to poor health among employees. They drive up health care usage and costs, and drive down productivity and performance. In most organizations, the majority of employees is likely to be reasonably healthy, productive and engaged in their work. Healthy employees actually account for the smallest portion of your health costs.

She went on to caution, “If you do nothing, however, each year a number of your employees will automatically shift from being healthy to unhealthy, so it’s actually very important to help these employees stay healthy.”

Towers Watson is engaged in helping clients educate employees about health and wellness and encourage more effective use of health care. The challenge is to find new and engaging ways to deliver this information so that employees take notice—and take action. After all, the amount of material employees receive on a daily basis from marketers, employers, and each other across the wide range of available media makes wellness topics extremely difficult to be heard. This is where gaming comes in—and why the company believes games are the appropriate tool to incorporate wellness into communication and engagement plans.

Conclusions

I strongly believe health games will have huge impacts on the availability, cost, and effectiveness of both remedial and preventative health care and the subsequent well-being of people everywhere. There will have to be ample evidence of validity and effectiveness of health games for doctors to routinely prescribe and insurers to pay for games used to treat diseases and conditions. Wellness programs using health games, on the other hand, have the potential for significant impacts on human well-being and the costs, pain, and suffering of preventable illnesses and conditions. Broad acceptance and use of games promote their familiarity, acceptance, and use not just by employees, but throughout society, thus, in my opinion, smoothing and shortening the path toward prescriptive use of games in all facets of health care.

References