

Digital Tools to Address Rising Mental Health Concerns

Human resource leaders are striving to help employees alleviate mental health issues by making apps, videos, webinars and other digital content available at growing rates.

By Dave Zielinski
November 24, 2020

Like many people around the world, employees at SurveyMonkey were experiencing social isolation, stress and uncertainty as a result of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Among the topics taking a toll on their mental health were concerns about contracting or spreading the virus; feelings of being disconnected from colleagues, family or friends; and stressors such as helping children with distance learning. To combat the anxiety, human resource leaders at the San Mateo, Calif.-based survey software provider gave workers access to a host of digital well-being resources from content provider Grokker. The company offers videos from credentialed experts on topics such as mindfulness, anxiety reduction, yoga and good sleep practices.

While many SurveyMonkey employees received a mental health boost by watching these videos on their own, others took the concept to another level by convening Zoom sessions so they could view and engage with the Grokker content together. The communal experience created a sense of connectedness and camaraderie that they'd been missing, helping to lift spirits and morale.

Becky Cantieri, SurveyMonkey's chief people officer, says providing the digital well-being content was a key part of the company's strategy to address rising mental health concerns identified in employee surveys, an issue magnified by the fact that employees will continue working from home deep into 2021.

"What began as access to online fitness classes broadened to use of Grokker videos for a variety of well-being purposes," says Cantieri, who had used the Grokker platform even before the pandemic. "During COVID-19, we've targeted content that could help employees with resilience, stress management and overall mental health. We also saw a big increase in teams of employees seeking to participate in using the content together in a virtual way."

Like many well-being vendors, Grokker prices its content by user type and company size, and its videos can be integrated with existing wellness programs and benefits technology platforms. Businesses pay \$65 per user per year, for example, with volume discounts available.

"HR and other organizational leaders realized that assistance with employee well-being needed to happen digitally because it was the only way to reach the workforce," says Lorna Borenstein, founder and CEO of Grokker. "People are suffering from feeling a lack of connection to the outside world, and video and other digital tools are the most proximate thing to someone being with you."

Changes Coming

Employees across industries have experienced almost unprecedented levels of stress during the pandemic. Research over the summer from Harvard Medical School and the University of North Carolina found that more than 50 percent of survey respondents said they were more stressed-out than before the pandemic began.

The risk for depression in the workforce has also grown considerably. Almost one-quarter of U.S. employees reported feeling emotionally drained or having trouble concentrating during the COVID-19 outbreak, according to research from the Society for Human Resource Management. Mental health experts say these feelings likely will worsen through the winter as options for exercising, gathering and dining outdoors diminish.

More HR leaders are striving to help employees alleviate these mental health issues by making apps, videos, webinars and other digital content more widely available. A recent survey by the Business Group on Health (BGH), a nonprofit health care organization in Washington, D.C., found that many employers plan to expand the mental health and emotional well-being services offered to employees in 2021—and many of those resources will be virtual in nature.

According to the BGH survey, 88 percent of companies plan to provide employees with access to online mental health support resources such as videos, apps, webinars and articles in 2021, up from 58 percent who did so in 2019. The BGH survey also found that more organizations will seek to reduce out-of-pocket costs for employee mental health services in 2021. More than half (54 percent) reported they'll be lowering or even waiving costs for virtual mental health services next year.

This growing use of digital tools is designed in part to address provider shortages, to minimize employee wait times for care and to reduce the stigma sometimes associated with seeking mental health support, according to the BGH survey authors.

Creating Virtual Connections

Some digital tools, such as apps or videos, can be used individually—and anonymously—by employees, notes LuAnn Heinen, vice president for the BGH. Other resources foster connections between participants, which can help counter feelings of isolation.

“One of the things we’ve seen during COVID-19 is a focus on using technology to create more human connections among employees,” Heinen says. “People no longer can hang out in the break room and commiserate with their colleagues about challenges like dealing with the pandemic. Organizations that have been able to create ‘virtual watercoolers’ or keep their people connected in other ways, like hosting virtual team classes, are reporting well-being benefits for their employees.”

Some companies encourage managers to model the use of these digital resources. Grokker’s Borenstein knows of organizations whose managers play short videos with deep-breathing exercises at the start of their meetings, for example.



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Anne Richter, North American co-leader of health management for global advisory firm Willis Towers Watson, says client research conducted by her firm during the pandemic found that more companies are embracing and promoting digital mental health wellness solutions for their employees.

"Almost one-third in our survey were planning to take additional action in this area as a result of the pandemic," Richter says. "We've seen a huge uptick in interest in vendors who are offering alternate types of well-being solutions, whether it's apps or websites. Companies are looking for 24/7, at-your-fingertips, on-your-phone kind of support options for their employees."

David Rodriguez, global chief human resource officer for Marriott International, partnered with meQuilibrium, a digital employee resilience training solution, to support the emotional well-being of his company's workforce. Rodriguez says internal surveys during the pandemic showed a rise in employee anxiety, uncertainty and stress, and he believes giving workers access to the digital resources helps to build their adaptive capacity and mitigate stress.

"The platform represents the nexus of science and technology and makes mental health resources easily available to our employees on their phones," Rodriguez says. "Too often, mental well-being issues don't get discussed or addressed and people avoid getting care, which can worsen those situations."

Marriott employees dealing with mental health issues more severe than what the platform is able to address can call a company referral line to receive information about professional counseling and other support options, Rodriguez says.

'Sticky' Tools

One of the biggest challenges HR leaders face is getting employees to stick with well-being apps or other digital resources over time.

"There's a lot of data showing that it can be hard for people who are feeling depressed or anxious to stay with using well-being apps," says Dr. John Torous, chair of the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Mental Health Information Technology. "It's easy to think just because an app is on an employee's phone, they'll use it—but that's not always the case."

Torous advises HR leaders to ask vendors to produce aggregate usage or engagement data from clients before investing in the tools. Some providers use a variety of techniques to make their well-being content "stickier" and to keep employees committed to using it.

For example, Grokker users can track the time they spend on each wellness activity, and regular e-mail and app notifications remind employees of their accomplishments to help keep wellness goals top of mind.

Many HR and benefits leaders leverage platform utilization and employee engagement metrics to gauge return on investment for digital well-being resources. Cantieri of SurveyMonkey, for example, annually reviews and assesses employee utilization rates.

"Every year in preparing for open enrollment, we evaluate all of our benefits offerings, including our well-being programs," Cantieri says. "As part of that, we survey our employees on the offerings they think are working best for them, and we continue to see high usage and strong support for well-being resources."

The number of apps, videos, websites and other online tools designed to help employees boost their mental health have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Popular apps on the market—which often have both free and paid or “premium” versions—include Headspace for meditation and mindfulness; Sleepio for sleep therapy; Daylight to reduce worry and anxiety; Calm for guided meditation, breathing exercises and relaxing music; Happify for game-based approaches to mood enhancement; and Talkspace, which offers text and video chat with licensed mental health professionals.

If choosing among providers seems overwhelming, one way to make more-informed decisions is to use apps.digitalpsych.org, a website created by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in Washington, D.C., that evaluates mental health care apps on the market. The website considers criteria such as whether the app has supporting scientific studies, how it protects user privacy, its ease of use, whether it has connections to licensed therapists, its crisis management features and more.

While apps can be appealing because of their 24/7 accessibility and anonymity—the privacy of using such digital well-being tools can comfort employees concerned about the stigma of mental health issues—experts say it’s important to understand their limitations as well.

“The apps market has made a lot of progress in helping people deal with anxiety, stress and less severe types of depression that have become more common,” says Dr. John Torous, chair of the APA’s Committee on Mental Health Information Technology. “But it’s important to be realistic about what these apps can do. Most can’t transform employees’ mental health on their own, but what the best apps can do is augment or boost their well-being.”

Torous says apps can be helpful in supplementing treatment for employees with existing mental health challenges that are largely under control. “But for people experiencing a mental illness for the first time, you want to connect them first to a family care doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist so [the health care professional] can look holistically at what’s happening and guide that person to the best treatment option,” he says. “An app shouldn’t be their first option for treatment.”

HR professionals also stress the importance of conducting thorough due diligence when choosing from the burgeoning number of well-being resources on the market.

“Among other things, you need to look at whether vendors actually have more than a handful of people using their platforms,” says Craig Cohen, general manager of the ADP Marketplace, a digital storefront offering a variety of HR apps, including those that address mental well-being issues. “A lot of new providers and apps are popping up out of nowhere today, and it’s particularly important to do your research when you’re dealing with mental health wellness apps and platforms. You want to make sure there are credentialed experts and good science behind them and that the company is complying with all of the rules and regulations governing it.” —D.Z.

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Illustration by Michael Korfhage for HR Magazine.

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