



What every employer needs to know about workplace fitness benefits

The average employee's approach to working out has shifted dramatically, and employers need to adjust their fitness programs to meet those needs. Here's how to bring your offerings into the new era.





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Introduction

The modern workplace is changing at a rapid pace, so it's probably no surprise that how employers approach their wellness benefits should change as well.

Gone are the days when an in-office gym or a bowl of bananas in the break room can only count as corporate perks. After all, with just over half of American office workers now working at least partly from home – and 20% fully remote – on-site benefits have lost some of their luster.¹

Instead, today's employee craves not only a hybrid work schedule, but also a hybrid fitness model, one that offers the option to work out within a gym's walls – be that at the office or off site – but also from home, virtually and at their leisure. If your fitness benefit doesn't take this new reality into account, it's simply not keeping up with the times.

To aid employers in making their offerings as plugged in to the cultural moment as possible – the smartest way to ensure a robust ROI, high uptake among employees, and maximized health outcomes – this guide will take a deeper look at how the fitness landscape is shifting and how employers can craft the right fitness benefit portfolio for their workforce.



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Wellness programs have often been viewed as a nice extra, not a strategic imperative. Newer evidence tells a different story.”

– Harvard Business Review²

Understanding the reshaped benefits landscape

It's no exaggeration to say that the pandemic turned the fitness industry on its head.

Unable or unwilling to access in-person gyms or group classes, millions of Americans instead turned to virtual workouts and at-home exercise equipment. As a result, they realized that online classes and tutorials meant fitness could be an anytime activity, with a seemingly endless array of concentrations and methodologies. From status-symbol stationary bikes in the home gym to YouTube yoga on the living room floor, exercising at home became the default.

But what started as a necessity has quickly morphed into a preference for some. Employees have grown accustomed to this highly customizable, flexible and convenient model of keeping fit – and now work out at home more than ever before. In fact, the home is now outpacing the gym as the preferred site for exercising: **One survey found that 56% of Americans said they would rather work out at home than outside of it.**³ The customization of online fitness has also made a big impression on the average exerciser. Now, employees increasingly desire workouts that are just right for them – inclusive of all skill levels, ages and interests. In another study, **63% of people said they now expect workouts to be tailored to their needs – not as a nice-to-have extra, but as a default.**⁴



Meanwhile, employers are approaching workplace fitness in alternate ways. A number of new offerings are now cropping up or becoming more widespread, such as offering discounts on healthy meal options and food and grocery delivery services. Reimbursing employees for gym memberships, whether wholly or in part, has all but become standard.

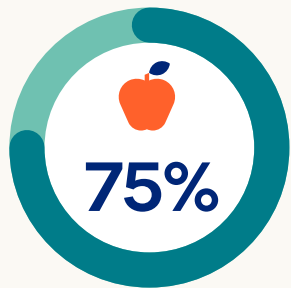
In addition, the lifestyle spending account (LSAs) are increasingly taking root in corporate benefit portfolios. Much like health savings accounts (HSAs) and flexible spending accounts (FSAs), LSAs allow pretax dollars used for preventive care, self-care, and personal fitness expenses such as exercise equipment, fitness classes or emotional health boosters. **Currently, only 10% of companies have an LSA in place, but 70% of those surveyed by Mercer say they're considering offering one.**⁵

What does all this seismic change amount to? A benefits landscape that's ripe for new opportunities and ideas – and desperately in need of innovative ways to reach a workforce whose fitness behaviors and tastes are in a state of flux.

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Regardless of the size, resources, setting, or type of your workplace, there are many ways to help your employees be more physically active.”

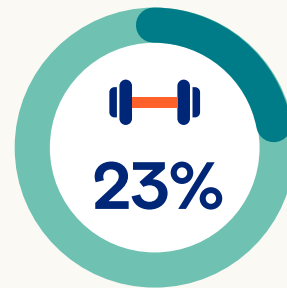
– Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁶



of employees said their employer has a responsibility to make sure they are physically well and healthy.⁷



of Americans think fitness is a top priority.⁸



of Americans meet minimum CDC standards for daily exercise.⁹



return is estimated for each wellness program dollar spent.¹⁰

Why fitness benefits matter more than ever

Even as the pandemic brought exercise to the American home in unprecedented new ways, it also reduced the baseline level of physical movement that most Americans get on a day-to-day basis. Here's one telling metric: **Americans now take 575 fewer steps a day compared to pre-pandemic activity levels.**¹¹

And while such a small number of steps may seem insignificant, the resultant health effects of reduced activity is anything but. Experts have found links between a sedentary lifestyle and conditions such as obesity, heart disease and high blood pressure.

This collectively lowered fitness level should thus be of real concern to employers who offer health coverage, since each of these conditions can result in extraordinary costs. And it's of great concern for many benefits leaders, which is why fitness benefits have become a crucial part of many companies' benefits offerings. **Today, roughly 81% of employers now offer some form of physical wellness benefits.**¹²

The rewards they reap as a result are hard to argue with – and equally hard to overstate:



of employees with access to a wellness program reported feeling more productive.¹³



of the employees said they had taken fewer sick days since beginning the program.¹⁴



of organizations that offered employees fitness benefits have lowered their health care costs as a result.¹⁵



Participants who engaged in physical exercise for at least 150 minutes per week were found to have fewer ER visits, hospital admissions and doctor visits than participants who did not hit the same movement threshold.¹⁶

But while this quantitative data is compelling, there are also equally compelling qualitative reasons to be generous with fitness benefits. **For example, well-thought-out fitness benefits can serve as an additional recruitment and retention tool – a boon in a tight hiring market.**

Research shows that today's employee is focused on achieving a more holistic, complete picture of wellness.

They don't want to just lose weight or stay toned, but also create a fulfilling and satisfying life in which health and fitness play an integral part. In fact, one study found that lifestyle-focused concerns, such as work-life balance, rank higher even than compensation in Americans' job-searching priorities.¹⁷ That's a strong indication that benefits that serve the person behind the employee are of great value to both prospective hires and current staff.

This is confirmed by the study that found that **73% of workers take health and wellness benefits into account when weighing a job offer. Among younger jobseekers – those aged 18 to 34 – that figure rises to a whopping 87%.¹⁸** Current employees also place huge emphasis on these benefits. A full 80% of workers whose employers offer wellness benefits report that they enjoy their jobs, and 85% of that number plan to stay put in their current position.¹⁹ On the flipside, among employees who don't have access to a benefit, only 40% say they're happy at work and a mere 58% intend to stick around at their current company.²⁰ If high morale and strong staff retention are your goals, it's clear that a worthwhile fitness benefit must be a key part of your strategy.



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A well-designed wellness program can be the difference between signing an employee or sending them in the direction of a competitor – or losing an integral member of your team to another company.”

– Forbes²¹

Finding the fitness benefit solution that works for you

When crafting a fitness benefit solution that fits your needs and those of your workforce, the key is to maximize value without overburdening benefits leaders and administrators. Here's how to do just that.



Make it flexible. Bearing in mind the intense focus that today's employee has on flexible fitness and customizable workouts, make sure to offer an array of virtual classes and exercise tutorial videos. But since many employees still want to continue to work out in public gyms or private studios, give them a variety of in-person options, subsidizing all or part of their dues.



You'll also want to make it easy for employees to join a fitness program or gym, change their membership parameters or cancel without hassle. And offer multiple membership tiers to ensure cost isn't a barrier to participation. For example, the Optum® One Pass Select™ program allows employees to choose from multiple membership levels, shift their membership tier at any point and move freely among the thousands of gyms covered by the fitness plan.



Make it inclusive and accessible. More than 50% of Americans say they're too intimidated by in-person gyms to create a fitness routine centered around one.²² In addition, many people with different physical needs – an employee with chronic neck pain, for example – find in-person gyms can't accommodate them. But there's an antidote to both problems in virtual fitness. And because One Pass Select members can access thousands of pieces of digital fitness classes to find the tutorials that are right for their needs, the program is a fit for all body types, skill levels and fitness requirements – and involves zero “gym-timidation.”



Make it effective. One thing that's abundantly clear: workplace fitness functions best and delivers the strongest results when it's whole-person-centered, adaptable and accessible. To help give your employees exactly the preventive care and lifestyle assistance they need, consider using a comprehensive health risk assessment (HRA). Used by more than 55% of large organizations that offer health coverage,²³ these questionnaires run the gamut of employees' health concerns and behaviors, giving employers a (HIPAA-safe) window into the conditions and habits that most need addressing in their staff.

Conclusion

To help contain health care costs, attract employees and boost company culture, it's crucial that employers and benefits leaders keep a close eye on the changing attitudes and preferences of their workforce.

Today, those preferences involve a dynamic and customizable exercise regimen, one that suits employee needs and keeps staff healthy in the long term.

By creating the conditions for continued physical health, employers will reap just as many positive effects, employers' investment will pay off as their employees move ever closer to a healthier, happier version of themselves.

Learn more about [One Pass Select™](#), the subscription-based fitness membership and well-being network designed to support a healthier lifestyle for members.



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