Spending on preventable chronic conditions consumes a significant portion of the total health care spend in the United States, which is expected to reach $4.8 trillion in 2021, up from $2.6 trillion in 2010. With these expected growth rates, health care spending will account for nearly 20% of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2021. The financial viability of all organizations, large and small, public and private, are at risk of collapse if effective measures to restrain costs are not implemented.

Given that 60% of Americans receive health insurance through employer-sponsored plans, escalating costs are now being transferred to corporations. Employers can expect 86% of full-time workers to be above normal weight or have at least one chronic condition, and 52% to have two or more chronic conditions. As a nation, 75% of our health care dollars go to treatment of chronic diseases. Employers must not only grapple with these hard costs, but also the indirect costs from higher rates of absenteeism, presenteeism, and disability.
The Good News:

The good news in these dismal statistics is that all of these chronic conditions can be reversed, and even better, prevented. Diabetes, obesity, hypertension and their downstream complications, including cancer and heart disease, are largely preventable. Studies have shown that at least one-third of all cancer cases are preventable, and over 200,000 deaths from heart disease and stroke each year are also preventable through healthy behaviors.

Ideal cardiovascular health metrics including regular exercise, healthy levels of fat intake, not smoking, moderate alcohol intake, appropriate body mass index and intake of fruits and vegetables can reduce death and disability from chronic conditions by six-fold. Despite this fact, in a recent study on trends in cardiovascular health metrics, only 1.2% of participants met the set standard levels of all tested health metrics.

The Attempted Solution:

Corporations attempt to alleviate this health deficit through workforce wellness programs. Employer efforts to help employees manage chronic illnesses saved $3.78 in health care costs for every $1 invested in the effort. That ROI has the potential to grow even further as lowering risk factors to their theoretical minimums (or moving from high-risk to low-risk), would reduce average annual costs per working-age adult by 18.4%.

Despite the potential, corporate wellness programs are slow to evolve on multiple fronts.

SYSTEMATIC IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKFORCE WELLNESS LAGS. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a report showing that only half of U.S. employers with 50 or more employees offer any sort of wellness initiatives. They also claimed that larger employers are more likely to offer programs than smaller employers and larger employers offer a greater variety of options. In addition, when the programs are implemented, overall participation in programs is poor with the most motivated individuals participating, and those who need them the most opt out.

CUMBERSOME PROGRAMS AND CLUNKY INTERFACES LACK APPEAL. In many cases, data is acquired via health risk assessments (HRAs) that transmit static information via exhaustive questionnaires. Such information is used by the employer to tailor interventions, but is plagued by long periods between “touches”. Subjective data is self-reported and inaccurate. It has also been shown that nearly one third of employers have HRA completion rates of only 20% or less.

CURRENT METRICS ARE A POOR PREDICTOR OF HEALTH & WELLNESS. Today’s wellness programs rely on participation metrics to determine success. Employees receive credit for filling out surveys, online webinars, and other “busy work” wellness activities. Data points routinely acquired include cholesterol, blood pressure, and glucose, but biometric screenings fail to measure critically important variables including fitness levels, sedentary behaviors, and damaging visceral fat (belly fat), which is tightly linked to inflammation, diabetes, cancer and heart disease. Nutritional counseling is also frequently overlooked.
The Real Solution: Revolutionizing Workplace Wellness

It's time for workforce wellness to move beyond acquiring static information from HRAs and biometrics to a dynamic model that leverages self-monitoring through the use of innovative software applications and wireless technologies. Our global society exists in a state of constant ‘connectedness’, with the use of mobile phones in the millions. The number of Americans using mobile phones for health information or tools reached 95 million in 2013, according to a Manhattan Research Cybercitizen study. That's up 27% from 75 million two years ago.\textsuperscript{14}

Mobile monitoring represents the next revolution in communication and wellness. Recent studies have shown that individuals given feedback in real time from mobile monitoring are more likely to sustain positive behavior changes.\textsuperscript{22} One meta-analysis study demonstrated that internet counseling has been shown to be as effective as face-to-face visits, and text messaging by health coaches results in much greater levels of physical activity.\textsuperscript{24} The digital era is shifting health care models from ‘doctor-centric’ to one that is ‘patient-centric.’

Automated text messaging and motivational paradigms emerging from intelligent software platforms facilitate the provision of personalized health plans and are yielding unprecedented clinical outcomes.

Conclusion

Today’s wellness program must deliver tangible health outcomes that directly result in healthcare savings for the employer and employee. Reducing an employee’s use of medications, reversing conditions like Type II Diabetes, or improving cardiovascular fitness are the types of metrics that really matter.

MD Revolution’s digital health platform, RevUp, targets the real drivers of chronic disease and is validated by results, not participation. Our easy-to-use web and mobile applications aggregate data from wearable devices and apps to make employees aware of their behaviors and activity levels. Expert health coaches make this data relevant and enable accountability through actionable, personalized feedback. Using proprietary analytics, RevUp can predict which employees are on track to achieve their goals, and our points system, which awards healthy behaviors, has been tightly linked to real health outcomes.

Without targeting the real scientific drivers of chronic conditions, true health and wellness will continue to evade us while costs rise. Employers can no longer afford to foot the bill and must find new ways to maximize digital health tools to scale workforce wellness and empower employees to take control of their own health and wellness.
CITATIONS:
14. Manhattan Research, Cybercitizen Health U.S. 2013 Study