A. Introduction

According to the 16th annual National Business Group on Health and Towers Watson Employer Survey on Purchasing Value in Health Care, social media is one of the key emerging strategies employers are using to improve employee wellness and reduce health care costs. Today 10% of employers are already using social networking to improve employee health and well-being, and as the survey noted, “It is likely more employers will embrace this vehicle to provide their workforce with expanded education and support.”
As employers embrace social networking and begin to apply its tenets to their employee wellness programs, it is important that they understand what it means and how it can be implemented in a successful way. This report is designed to provide a framework for employers who are ready to take their wellness program to the next level by leveraging the core concepts of social networking.

**B. What Is Social Networking?**

The term social networking has become ubiquitous in the news, on the Internet, and in conversation. Since it has been used liberally in so many different ways, it is important to understand what it actually means. Social networking means working together within a defined group of individuals—a social network—to achieve a common purpose. That purpose may be to connect with new people or to share information with existing friends.

The concept of social networking has become so prevalent in the last few years because the Internet has made it easy for this process to happen online. Often people will think of websites like Facebook or Twitter when they hear the words social network. It is important to recognize that these are simply popular technology platforms that allow the process of social networking to take place on the web, and there are many others like them. Social networking can occur offline, too. Anytime a group of individuals is organizing for a specific purpose, social networking is taking place.

Your workplace itself is a trusted social network. It is a network of individuals who are connected because they work for the same company. Within this network there exists an inherent sense of trust based on shared company values and a common understanding that everyone is part of the same community. Social networking in the corporate setting means bringing people together within this trusted environment to share information and work together toward common goals.

**C. Why Social Networking Improves Employee Health**

There is a new body of research forming that demonstrates just how important social networks are to individual health. Dr. Nicholas Christakis from Harvard Medical School has pioneered this research, and he found that good health is contagious. This means that when a person loses weight or quits smoking, their friends and family are more likely to do so as well. The implication of this research is that interventions can leverage this phenomenon to purposefully spread healthy behaviors. By using strategies that bring your employees together and leverage peer support, you can increase the likelihood that your population gets healthier.
Social networking also generates participation rates higher than any traditional form of wellness initiative. It is difficult to reach all of your employees with "one-to-one" interventions like coaching. Even web-based platforms that offer educational content and health trackers fail to truly engage a large population. The power of social networking lies in its “many-to-many” construct, where participants are empowered to engage their other colleagues. When this happens, your wellness program goes viral and turns into a grassroots, employee-driven initiative.

Once employees become engaged in wellness programs through social methods, they are more likely to remain interested over the long-term. Connecting with their colleagues makes wellness fun and highly relevant. Their colleagues also provide a sense of accountability, which increases their chance of success. Long-term engagement is the key to sustainable behavior change and improved health outcomes.

D. How to Add Social Networking to Your Wellness Program

Now that you’ve learned what social networking means and why it helps to improve the health of your employee population, here are eight key strategies along with actionable suggestions for applying this concept to your current wellness program.

1. Create Connections

Bringing people together is the core function of social networking, and it should be the first thing you do. Think about how you can help your employees connect with each other around commonalities. All employees have goals they are aiming for such as losing weight, quitting smoking, or staying active. People also have unique interests like playing soccer, healthy cooking, or yoga. Helping employees connect around these topics allows them to find supporters and partners to pursue healthy activities.

How you can do it at your company:

✓ Survey your employees to find out about their health interests and goals. Get their permission to share that information so you can help them find like-minded colleagues.
✓ Institute a buddy system by asking employees to identify a co-worker who will exercise with them and motivate them to stick with their fitness routine.

✓ Turn one-on-one coaching sessions into group coaching to leverage peer support and accountability. Employees will be more likely to participate and stay engaged if they are working together as a group.

2. Host Challenges & Competitions

Challenges and competitions motivate employees to take action by tapping into their natural competitive spirit. When there is a contest or challenge issued to a group of individuals, many people feel a strong desire to win. Competitions might consist of individuals competing with each other, teams of people competing to win, or even a large group of individuals working together to achieve one common goal. By providing a structure, rules, and a defined timeline for participation, competitions help organize people to take action. Competitions are most successful when they include motivational game mechanics like rounds, rankings, and scores. Team competitions leverage the power of accountability since people don’t want to disappoint their team members.

How you can do it at your company:

✓ Establish a company-wide goal (e.g. losing 10,000 pounds in ten weeks), ask employees to voluntarily submit their weight loss each week, and tally the results for everyone to see.

✓ Host an exercise competition at your workplace. Invite employees to form teams, identify a team captain, and select a team name. Then ask each team captain to submit the team’s total exercise minutes each week. Rank all of the teams weekly and make the standings available to the entire company.

✓ Organize tournaments and intramural leagues for sports that are popular among your employees. You may even consider organizing a “field day” for your employees where they can compete in several different activities at a single event.
3. Leverage Peer-to-Peer Invitations

Would you rather join a wellness program when invited by the person in the cubicle next to you or when you are invited by “HR”? An invitation from a trusted colleague is always more powerful and compelling—and people are more likely to pay attention. When employees invite each other to participate, it makes a wellness program welcoming and adds an element of trust. It also takes advantage of peer influence—how can you say no when a colleague invites you to join her walking group? By encouraging employees to invite each other to your wellness programs, you can achieve dramatically higher participation rates.

**How you can do it at your company:**

- Each time someone joins a wellness program, make it easy to spread the word, ask the employee to do so, and empower the employee to do it. Provide print or email templates that employees can fill out and give to a colleague. Give employees space on the invitation to indicate the reason(s) why they joined the program.

- Create minimum participation thresholds. For example, in order to get a free flu shot, consider requiring employees to bring at least one colleague along with them to the clinic.

4. Facilitate Conversations

Most people love to talk—especially about themselves and the activities they find interesting. Find ways to help organize conversations about healthy topics. People find it engaging to ask questions and solicit responses from their colleagues. Conversations generate lots of crowd-sourced content—more than you can create on your own or license from a third-party. Since this content is from their colleagues, it becomes more interesting and engaging for employees to read.
How you can do it at your company:

✔ Start a corporate wellness blog or Twitter account and use it to start conversations about important wellness events and topics.

✔ Host conversational events like a “weight loss strategy hour” where employees can congregate and talk about a common topic of interest.

✔ Start a corporate wiki that allows employees to ask and answer health-related questions posed by their colleagues, such as “where is the best place to buy running shoes?”

5. Allow Public Expressions

People are engaged by the opportunity to express who they are as well as the chance to see how others express themselves. This is why people like to view profiles on websites like Facebook and LinkedIn. Find a way to let people in your organization share a profile with their colleagues talking about who they are, what they are looking to do (e.g. find a tennis partner), and what success they’ve had (e.g. successfully ran a 5K race last month). This form of public expression allows people to feel a sense of belonging and also inspires others to participate.

How you can do it at your company:

✔ Ask people to submit photos of themselves and their colleagues engaging in healthy activities. Create a photo gallery and share it with the whole company.

✔ Solicit success stories from your employees and publish them so that others can be inspired by their achievements.
6. Use Peer Encouragement

Peer encouragement is one of the most powerful motivators because most people care about the opinions of others. You can leverage this to nudge your employees toward healthy actions or reward them for success. For example, you can allow your employees to remind each other to take their health risk assessment or schedule their annual physical exam. You can also encourage them to congratulate each other for meeting personal goals or completing certain tasks. Being recognized by a colleague is a truly motivating and gratifying experience.

How you can do it at your company:

✓ Ask those employees who have completed a wellness activity, such as taking a health risk assessment, to encourage others to do so as well. Set a company-wide participation goal to give them a reason to persuade others to take action.

✓ Create fun awards such as “Healthy Role Model” and “Most Likely to Take the Stairs.” Make certificates that employees can print out or email to their colleagues when they feel the award is deserved.

7. Show Status and Comparison

People always want to know how they measure up against the other people around them. This provides a benchmark for success and allows them to see if their results are above or below the average. Sharing this data makes people more likely to participate and can motivate them to achieve more. People are also stimulated by the social status that is conferred by special titles that indicate a higher level of achievement than their peers, especially when that title can be publicly displayed. This is why Girl Scout badges and karate belts have so much meaning to the people who earn them.

How you can do it at your company:

✓ When hosting wellness activities, share results with your entire company. For example, if hosting a pedometer walking program, let everyone know how many steps the average employee is walking per day. Drill down by categories like
worksite, gender, and age group so people can see the data in the most relevant context.

✓ Create a title like “Wellness Champion” that employees can earn through participation in certain activities or achievement of specific goals. Give your employees a way to publicly display this status through a badge, t-shirt, or trophy.

8. Tie Rewards to Social Behaviors

Do you have a financial or other type of incentive program in place for your employees? Consider aligning rewards with social behaviors such as inviting a colleague to join a wellness program, attending a wellness event with another person, or becoming a team captain. By including social strategies in your incentive program, you can drive participation, improve outcomes, and increase long-term engagement.

How you can do it at your company:

✓ When employees join a wellness program, ask if a colleague referred them. Offer a prize to the colleagues who are named most frequently as the referring parties.

✓ When hosting a wellness competition, offer a special incentive to individuals who sign up to become a team captain and recruit other colleagues to participate. Consider making the incentive contingent on reaching a minimum team size such as five participants.

✓ Create incentives that are tied to company-wide goals. For example, if at least 50% of the workforce takes a Health Risk Assessment, every participant will receive a reward. This gives people a strong reason to persuade others to participate.
Conclusion

As more employers seek to adopt social networking to increase the success of their corporate wellness programs, it is important that they understand how to leverage these core methods for social engagement. If used effectively and thoughtfully, these strategies have the potential to generate high participation rates, long-term engagement, sustainable behavior change, and significant health outcomes for employee populations—resulting in a healthier company with a healthier bottom line.

About Shape Up The Nation

Our team has spent the last five years building expertise in implementing social networking strategies for employee wellness programs. We have taken the social engagement methods outlined in this report and brought them together in an easy-to-use, web-based platform that employers can deploy within their trusted corporate environment. Interested to learn more about how we can help you improve engagement and outcomes by making your wellness program social? We can show you exactly how we use social networking strategies to transform the health of populations. Email us today at info@sutn.com or call us at 1-877-561-8739.