

# PAIRING WELLNESS AND FUN

## Gamification Supports Workplace Efforts

“In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun and snap, the job’s a game. And every task you undertake becomes a piece of cake, a lark, a spree, it’s very clear to see.”

Recognize these words? If you started humming a “Spoonful of Sugar” from the Disney classic *Mary Poppins*, you’re on the right track. The scene in the movie involves the new nanny showing her charges how much fun it can be to clean up their rooms if they just add a little fun and games to the chore.



Bringing an element of fun into workplace wellness programs can boost engagement and success. Gamification can be as simple as a hydration challenge or as technical as online apps and tracking.

A parallel can be drawn from the sentiments in that scene to game-based strategies in workplace wellness, often referred to as “gamification.” The theory is that by using programs or challenges that make a game out of getting healthy at work, more people will be engaged and ready to make lifestyle changes.

“The sweet spot for gaming within the comprehensive wellness program is going to be affecting habits, helping people make healthier choices,” explains Heather Sittler, health strategist at Hylant in Fort Wayne. “The games provide the engagement in a wellness program, and they’re going to help people just recognize this is a habit I can change, this is something I can affect.”

Sittler works with companies on how to design, implement and execute strategic health and wellness plans. She says a number of her clients are using gamification as one piece of their overall wellness program. But anyone who thinks just about using games to achieve results will have a rude awakening.

“What we do with gamification specifically, we use it as supportive programming. You wouldn’t want to consider the gaming piece of wellness the end result. Or you wouldn’t want to consider that as your entire program,” she offers. “If your program consists just of the gaming piece of it, you’re really missing the mark.”

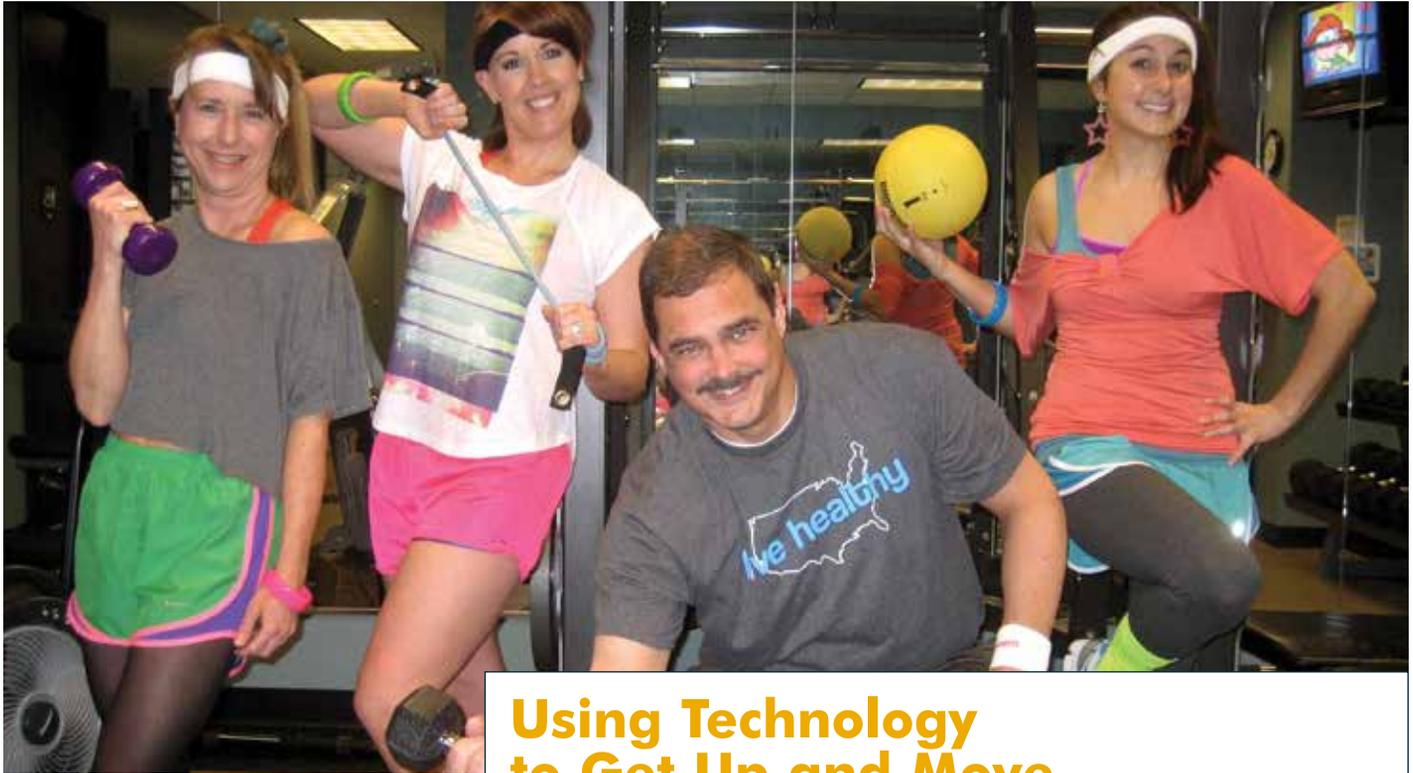
Troy Vincent, director of Iowa-based wellness vendor Live Healthy America, shares similar thoughts.

“The goal isn’t to have people participate in a game. When it comes to the gamification of utilizing wellness, it is one piece of building a workplace culture of health and wellness and being able to drive sustainable behavior shifts ... it’s a tool in the toolbox,” he states. “If we don’t engage in multiple opportunities for our workforce and don’t offer things that are unique and different, we’re never going to be able to attain and attract the best people in our organization.”

### What’s in a game?

Ever participated in a *Biggest Loser*-type challenge at work where the person with the largest percentage of weight loss at the end of the

Each employer should decide which type of program is best-suited for its workforce, notes Heather Sittler, health strategist at Hylant. Healthy incentives are another way to increase involvement once programs conclude.



## Using Technology to Get Up and Move

competition is declared the winner?

Maybe you've been in a contest to see who takes the most steps – tracked by a pedometer – in a certain amount of time.

Or possibly you've gone online and tracked how much water you drank or how often you avoided the vending machine and instead consumed nutritious snacks. It could be that your employer has provided arm bands that track your movements throughout the day, allowing you to accumulate points to earn badges and prizes.

All of these tactics are game-based wellness. Picking the ones that are right for each workforce is the trick, Sittler attests.

"A *Biggest Loser*-type challenge, there are some groups which that challenge is thoroughly inappropriate. Maybe they're not ready to lose weight. You need to pick and choose your games based on the goals you're trying to accomplish. For a reduction in cholesterol, you might pick an exercise or nutrition campaign that will tie into that," she explains. "Risk reduction, that's the goal we're looking for, to help people's health behaviors."

One of Sittler's clients, Ash Brokerage Corporation in Fort Wayne, has been using gamification for several years. Human resources manager Cara Bauer explains how the company keeps the challenges fresh and inviting for all employees.

"We have a lot of people here who are

A team of Purdue researchers is undertaking two big challenges at once: decreasing childhood obesity while also increasing interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education.

Alka and Brad Harriger (professors of computer information technology and mechanical engineering technology, respectively) recently received a \$1.2 million grant from the National Science Foundation for their TECHFIT (Teaching Engineering Concepts to Harness Future Innovators and Technologists) program.

The goal is to train middle school teachers on how to instruct students to create games that require the players to be active – therefore using STEM curriculum to help curb the obesity crisis.

The husband-and-wife team came up with the idea with a pair of former Purdue professors, Mike and Susan Flynn (who are now with the College of Charleston in South Carolina), while watching their sons compete in high school wrestling matches. The Flynn's are professors in health and kinesiology disciplines.

"We're in technology and the general public started embracing technology early on. It did have the negative effect of impacting obesity and there's a lot of people that blame technology (for) increased obesity," Alka Harriger explains. "But it's also come out with ways to aid your fitness. You have apps you can get on your smart phone; the Nintendo Wii Fit, Microsoft Kinect are examples of our discipline recognizing that instead of being blamed for exacerbating the crisis, we can aid it."

The TECHFIT program will be launched at several middle schools in the West Lafayette and Lafayette areas. The Harrigers set up a pilot program in 2009 and recall that the students were excited about what they were building and didn't even realize they were "exercising."

"One of the games the students created was a push-up contest. There were a couple of the kids on the floor competing with each other doing push-ups, saying that really gave them a workout," Alka Harriger remembers. "You can create these things, and really address fitness and have fun doing it."

Teachers will begin learning the TECHFIT program in July.

**RESOURCES:** Alka and Brad Harriger, Purdue University, at [www.purdue.edu](http://www.purdue.edu)

heavily into exercising and running, so we try not to make it so they're always the benefactor of our events," she notes. "Sometimes that can be a challenge, to try to find things that are fun, things people would want to do outside of work."

The company's most recent game was a "Holiday Trimmings" program, in which participants weighed in every two weeks, with the goal of gaining no more than five pounds over the holiday season. People who maintained their weight were entered into a biweekly drawing with a grand prize awarded at the end.

Incentives keep people motivated and healthy prizes are best, Sittler emphasizes.

"There are different ways you can tie it back to benefits, or you can go the traditional prize route. There are groups that will give away running shoes, a mountain bike. I like it best when those prizes are tied back to some sort of health improvement. To give away a TV – I don't think that enforces the message of what you're trying to accomplish," she acknowledges.

### Social components

Vincent contends the strategy of gamification is part of the natural progression of workplace wellness.

"Ten years ago, it was do your health risk assessment online and that was the epicenter of data. Now we're doing biometric screenings

and things like that," he maintains. "Wellness went from a niche thing to it's here to stay and part of our overall DNA of our organization, a cultural catalyst of connectivity within our organization. Gamification really brings that together. It can be fun; it can be motivating; I can tie rewards to it."

The technological advances continue to enhance what employers are able to offer.

"The considerations were keep it simple, easy and achievable to begin with. Move into competitions. Now we're moving into tracking and monitoring progress, and then we're making it social," Vincent shares. "It's a steady progression of: it goes from a niche idea, to part of the culture, to part of the rewards and behavioral change."

Another piece to keep in mind is the multi-generational face of the modern workforce.

"The evolution of Facebook, cell phones, smart phones, email to texting to snap chat and various things that are evolving; trying to communicate employee wellness to the 51-60 (demographic) is not the same as our 18-21 (demographic)," Vincent relays.

"Wellness is becoming a very personal decision and if we're going to engage people in healthy behaviors, it needs to have an element of fun and an element of play to it. It provides us an opportunity to see where we can connect various elements of what interests people."

**RESOURCES:** Troy Vincent, Live Healthy America, at [www.livehealthyamerica.org](http://www.livehealthyamerica.org) | Heather Sittler, Hylant, at [www.hylant.com](http://www.hylant.com) | Cara Bauer, Ash Brokerage Corporation, at [www.ashbrokerage.com](http://www.ashbrokerage.com)

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