THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

to Implementing **Gamification Techniques** in **Wellness Programming**

CORE HEALTH
by **Carebook**

Understanding Gamification in Employee Wellness

Employee wellness programs have proven to provide a substantial return on investment for companies that have them. Yet, employees still report anxiety, depression, and burnout at record levels, and companies are struggling under that weight as turnover is high and employee engagement is low. [1]

Gamified wellness programs have been proven to increase intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and significantly boost employee participation. But how do you implement gamification? This ultimate guide will provide the latest evidence-based advice on designing, implementing, and evaluating your gamified wellness program to improve employee participation and help your employees reach their health goals.

Gamification refers to the application of game elements to non-game settings. [2] The phrase was coined by Nick Pelling, a computer programmer and inventor, in 2003, and its strategy has been employed with great success across many industries, such as education, fast food, marketing, retail, and fitness.

For many industry giants—from Fitbit to Apple and Duolingo to McDonald's – gamification has proven to be the single most effective way to increase user participation and incentivize desired behaviors. [3] Gamification creates novelty through play, socialization, and engagement, which drives motivation and adherence. This can be highly effective when building new, healthy habits.

> **For a deep dive into the tremendous potential of using gamification to increase employee engagement, read our white paper.**
>
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Benefits of Gamification in Employee Wellness

Including game elements in non-game settings makes a tedious or difficult process more engaging, rewarding, and fun. Because of its broad applicability throughout the entire digital wellness platform and program experience, it's a helpful tool that can increase participation in numerous ways.

Crucially, since many of the best digital wellness platforms have gamified elements built in—as well as optional health tech integrations, such as Fitbit or Apple Health— gamification also offers a much more cost-effective way to continually motivate employees.

The benefits of gamification in wellness aren't theoretical; they're proven thanks to a rapidly growing body of evidence showing its unique efficacy in employee wellness. [4][5][6]

TOP BENEFITS OF GAMIFICATION:

1. Makes tedious tasks more fun
2. Easy tech integrations allow for optimized data usage
3. Increased personalization
4. Cost-effective & consistent motivation
5. Increased employee program participation & overall engagement

Gamification Components

When designing or adding gamified components to your current program–you must understand the goal of gamification and the strategies and elements available to use. Gamification in employee wellness is most successful when it is highly personalized and guarantees the privacy of employee health information–more on that later.

Strategies commonly used in gamified systems include:

- Goal setting
- Feedback
- Progress comparisons
- Fun and playfulness
- Capacity to overcome challenges
- Reinforcement
- Social connectivity

Gamification effectively motivates users to engage in specific behaviors by incentivizing participation through fun, novelty, and play.

What are Game Elements?

In addition to broad game strategies that can be applied in several ways, game elements are the individual mechanics, rules, and components that can be used in gamified programs. The most common game elements used in wellness programming include:

Process-Based Gamification Tactics

Levels

Immediate success feedback

Continuous progress feedback

Goal-setting

Choice in goals & activities

Stories and themes

Rewards & Achievements

Points

Achievement badges

Leaderboards

Prizes

Social Elements

Support & Accountability

Teams

Partners

Competitions

The Challenges of Gamifying Employee Wellness

It's important to discuss gaps in the research and natural limitations of any new technology or strategy before implementing it in your organization. While there have been a few excellent studies that demonstrated long-term benefits to employee wellness and participation in gamified programs, more research is needed to understand its success in the long term. [6]

In addition, two crucial considerations in the research stand out when designing and implementing gamified elements into a wellness program.

Privacy is Paramount

Organizations are keenly aware of the importance of secure and private data collection and storage in today's technologically driven landscape. Yet, recent events, such as the global aviation outage of 2024 caused by a single software update, drive home the importance of privacy design for employee and customer data alike. [7]

A program design with multiple layers of separation between the employee's personal health details and what is shared with other employees is necessary.

Furthermore, employee wellness programs present an even more delicate situation as many employees fear how their personal health information could be used against them in the professional realm. [8] [9] For that reason, a program design with multiple layers of separation between the employee's personal health details and what is shared with other employees is necessary.

Personalization is Key

Another valid concern sometimes voiced when discussing gamification in employee wellness is that generic game elements and strategies are ineffective, and that is true.

Early gamification attempts typically meant offering a challenge or competition for all employees to compete against each other and try to achieve a singular outcome, such as weight loss, a daily step goal, or smoking cessation.

> One of the main strengths of gamification is its ability to introduce a social element to habit change, which is encouraging and fun.

While these competitions can be effective for some, they can also isolate and discourage other employees. For an employee in a wheelchair, a daily step competition may leave them feeling left out, isolated, and discouraged which would have the exact opposite effect as intended.

These challenges can also feel invasive and increase feelings of shame, failure, and disappointment if handled indelicately. For example, complex physiological outcomes such as weight loss must be highly personalized and should never be compared directly from person to person. When they are–especially when that data is shared publicly–these programs can result in worse health outcomes, primarily driven by worsening mental health, which decreases personal efficacy. [10]

With these challenges in mind, how do you design a gamified wellness program that protects employees' privacy and provides a truly personalized, fun, and engaging experience for each employee?

Design Considerations for Gamified Wellness Programs

When considering gamification design and implementation options, examining how some companies have done so successfully can be helpful. One research study offers incredible insights into a program design that maximizes this strategy's potential in employee wellness.

CASE STUDY: Promoting Occupational Health Through Gamification & E-Coaching

International Journal of Environmental Research & Public Health

A research team in the Netherlands wanted to create a gamified employee health program for a university that ensured employee data privacy and security so employees would be more likely to participate and enjoy the process.

They created a two-level, asymmetrical game design that guaranteed anonymity of the data and allowed everyone to pursue their individual health goals set by occupational physicians while still allowing for social interaction and competitive benefits of a single-level game design.

Study Overview

Conducted at a Dutch research university with 3,200 employees and doctoral students, the five-month study involved 53 self-selected participants. The program featured a two-level game design with a personal and social challenge level.

At the personal challenge level, points were assigned to each employee's actions that worked toward their individual health goals set with the overseeing physician. Employees had point goals set each month by the physician for their goal behaviors.

At the social challenge level, bonus points were awarded each time an employee scored points at the personal challenge level, which were tracked on a social leaderboard. Employees could compare their performance with peers, but individual health data remained confidential, shared only between the employee and physician.

Key Outcomes

1. Approximately half of the participants made significant lifestyle improvements, with the most notable changes in diet and physical activity.

2. The two-level game design was highly effective, allowing employees to achieve personal health goals while benefiting from gamified social elements like leaderboards and competition without compromising their privacy.

Understanding the Benefits of Two-Level & Asymmetrical Game Design

The two-level game design used in the Dutch study is ingenious and may be the future of gamification in wellness programming. This example of an asymmetrical game design deftly solves the two main concerns when designing wellness programming. Chiefly, it shields employee health information but maintains all the closeness and community that employees expect from these types of health programs, allowing employees to pursue personally relevant health goals and behaviors.

Decades of data support the assertion that personalized content and goal setting are the best practices when helping employees reach their health goals, but historically, providing it has been a significant challenge.

The Dutch study combined the best interventions and strategies available in corporate wellness, including versatile mobile technology, health coaching, highly tailored programming, and gamification strategies to motivate employees to engage in their wellness program. Because participation was so high, more than half of these employees met at least some of their health goals and rated the DMCoach+ program highly in post-program questionnaires.

10 Best Practices for Incorporating Gamification in Wellness Programming

How you design and implement a gamification strategy into your wellness program depends on your unique organizational goals, needs, and technology. But no matter how big your business or what wellness technology you have available, **these 10 best practices** will help boost your program's employee participation and help your organization create a healthier, happier workforce.

1. DEFINE CLEAR, MEASURABLE GOALS FOR YOUR WELLNESS PROGRAM

You cannot assess the effectiveness of any change without first setting clear, verifiable goals for your organization. Before you make any changes to your organization's wellness initiatives, conduct an internal audit to assess your team's needs. From there, you can set goals and choose solutions to meet them.

2. PROGRAM PARTICIPATION MUST BE VOLUNTARY

All wellness program offerings must be voluntary. Research has shown that when employees are forced to participate in wellness programming, it can have the exact opposite effect as intended and backfire.[11] [12] Paternalistic business practices have routinely been shown to damage the relationship between employees and employers. They are also highly ineffective at creating meaningful health and behavior change.

3. PERSONALIZATION IS CRUCIAL

Wellness program goals and activities must be highly personalized. A smoking cessation challenge has no benefit to a non-smoker, just as a daily step count goal offers little benefit to a wheelchair user. Tailor challenges and rewards to individual preferences, fitness levels, and health goals to enhance engagement and foster positive feelings about the program.

4. OPT FOR THE MOST TECH-ENABLED OPTION POSSIBLE

The best organizations use agile digital wellness platforms that centralize program administration and provide easy access for employees from their favorite devices. They also offer much stronger security around employee's personal health information, providing participants peace of mind.

Some platforms even offer additional personal tech integrations, such as fitness trackers and wellness apps that track physical activity, sleep, and other health metrics. These platforms enable easy program administration from anywhere and additional program options for challenges, games, and accountability.

5. GAMIFIED WELLNESS INITIATIVES SHOULD FIT SEAMLESSLY INTO THE EMPLOYEE'S WORKFLOW, NOT ADD ADDITIONAL REQUIRED LABOR

This applies to all wellness initiatives: when employees feel that wellness programs add extra work to their day, they're less likely to participate. To avoid this, use mobile wellness platforms and apps that employees can access anytime, anywhere, reducing the pressure to complete tasks during work hours when they need to focus on more pressing matters.

6. UTILIZE ASYMMETRICAL GAME DESIGN

By using asymmetrical game design—like the two-level design used in the Dutch study—you allow employees to pursue personally relevant health goals and behaviors while fostering a social, supportive environment through leaderboards or challenges.[13] Best of all, asymmetrical play does not require personal health data to be shared with coworkers or employers, so trust and privacy is maintained.

7. PROMOTE PROMOTE PROMOTE

A key factor in your wellness program's success is the level of leadership support and how effectively it's promoted to employees. For the best results, leadership should fully back the program and encourage participation—ideally by leading by example. Regular communication from program administrators, including updates, success stories, and progress, is essential to keeping participants engaged.

8. OFFER VARIED INCENTIVES FOR KEY OUTCOMES

While financial incentives are highly effective at motivating employees in the short term, gamified systems are most effective when they offer a mix of tangible rewards (e.g., gift cards, fitness equipment) and intangible rewards (e.g., recognition, extra leave days) to motivate participants. This is another way to personalize the program and assure maximum participation.

9. ACQUIRE FEEDBACK AND DOCUMENT IT

When implementing a new program, think about the process like an experiment, and you are the scientist. Data is essential, so create feedback loops where employees can share their experiences and offer suggestions to improve the program. You can also use data analytics to monitor participation, track progress, and identify trends.

10. EVALUATE PROGRAM IMPACT REGULARLY

Lastly, the data you collect should be regularly reviewed with leadership to assess the program's effectiveness. Metrics such as participation rates, completion rates, employee satisfaction, health outcomes and engagement metrics are crucial to proving the ROI of your wellness program and guiding future decisions. Review the program's impact regularly and adjust based on feedback and data insights.

Next-Gen Wellness Solutions: Driving Employee Participation with Gamification

Effective behavioral modification strategies like gamification drive the results of the most effective wellness programs, but the program's design is crucial. By using an asymmetrical game design, such as a two-level design, you can protect sensitive employee health information while still reaping all of the social benefits of competition, camaraderie, and fun.

About CoreHealth

CoreHealth by Carebook is a leading digital health technology company trusted by global companies to power their health and wellness programs. Our innovative wellness platform helps maximize health, engagement, and productivity for over 5 million employees worldwide.

Discover how CoreHealth can revolutionize your organization's wellness strategy! Contact us today to learn how we can help you design and deliver a tailored, configurable, and scalable digital wellness solution for your organization.

Ready to see what you've been missing?

Speak to one of our technology experts today!

[Book a Demo](#)

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