



# DIGITAL HEALTH – MEETING THE WELLBEING NEEDS OF A FLEXIBLE WORKFORCE



Published by the  
Reward & Employee  
Benefits Association

In association with





# Editor's welcome



Our working habits, personal priorities and wellbeing behaviours have all been transformed by our experiences over the last two years. Alongside the Covid-19 pandemic, technology, data analysis and digitalisation have all played a significant role in driving long-lasting change at work and in society.

Employers and employees are still debating long-term policies around working patterns, with a spectrum ranging from 'anywhere any time', to those demanding a return to workplace-based nine-to-five regularity. Wherever an individual business sits on that continuum, technology will be vital to enable effective work – as well as making sure that employees have a consistent experience in terms of workplace culture, access to benefits and wellbeing.

Healthcare – prevention, diagnosis, treatment and management of illness – is also being revolutionised by digitalisation. Personalised prescription drugs using 3D printing techniques, improved diagnostics using Artificial Intelligence, and self-monitoring apps that help support chronic conditions such as diabetes are just some of the future ways that digital health will evolve.

While these ideas are still under development, present technology such as apps and virtual healthcare support are already providing us with more sophisticated ways of improving our wellbeing. The role of employers in digital health is to provide access to tools that can help employees remain healthy and productive for the long term, and ensure that they have access to appropriate healthcare tools should they need to get help.

The pandemic brought home to every business the importance of supporting a healthy workforce and also highlighted the value of digital health services such as online GPs, employee assistance programmes and wellbeing apps. In this guide, we explore some of the latest digital health ideas and future plans – as well as the ways in which employers can make sure that employees benefit from them today, no matter when or where they choose to work.

**Maggie Williams**  
Content Director, REBA

# Contents

- Sponsor's comment..... 3
- Chapter 1: How the pandemic has reshaped workplace wellbeing..... 4
- Chapter 2: The digital health revolution..... 6
- Chapter 3: Switching employees on to digital health..... 8
- Chapter 4: Integrating digital into health campaigns..... 9
- Quiz..... 10
- Who we are..... 11



This report was devised by REBA in association with BHSF.

The guide was edited by Maggie Williams, written by Samantha Barrett and designed by SallyannDesign.

© REBA 2022. Published by REBA Group Ltd, 7c Vera Road London SW6 6RW United Kingdom.



# Sponsor's comment



Building better workplaces by connecting employees to emotional, financial and legal support has been at the heart of the BHSF offer for many decades. This is even more so now, given that the workplaces of today are as complex and unpredictable as they have ever been. The world of work has clearly been upended by the pandemic; normalising remote and hybrid working, accelerating automation and raising questions over the role of the office. The associated impact on employees' mental, physical and increasingly now financial health is also evident.

Overlay relentless GP workloads, and increased surgery waiting times and it is easy to see why employees are struggling to prioritise their health and wellbeing.

## Health is wealth

Educating the organisations we work with around 'health is wealth' values is crucial to supporting the psychological and physical wellbeing of employees through the post-pandemic recovery years which we're optimistically heading into.

Early intervention to tackle physical and mental health issues employees may be facing early on can have a significant impact on the emotional and financial cost of workplace absenteeism.

Helping employees to book a GP appointment at a time and date that suits them, and their employer is key. By securing appointments to fit around an individual's work and domestic commitments, we're making healthcare more accessible. Instilling this better work life balance in turn creates a healthier and more productive workforce.

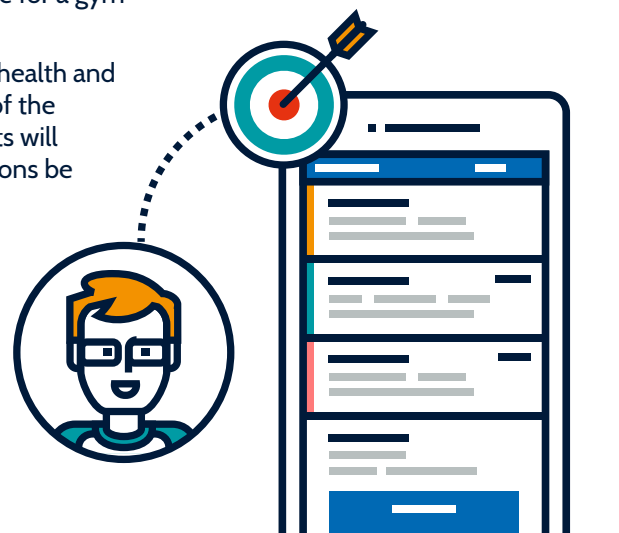
Technology-driven change has of course been front of mind across healthcare. The focus of advanced research across medicine and Covid vaccines saw a significant gear change to tackle the pandemic. Great strides have also been made across IT and data sharing, the role of medical devices, as well as direct patient monitoring. The likes of AI, VR, data sharing, genomics, wearable devices, hygiene tech and robotics, have all advanced in response to healthcare scenarios requiring greater social distancing, more efficiency and autonomy, plus of course stringent sanitisation requirements.

## Remote support

As our experience powerfully demonstrates, the key area where an accelerated pace of innovation has been seen is in the delivery of remote services. Tapping into digital services like GP Helplines is such comfortable territory for today's workforces. Yes, lockdowns have driven a rise in the delivery of remote services, but behavioural change is also pushing a shift in consumption habits as we all search for more simple, affordable and convenient experiences. Many of us are enjoying on-demand subscription services for countless areas of our lives, whether that be for a gym class, streaming entertainment or fresh meal delivery boxes.

Digital will become a pre-requisite in terms of accessing workplace health and wellbeing benefits. The long-term requirements and expectations of the workforce and how they choose to engage with, and access, benefits will be defined by the digital experiences and digital engagement solutions be available to them.

**Shelley Rowley**  
Chief Commercial Officer at BHSF





# Chapter 1: How the pandemic has reshaped workplace wellbeing

The pandemic has had a profound effect on workplace wellbeing, reshaping everything from attitudes to health to how interventions are delivered. Understanding these shifts is key to developing an effective health and wellbeing strategy.

Health awareness has increased. A [Public Health England](#) survey of more than 5,000 people found that 70% were motivated to adopt healthier lifestyle changes such as exercising more or stopping smoking as a result of the pandemic.

## New health issues

New health issues have also emerged. As well as the effects of the virus, doctors and employers are grappling with the emergence of Long Covid, with symptoms including fatigue, shortness of breath, joint pain and brain fog.

[Office for National Statistics figures](#) show that around 1.1 million people were reporting symptoms that lasted more than four weeks after a Covid-19 infection, with the working age population (people aged 35 – 69) at higher risk of developing this longer-term condition.

## Health burden

Many existing conditions have become more prevalent during the pandemic. Mental health issues have increased, with Mind warning of a second pandemic as calls to its helpline doubled and urgent and emergency NHS referrals shot up.

More musculoskeletal problems have also emerged, triggered by poor home office set ups, stress and long hours in front of a laptop.

Concerns remain too around missed screenings and diagnoses for serious conditions such as cancer and heart conditions. Catching these at a later phase can often mean a worse prognosis but, with NHS waiting lists skyrocketing, catching up on check-ups can be challenging.





## Workplace shifts

Working habits have also shifted, with implications for employee health and wellbeing. More hybrid and flexible working can bring benefits, especially around work life balance, but there are potential drawbacks to guard against when employees aren't always in the office.

And while it may be more challenging to support the health needs of remote employees, the employer's role in this has never been more important. Aon's [Benefits and Trends Survey](#) found that 95% of employers agree or strongly agree that they have a responsibility for the health and wellbeing of their employees.

Given these trends, and with the job market skewed in candidates' favour, finding ways to deliver the health and wellbeing employees want has never been more important.

### Five wellbeing challenges for employers

Fundamental shifts in workplace wellbeing mean employers are facing new challenges when developing their health and wellbeing strategies. These include:



Providing a health and wellbeing proposition that all employees can access, whether they're working remotely or in the workplace full-time.



Developing a proposition that will address the health and wellbeing concerns that have emerged from the pandemic.



Ensuring employee health and safety when employees are working at home or remotely.



Being aware of employee health issues when they're working remotely, especially around mental health.



Designing a compelling health and wellbeing proposition that meets employee needs and will support attraction and retention. Propositions need to support a variety of needs: there's no one-size-fits-all solution.





# Chapter 2: The digital health revolution

The pandemic has changed attitudes to health and the way we work but it has also fast-forwarded the take-up of digital health. This increased use of digital health tools is set to benefit employers looking to support their workforces in a post-pandemic workplace.

## Shifting attitudes

Although digital health services such as video GP appointments and online counselling have been available for around 10 years, the pandemic has transformed them into a mainstream product. With traditional face-to-face healthcare out of reach during lockdowns, employees had to turn to digital options for their health concerns.

Just how impressed they were with their experience of digital health tools can be seen in figures from Mercer Marsh Benefits [Health on demand 2022](#) research. Across Europe and the UK, 83% of employees say they plan to use telemedicine the same or more than during the pandemic.

## Digital benefits

It's easy to understand why it remains so popular long after more normality has returned to healthcare delivery. Employees can access the health support they need at a time that's convenient for them, saving time compared to visiting their GP, physiotherapist or counsellor.

And, with many employees now working more flexibly, being able to access health advice and information wherever, and whenever, they want is a huge bonus.

It's positive for employers too. Knowing that employees can access healthcare easily and at a time that's convenient, means they can get treatment if needed, or reassurance that everything's normal, quickly. This can help to reduce sickness absence as well as cutting the amount of time employees need to take off to see their GP.

Employees also value these benefits, which can help an organisation with its talent strategy.





## Health improvements

Digital health tools can also drive improvements in health. As well as providing employees with plenty of health and wellbeing information and advice, the use of gamification and nudge theory can drive behavioural change. A gentle reminder to maintain a healthy lunch habit or a challenge to beat the number of steps their colleagues have taken that week can help employees adopt healthier lifestyles without any fuss.

These tools are also great for driving health improvement through early intervention. The ease with which an employee can get something checked out means they're more likely to reach for their smartphone at the first sign of any health concern. If it's nothing, there's reassurance, but if it needs attention, this early diagnosis can mean simpler treatment and a faster recovery.

Providing employees with digital health tools can also deliver valuable management information to shape workplace health and wellbeing campaigns. Where a workforce is large enough to provide anonymous data, employers can see which health trends are affecting employees – and take steps to address them.

### What tools are available

A variety of digital health tools are available in the workplace, including:



Digital GP – providing telephone and video-based consultations with a GP at a time that's convenient.



Employee assistance programme – offering access to trained counsellors via phone or app for advice on a range of issues including health, legal and financial.



Digital physiotherapy – the provision of physiotherapy services through videos and online consultations to enable an employee to manage a musculoskeletal problem.



Online CBT and counselling – online talking therapies that can help an employee deal with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety by changing the way they think and behave.



Health and wellbeing apps and trackers – apps providing health and wellbeing information, with some allowing employees to monitor health data such as steps, diet, heart rate and sleep.



Financial wellbeing apps – providing financial education and tools to help employees understand and manage their finances.







# Chapter 3: Switching employees on to digital health

Thanks to the pandemic, more employees are familiar with digital health tools and comfortable using them. Research by BHSF across 2,000 UK employees in full or part-time employment found that 79.3% regard their GP helpline as an excellent or good benefit. But, with some employees yet to try these tools and others still unsure about them, there are some steps that employers can take to ensure that everyone benefits from telemedicine.

## Run a benefits audit

Over the last few years, and especially during the pandemic, the number of digital health tools has increased significantly. It's great to have all this choice but it can mean there's a risk of duplication, with employees able to access two or more versions of the same digital service.

As this can cause confusion, it's worth running a benefits audit to identify the best services and where there are any gaps. This could potentially save money but will also make it easier for employees to engage with these services.

## Set up a communications programme

Once you've identified the key digital health services you offer employees, promote them. The pandemic forced employees to seek out these solutions but, with face-to-face consultations available again, it's worth reminding them of how convenient these tools are.

Don't forget to run communications across as many channels as possible to reach employees, especially now flexible working can mean we're not all able to see the poster on the back of the office toilet door.

## Use management information to target messages

Digital tools can often provide valuable information about the health of your workforce. As this is anonymised to protect employees' personal data, its granularity will depend on the size of your workforce but it can be used to gain insight into common health issues.

Hooking a health and wellbeing email or campaign to a common health issue will reach more employees and encourage them to take steps to make changes.

## Myth busters



Although the pandemic helped more people feel comfortable using digital health tools, there are still some myths around these services that stop employees using them. These are some of the common ones – and some insight into employee sentiment from BHSF's research among UK employees.

***"My employer will find out I have a mental health condition."***

Wrong. All calls are completely confidential and no information about your health will be shared with your employer.

BHSF found that only 34% of respondents thought a virtual GP service was less confidential than their local GP.

***"A video consultation with a medical practitioner isn't as effective as a face-to-face one."***

Wrong again. In some instances, it can be more effective to go digital. They'll be able to see you quickly and provide tailored advice.

BHSF found that, if they had access to a GP helpline, 64.9% of respondents would seek help for problems they'd been putting off and 61.1% of respondents would be encouraged to look after their health and wellbeing.

***"Isn't it better to see my own GP? They have my medical records."***

It's up to you but you can choose to share your NHS records with digital health services – and they can also supply information to your GP. It's your data and your choice.

BHSF found that nearly three quarters (74.7%) of respondents were comfortable using a GP helpline rather than seeing their own family GP, with 45.2% saying they felt good or great about it.

***"I'll still have to wait for an appointment."***

You might, but you'll be able to pick a time and date that's convenient for you. Plus many of these services are available 24/7.





# Chapter 4: Integrating digital into health campaigns

Digital tools are a great addition to health and wellbeing, helping employees access healthcare services at their convenience. Integrating them into broader health campaigns can raise awareness and really bring them to life. Using digital tools within a broader campaign overcomes some of the challenges associated with more flexible working. Rather than delivering a campaign within the workplace, employees can hook into it, wherever they're working.

## Inclusive

Being able to participate anywhere is a big tick for inclusivity. For example, rather than run an exercise class onsite or have walking meetings in the office, a company could implement a steps challenge, with employees using fitness trackers to measure the distance they cover. The element of competition – whether between individuals or teams – can also drive social interaction, bringing together employees that might never meet.

## Interactive

Digital also makes it possible for campaigns to be more interactive. Employees can feed in their details and receive a personalised response with suggested actions. These could be provided by other digital health tools. For instance, a happiness campaign could use everything from health information on improving sleep, diet or exercise to referrals to a digital GP or counselling service where an employee needs more support.

## Engaging

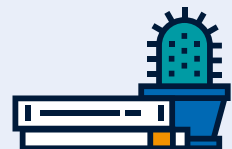
Delivering more personalised health insights makes these campaigns more engaging too. Whether an employer is running a post-pandemic health MOT, with employees providing details of health factors such as their weight, alcohol consumption and their mental health experiences during the pandemic, or providing access to simple at-home cancer screenings, receiving recommendations that are unique to the employee will make them more relevant and help to drive behaviour change.

## Powerful

Providing employees with convenient access to medical professionals also brings credibility to a health campaign. There's no compromise on quality through digital tools, with medical practitioners required to meet professional standards and hold relevant accreditations. Whether it's a physiotherapist for muscle strain in a steps challenge or a GP to help talk through treatment options following a diagnosis, being able to talk to a professional will make the support much more valuable to employees.

## The future of digital health

Digital health tools are changing the way we access healthcare, delivering a compelling blend of service, health insight and convenience that fits perfectly with shifts in working patterns. The future promises even more innovation.



Already, the provision of medical kit such as stethoscopes and thermometers makes it possible to conduct more in-depth examinations during a video consultation with a GP. This will grow further, enabling more check-ups and condition monitoring to be carried out in the comfort of the home. Data will also shape future digital tools. As well as collecting information from wearables and fitness trackers, further health insight can be taken from other connected home devices such as voice assistants and smart mirrors.

Using artificial intelligence to sift through this wealth of data will help to identify trends but also understand the individual's health motivations and habits better. This will ensure a truly personalised and more engaging approach to their health and wellbeing.



# Quiz

1. According to Public Health England, what percentage of people were motivated to adopt healthier lifestyle changes as a result of the pandemic?

- A. 19%
- B. 45%
- C. 70%
- D. 85%

2. What are some of the common symptoms of Long Covid?

- A. Fatigue, shortness of breath and brain fog
- B. Spots, sweaty feet and dizziness
- C. Chest pain, extreme thirst and blurred vision
- D. Sinus congestion, boils, swollen ankles

3. Which age group is most at risk of developing Long Covid?

- A. Under 18s
- B. 18-25 year olds
- C. 35-69 year olds
- D. 70+

4. What percentage of employers agree that they have a responsibility for the health and wellbeing of their employees?

- A. 20%
- B. 40%
- C. 65%
- D. 95%

5. What percentage of employees plan to use telemedicine the same or more than during the pandemic?

- A. 38%
- B. 63%
- C. 83%
- D. 93%

6. What are the benefits for employers of offering digital health tools?

- A. It's valued by employees
- B. It reduces sickness absence
- C. It helps with attraction and retention
- D. All of these

7. In research from BHSF, what percentage of respondents thought a GP helpline was an excellent or good benefit?

- A. 39.3%
- B. 59.3%
- C. 79.3%
- D. 99.3%

8. Running a benefits audit ensures...

- A. There's no duplication of benefits
- B. All benefits have the appropriate kitemark
- C. Benefits can be promoted alphabetically
- D. The paperwork is up-to-date

9. According to BHSF, what percentage of people are comfortable using a GP helpline rather than their own GP?

- A. 50.3%
- B. 74.7%
- C. 82.3%
- D. 85.9%

10. What additional medical kit do some providers offer to enable more in-depth examinations during a video consultation with a GP?

- A. Sticky plasters and crepe bandages
- B. Pain killers and mouthwash
- C. Walking sticks and face masks
- D. Stethoscopes and thermometers

1. C, 2. A, 3. C, 4. D, 5. C, 6. D, 7. C, 8. A, 9. B, 10. D.

Quiz: The answers



# Who we are

## BHSF

We are a not-for-profit health and wellbeing provider with a proud history of making quality healthcare accessible to working people across the UK. Today, we make a positive impact on workplace wellbeing – helping to keep employees mentally, physically, and financially healthy.

BHSF services include employee mental health support, occupational health, employee wellbeing and health insurance products. 10 or 10,000 employees – we've got something to suit everyone.

Our human-centred, case-managed approach is built on years of understanding and powerfully evidences the impact that we make. By intervening early, we can help to keep employees in work and healthy.

### Contact BHSF:

reba@bhsf.co.uk

0121 454 3601

www.bhsf.co.uk/gp-helpline



## Reward & Employee Benefits Association

REBA is the only dedicated professional networking community for reward and benefits practitioners. We help members to pursue best practice, increase professionalism in the industry and prepare for upcoming changes. We also lobby government on members' behalf.

### What does REBA do?

- **Hosts** regular conferences and networking events, both face-to-face and virtually through webinars and online platforms
- **Produces** benchmarking research, insight and data reports on key reward and benefits themes
- **Creates** and distributes online content, including industry insights into best practice, case studies and thought-leadership
- **Curates** an industry-wide research library of reports, government consultations and best-practice guides
- **Delivers** focused content through daily emails and social media channels
- **Supports** professional members with supplier shortlisting and research
- **Offers** focused digital networking for professional members through our rebaLINK peer-to-peer forum, where members can also get supplier reviews from their peers.

### Contact REBA:

- **Debi O'Donovan**, co-founder: debi.odonovan@reba.global
- **Phil Hayne**, co-founder: phil.hayne@reba.global or 0771 466 0857

Website: [www.reba.global](http://www.reba.global)



Reward & Employee  
Benefits Association

PURSuing BEST PRACTICE

Digital health - meeting the wellbeing needs of a flexible workforce  
is published by



[www.reba.global](http://www.reba.global)

In association with



May 2022