

How to maximise take-up of health and wellbeing benefits through communication

Part of the REBA technical training series



In association with  Simplyhealth

Editor's comment



Most employers would agree that offering health and wellbeing benefits to staff has advantages for the business too. After all, helping to improve employees' health means they are less likely to take time off sick and can therefore be more productive.

But there's no point implementing these initiatives unless they are valued and used by employees – and this can only happen if people know they are available in the first place. For this reason, communicating health and wellbeing benefits is incredibly important.

According to REBA's *Employee Wellbeing Research 2018*, published in association with Punter Southall Health & Protection, the most popular way of telling your staff about your health and wellbeing benefits is by email (83.2%). This is closely followed by intranet pages (81.2%) and posters and leaflets (76.6%).

Get your messages wrong and you could be wasting money on perks that aren't being utilised or appreciated. However, get your communications right and your employees will benefit from better physical and mental health, and recognise you as a caring employer – allowing you to reap the rewards of improved morale, performance, and ultimately a healthier profit margin.

So what's the best way to tell your staff about the health and wellbeing benefits on offer? Read on to find out.

Kavitha Sivasubramaniam

Editor

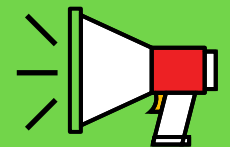
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Sponsor's comment

Employees' health and wellbeing continues to be a significant area of focus for HR. With stress being the most common cause of long-term absence, enhancing job satisfaction and employee engagement through a range of wellbeing initiatives is essential.

If you've committed to offering your employees health and wellbeing benefits, many of these are designed to encourage prevention rather than cure – which can only help in easing the burden of absenteeism at your organisation. So how do you ensure your people fully engage and make the most of what's on offer?

As with all engagement initiatives, communication is key. Your employees need to understand what is on offer, but not just the 'what' – if they understand the 'why' they are far more likely to get involved.

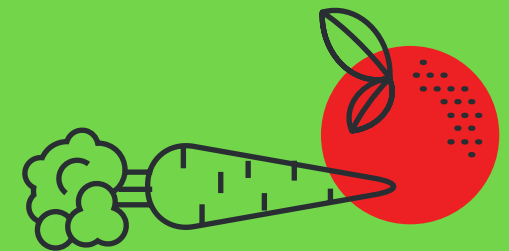
In communicating with your teams it's important that you understand their personal motivations and preferences. Ensure your communications cover a breadth of messages suitable for all your audiences – from the regular gym-goers to the more sedate employees. At Simplyhealth we've used our involvement with the Great Run series to motivate our employees. Not everyone is a runner, of course, so we've focussed our messaging on moving more – whether that be walking the dog, going for a swim or simply taking the stairs instead of the lift.

Of course it's not just about fitness. Encouraging a positive health and wellbeing mind-set encompasses leisure time, family time, access to mental and physical wellbeing services – the list is extensive. Tailoring your messages to your audience through communication channels they regularly interact with and respond to will ensure a greater uptake. A great way to encourage involvement is to 'recruit' ambassadors from within your business. Existing employees who have a significant interest in one particular aspect of your programme can champion an initiative among their colleagues. For example, Great Run Champions have helped spread their enthusiasm for getting active across the Simplyhealth business, enabling a more informal approach and greater reach among their colleagues.

Don't forget, you're not alone in wanting to spread the health and wellbeing message. Your benefit providers will have a wealth of materials designed to promote their services to your employees. Ongoing communication across a variety of channels will keep your benefits top of mind, and you can test your messaging by measuring the uptake each initiative. Of course, the ultimate measure will be how well you maintain a happy, healthy and productive workforce.

Pam Whelan

Director of Corporate at Simplyhealth



Average take-up levels of health and wellbeing benefits

Good, bad or just plain average, health is something we've all got in common. But, when it comes to engaging with workplace health and wellbeing benefits, take-up rates can be criminally low.

Although it will depend on factors such as how they're offered, the cost, and the demographics of the workforce, take-up of benefits offered on a flexible or voluntary basis can be under 20%, with many in single digits.

Even benefits that are provided free to all employees can fail to ignite their interest. For example, according to the UK Employee Assistance Professionals Association, the average utilisation rate for an employee assistance programme (EAP) is just 5%.

In a nutshell

Without effective promotion, employee take-up of health and wellbeing benefits can be in single digits.

Making the business case for a communications budget

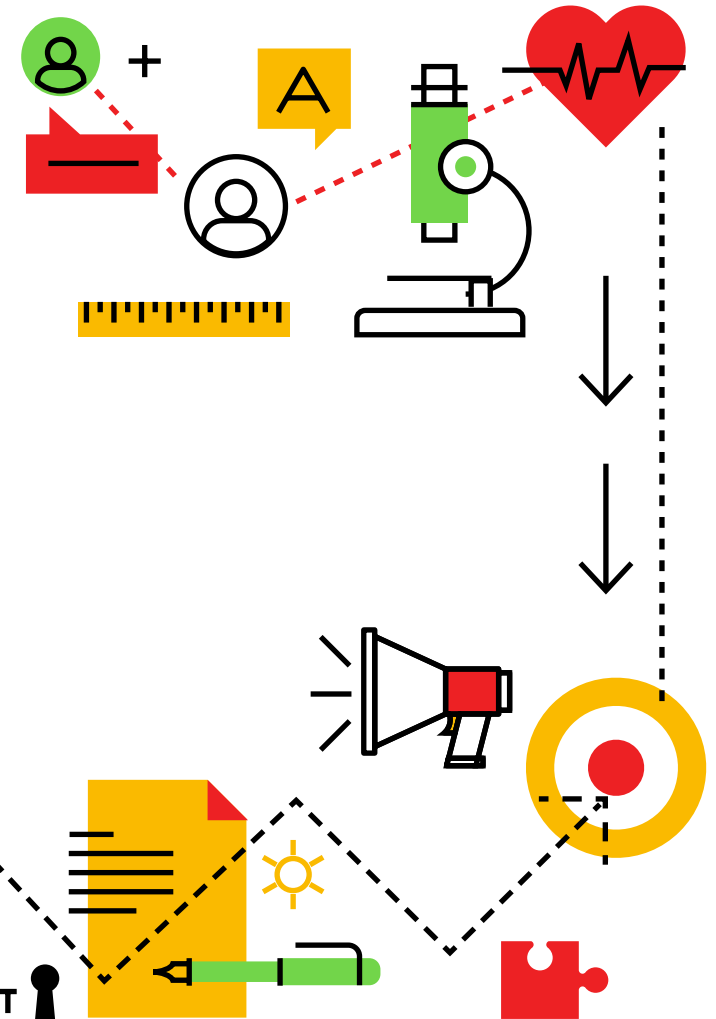
Failing to effectively communicate your health and wellbeing benefits can cost your business dearly.

Research by Cass Business School, *Money Talks: Communicating Employee Benefits*, found that stinting on communications costs UK employers more than £2.75 billion a year in turnover and workplace absence.

While this study was based on the full range of employee benefits, failing to promote your health and wellbeing provisions can be particularly damaging. Without intervention, health risks can escalate, leading to higher levels of sickness, lower productivity and employee engagement, and more accidents.

Top five reasons to invest in communications

1. Healthier employees.
2. Reduced turnover.
3. Less sickness absence.
4. Higher productivity.
5. Greater employee engagement.



Getting started

Know your audience

To ensure your communications hit the spot, you need a good understanding of your workforce. First, think about what your employees do. If they have desk jobs then emails and intranet content can work well, but if they are predominantly on the road they will never see these communications, so consider producing marketing literature to keep them informed.

Age may also be a factor to consider. Although it's important not to generalise, older employees may prefer a more traditional approach, while younger ones will probably expect you to use more technology in your communications, in keeping with the consumer brands they prefer.

With these types of benefits, understanding the health profile of your workforce is useful. As well as informing benefits selection, it will help determine your communication strategy. For instance, if your workforce is fit and healthy, it will be relatively easy to encourage them to participate in your health and wellbeing benefits. However, in workplaces where many think exercise and healthy eating are dirty words, a gentler, more long-term approach with as much peer influence as possible is likely to achieve the best results.

Establish your budget

Although it's possible to run an effective communications programme on a very low budget, the business benefits associated with health and wellbeing initiatives give you a strong case for investment.

As an example of the financial gain available to an employer that promotes health and wellbeing, consider a pilot scheme that involved NHS staff in Sheffield. Of the 50 employees who took part, 71% significantly improved their fitness levels, with researchers estimating a saving of £36,000 in sickness absence alone. With the scheme costing £13,000, this represents a return on investment of £3 for every £1 spent.

Whatever size of budget you secure, also consider the structure of your communications programme. Unlike an annual benefits window, health and wellbeing promotion is ongoing so you may want to allocate budget on a monthly, or even weekly, basis.

Who to use

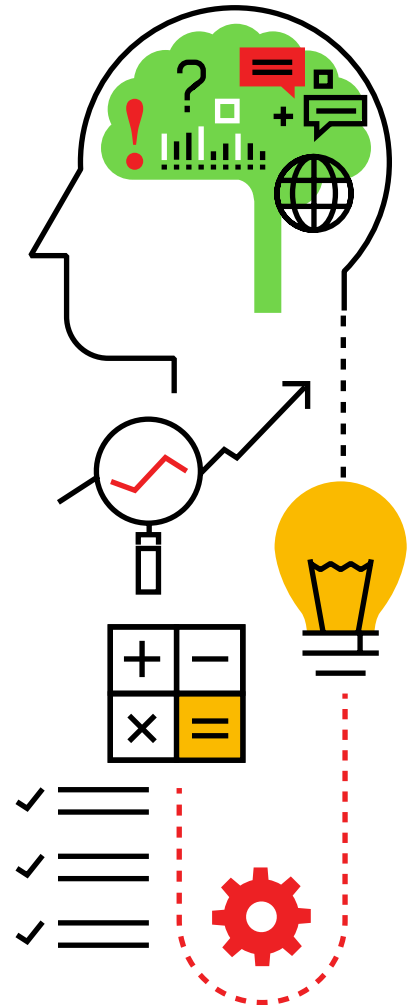
Whether you're a marketing whizz with a huge team or you're not sure where to start, there's plenty of support available to help you design a winning communications strategy.

Your health and wellbeing benefits providers and consultants are good starting points. As well as understanding the market, they also have a vested interest in making your campaign work. As a result, many can provide dedicated marketing support, ranging from advice through to posters, webinars and even sending someone to talk to employees or attend a wellness day.

A specialist communication consultant may be worth considering, especially if you have the budget. You could also do it yourself, in conjunction with your marketing department or any of these external bodies. While some knowledge of marketing techniques and the finer detail of the products is useful, often the most compelling communications programmes come down to a good understanding of your employee base and a healthy dose of imagination.

Dos and don'ts

- ✓ Think about how employees might access communications – a homemaker won't see a poster in the office.
- ✓ Take employees' health status into consideration – someone who hasn't exercised for 20 years won't be running a marathon by the end of the month.
- ✗ Splurge all your communications budget on the launch of an initiative – health and wellbeing requires ongoing promotions to engage employees.
- ✓ Speak to your benefits providers and consultant for help with your marketing and communications.
- ✗ Be afraid to think outside the box – a bit of creativity can bring your communications programme alive.



Communication methods

When it comes to telling your employees about your health and wellbeing benefits there are plenty of different methods available. The most popular is email (83.2%), according to REBA's *Employee Wellbeing Research 2018*, which was published in association with Punter Southall Health & Protection. Just behind it come intranet pages (81.2%) and posters and leaflets (76.6%).

To maximise the benefit of these methods, Kate Whelan, director of reward and HR services at Telefonica UK, recommends mixing them up. *"Don't underestimate the impact of familiarity. We walk past the same sign every day and no longer see it. If you've gone to the effort of producing physical collateral, particularly posters, make sure people see them,"* she explains. *"We've made good use of floor stickers during campaigns to grab people's attention, together with notices in washrooms above hand dryers or on the back of toilet doors as well as in the kitchen and hot drinks areas."*

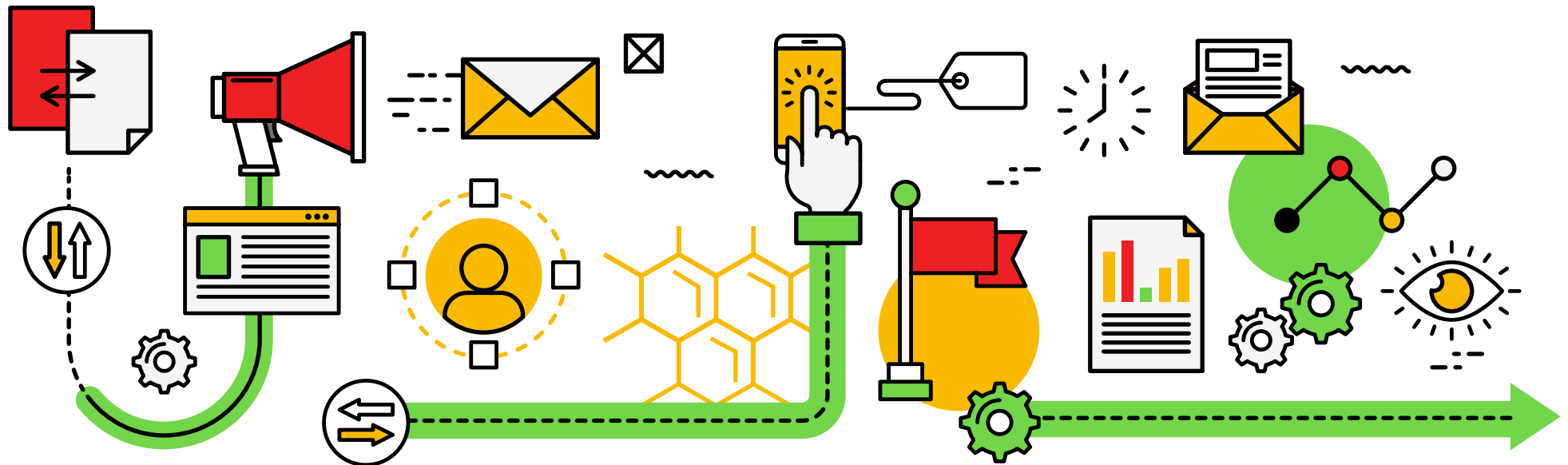
The personal nature of health means that wellbeing champions can be a particularly engaging way to communicate benefits. These can come from any part of the business but must be able to inspire others and encourage take-up.

Line managers are another effective means of promoting health and wellbeing. As the first ones to deal with an employee's health issues, it makes sense for them to be up-to-speed with all of your health and wellbeing initiatives so they can pass this information on.

Wellness fairs, where employees can get personalised health information, a massage or a free fitness tracker can help get them on board too. Similarly, running a competition is another great way to encourage take-up.

A variety of more cutting-edge communications technologies languish at the bottom of the table, including smartphone or tablet apps (9.6%), audio or video (6.1%) and mobile text messaging (2%). These are likely to become more popular, especially when you consider how many people access content such as fitness videos, recipe demonstrations and wellbeing tips on video streaming sites.

For those employers who have embraced technology for their communications, the results have been very positive. For instance, Virgin Atlantic recently launched social network Workplace for its employees, including a health and wellbeing group. *"It gives us an instant way to share wellbeing information,"* says Daniella Brackpool, Virgin Atlantic's benefits manager. *"Employees can ask questions and share their experiences. It's a really good way to increase engagement."*



Communication methods

Consumer brand inspiration

Consumer brands are a great source of inspiration for your communications strategy. For many, it's all about personalising the message, with Amazon being the perfect example of this. Search for a new kettle and you can be certain these, and suggestions based on your choices, will be popping up in emails for weeks.

This can be replicated by segmenting your workforce and targeting messages at them. For instance, if your employees sign up for a race, chances are they would like to know about discounts on running gear, and the sports massage and physiotherapy they can get through your benefits programme.

Making communications relevant to the audience has worked well for the University of Lincoln's financial education and wellbeing initiative. Its head of reward, Ian Hodson, explains: *"We struggled with engagement on the subject matter until we created the 'Financial Fairytales' theme. This really opened up the communication channels, increased engagement and softened what can be seen as a taboo subject."*

Consumer brands also keep an eye on the calendar, building marketing around the seasons and holidays. Linking to events such as Christmas, New Year and Valentine's Day can make your communications more topical and engaging, but also consider charity events and health news stories to make it topical.

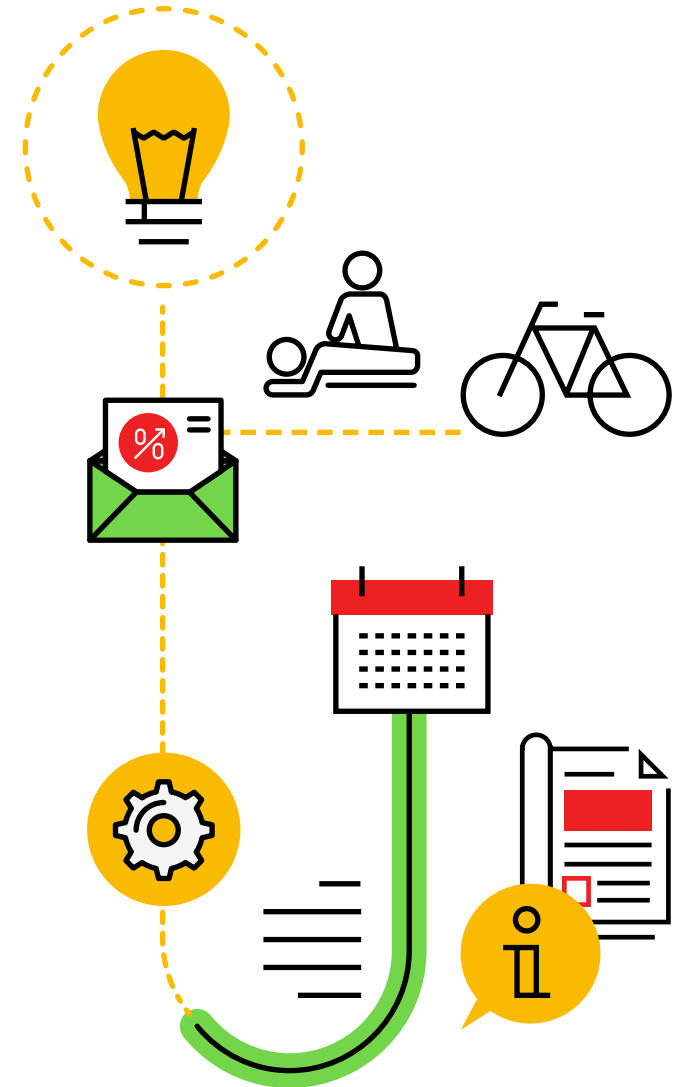
Brand endorsement from senior management can be very powerful, with Mark Zuckerberg posting on Facebook or, if you're old enough, Victor Kiam liking Remington's products so much he bought the company, both perfect examples of this. If you can get the board involved with your wellbeing programme, it'll add clout to your communications.

The NHS can also provide some valuable insight. In the NHS *Employers' Health and Wellbeing Communications Guide*, it recommends developing a brand for your programme. This, it says, will make individual interventions more recognisable and reinforce messaging around your activities.

Jessica Macskimming, head of UK reward at National Grid, is a firm believer in linking your benefits to your company brand. *"No-one's here because they want to be fit and healthy; they're here because of our values so it makes sense to link benefits to these,"* she explains. *"It makes the benefits part of your company and reinforces your employees' role as brand advocates."*

Top tips

- Recruit wellbeing champions and ensure line managers understand what's available.
- Wellbeing days, wellness fairs and competitions can encourage employees to take part in your initiatives.
- Consider more cutting-edge communications such as video content and smartphone apps.
- Segment your workforce to enable greater personalisation of messaging.
- Build your campaign around the seasons, holidays and charity events to keep it fresh.
- Get senior managers involved to set an example throughout your company.
- Create a health and wellbeing brand identity to give your campaign extra clout.



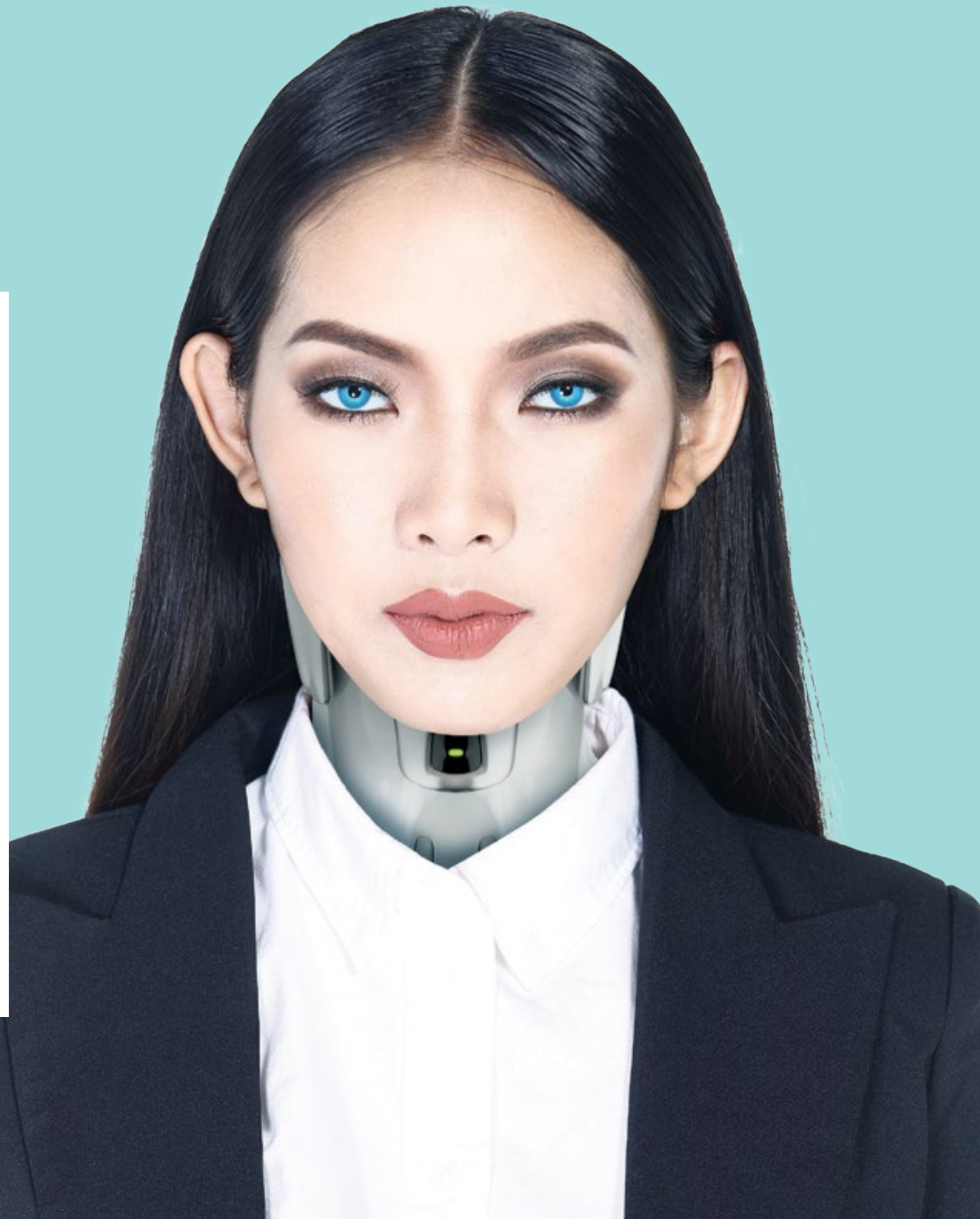
If your people perform well, so does your business.

Simplyhealth helps companies, and their talent, perform well. In an age of technology, it's still people who create business advantage.

Our health and dental plans enable businesses to look after their people, and make it easy for people to maintain their health and wellbeing, so they can look after the business.

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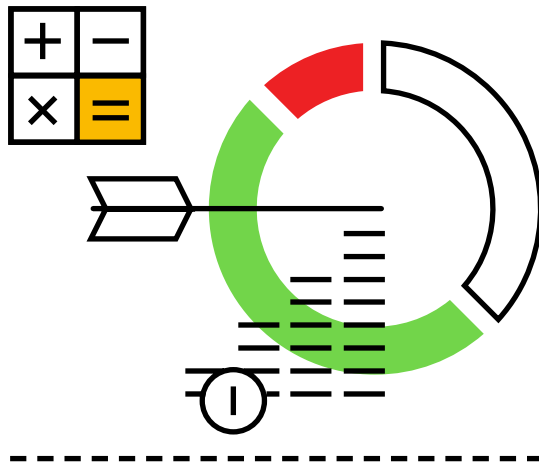
Costs

When it comes to your communications budget, there are a number of ways to stretch it to maximise its effectiveness. As well as being able to piggyback on existing workplace communications systems such as email and intranet, many benefits providers will have marketing material they can provide for free. If you're large enough, many will bespoke this for you.

You can also turn to some of the health charities for inspiration. As examples, mental health charity Mind has plenty of guides to support employers while British Heart Foundation has a health at work toolkit to help you run campaigns.

Running a platform such as Workplace or Slack can be cost-effective too. Free versions are available, allowing you to test whether this type of social media platform works for your organisation.

Whatever you do, don't forget to factor in your own time, plus the cost of any prizes or incentives you might want to offer to encourage take-up.



Pitfalls and legalities

Any employer offering health and wellbeing benefits is likely to have good intentions but, if you're looking at ways to improve employee health, there are some potential pitfalls to avoid.

If you're providing any health information or advice, it's important to ensure it's reputable. The internet is full of health advice, some of it extremely questionable. Using information provided by your benefits providers or accredited sources such as a charity or the NHS will ensure the information you provide is trustworthy.

Similarly, as your employees are likely to have varying levels of health and fitness, make sure you provide appropriate support. Pushing everyone to enter a 10k run in a month could seriously backfire if they wind up with injuries or other health problems, so offer a range of initiatives to encourage participation.

It's also important to keep up to speed with the benefits your providers offer as this can affect your promotional material. Working closely with them will provide a necessary sense check.

Preconceptions about some products can also hinder take-up. This is particularly the case for EAPs, with the UK EAPA report, *The Evolution of Employee Assistance*, reporting that HR managers believe utilisation is lower than it should be as employees see it as just a counselling service for mental health issues. In fact, an EAP can provide advice and information across a wide range of areas including legal, debt, relationships and bereavement.

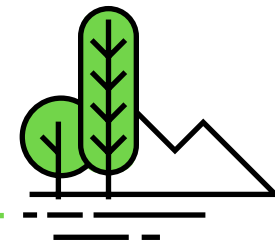
Similarly, cash plans can be seen as providing money for hospital treatment. While this certainly was the case, they have evolved to support everyday health needs including trips to the dentist, opticians and physiotherapist. Reflecting these broader benefits in your communications will increase take-up.

Dos and don'ts

- ✓ Do use reputable health information from trusted sources such as benefits providers, charities and the NHS.
- ✗ Don't assume everyone is fit and healthy as this could lead to additional health problems.
- ✓ Do consider checking your health promotions with your benefits providers.
- ✓ Do think about the broader benefits of products to increase their appeal to employees.

Where to find suppliers

For more information about communications providers, check out REBA's supplier directory. This contains details of the leading providers, including contact information and links to their websites.



Measuring success

The most obvious way to measure the success of your communications is by tracking the take-up of your benefits and initiatives. But there are plenty of other measures you could consider too, many of which will give you a powerful return on investment figure to support further campaigns.

These could include sickness absence figures, employee engagement, productivity and staff turnover.

Also consider whether your campaign is reaching the right employees. It's easy to get the gym bunnies to sign up for all sorts of initiatives but, if your communications reach out to those who aren't so healthy, the benefits of engagement will be even greater.

It's also important to be aware that some figures may appear to go the wrong way. In particular, this may happen if you're running a mental health campaign where you might see an initial spike in claims and absence as employees feel more confident to admit a mental health issue.

Top tips

- Track take-up of benefits and initiatives to gauge the effectiveness of your communications.
- Measure other factors such as sickness absence and productivity to show return on investment.
- Have a broad range of promotional material to cater for employees who might not normally take part in health and wellbeing activities as well as those who do.



Future of communications

Technology is set to transform employee communications, with chatbots and artificial intelligence already shaking up this space. As an example, Intel launched its virtual HR agent, Ivy, back in 2013, using artificial intelligence, optimised search and natural language processing to answer employees' HR questions.

As well as helping to guide employees to different benefits, chatbots have an important role to play in supporting employees' mental health. Speaking to a computer rather than a line manager about their issues will be easier for some employees, and, if additional support is necessary, the chatbot can ensure they are signposted to it.

These advances benefit reward specialists too. By removing the simpler, more mundane tasks, and empowering employees to really engage with your company's health and wellbeing provision, you can focus on more interesting projects.

Who we are

About our sponsor: Simplyhealth

We've been providing cost-effective, accessible and manageable health cash plans for 145 years. Our market-leading products help businesses demonstrate real commitment to the maintenance of their employees' health, wellbeing and everyday performance.

What Simplyhealth does:

Our health cash plans enable businesses to look after their employees, and make it easy for people to maintain their health and wellbeing, so they can look after the business.

We offer two types of preventative health cash plans:

- **Optimise:** our health plan, covering a range of treatments including visits to the optician, dentist, 24/7 GP services and more
- **Denplan:** our dental plan, covering all clinically necessary treatments, routine examinations, hygiene treatments, plus cover for accidents and emergencies

In 2017, Simplyhealth and Denplan united under one Simplyhealth brand and today we're proud to be the UK's leading provider of health cash plans, Denplan dental payment plans and pet health plans.

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About us: Reward & Employee Benefits Association

REBA is the professional networking community for reward and benefits practitioners. We make members' working lives easier by saving you time, money and effort through sharing experience, ideas, data and insight with each other. We help members to pursue best practice, increase professionalism in the industry and prepare for upcoming changes. REBA lobbies government on members' behalf.

What REBA does:

- Runs regular conferences and networking events
- Produces benchmarking research, insight & data reports and analysis
- Curates the information you need to know, both online and in our weekly email
- Helps with supplier shortlisting and research

Contact REBA:



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Website: www.reba.global

Quiz

1. What is the average utilisation rate for an employee assistance programme?

- A 5%
 - B 10%
 - C 50%
 - D 98%
-

2. What is the annual cost, in terms of absence and staff turnover, to UK plc of failing to run an effective communications programme?

- A £1 million
 - B £500 million
 - C £1 billion
 - D £2.75 billion
-

3. What was the return on investment achieved as a result of the reduction in sickness absence in a pilot scheme involving NHS staff in Sheffield?

- A £7 for every £1
 - B £3 for every £1
 - C £13 for every £1
 - D £1 for every £1
-

4. What is the name of the University of Lincoln's financial education and wellbeing campaign?

- A Money Matters
 - B First in Finance
 - C Financial Fairytales
 - D Hard cash horror stories
-

5. An effective health and wellbeing communications campaign should be:

- A Ongoing
 - B Varied
 - C Relevant to employees
 - D All of these
-

6. What's the most popular way to communicate health and wellbeing benefits?

- A Email
 - B Intranet
 - C Posters
 - D Staff handbook
-

7. What is a wellbeing champion?

- A The employee who walks the most steps in a week
 - B The head of reward and benefits
 - C An employee who can promote wellbeing benefits and inspire others to take part
 - D The employee who uses every health and wellbeing benefit you offer
-

8. What involvement should senior managers have with your health and wellbeing communications?

- A None, they're too busy and employees must see them working
 - B They have busy schedules so only invite them to the launch
 - C Ask them to sign a welcome letter to employees who sign up for your walking challenge
 - D Get them as involved as possible as it sets a good example and underlines the organisation's commitment to employee health and wellbeing
-

9. How can a health and wellbeing brand improve your communications?

- A It makes it easier for employees to recognise any initiatives that you run and shows how much you value their health and wellbeing
 - B It enables you to order some new stationery
 - C It distracts employees from your other benefits
 - D It means you can outsource the communications to a marketing agency
-

10. What is the name of Intel's virtual HR agent?

- A Tel
 - B Inni
 - C Ivy
 - D Harry
-

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

Quiz: The answers

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