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# Digital Wellness

## From a Scaffold to a Pillar of Employee Well-Being

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# Introduction

What is our level of digital wellness? This is an increasingly key question not only for ourselves and loved ones but for the employees in our organizations. In an era of rapid technological advancement and an increasing prevalence of digital devices, this new dimension of well-being has emerged. Digital wellness focuses on fostering a positive relationship with technology to promote the overall welfare of employees.

Today there are 5.16 billion Internet users in the world and 5.44 billion unique mobile phone users, according to the report Digital 2023. The average time spent using the Internet is 6.37 hours globally, and the average American spends nearly 7 hours looking at a screen per day. In short, we expend many of our waking hours on the Internet and looking at screens.

Of course, this greatly impacts our physical, mental, and social well-being. Extended periods of sitting and decreased physical activity due to technology-related tasks often lead to a sedentary lifestyle and associated health risks. The constant exposure to information and notifications can lead to stress, distraction, and reduced focus, impacting employee productivity and well-being.

What's more, all this time spent on digital technologies has massive implications for the security of our employees and the wider organization. These security issues can, in turn, impact everything from mental to financial wellness.

**About the Research**

In this article, we allude to data from the HR Research Institute's survey on Digital Wellness that was fielded in 2023 in partnership with McAfee, the global computer security software company. The survey had 204 respondents from a wide range of industry verticals, all of them being HR professionals from large organizations (at least 1,000 employees) in the United States.

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## A Brief History of Wellness in the Workplace

Employee wellness is not a new concept, but it is one that has been evolving quickly.

Wellness and well-being programs date back to the mid-20th century, when employers began recognizing the impact of employee health on productivity and overall organizational success. Initially, in the 1950s and 60s, the emphasis was primarily on occupational health and safety programs, with a focus on preventing workplace accidents and injuries.

As we entered the 1970s and 80s, employers realized that promoting preventive measures and encouraging healthy behaviors among employees could lead to reduced healthcare expenses in the long run. HR departments started emphasizing wellness initiatives that focused on areas such as increasing cardio health, helping people stop smoking, and encouraging regular physicals. During the 1990s, well-being programs expanded further to include stress management, work-life balance, and employee assistance programs (EAPs) to support mental and emotional health.

In the 21st century, the focus of well-being programs has expanded and shifted towards a more holistic approach that covers not only physical and mental health but also social, financial, environmental and now digital wellness. The idea is to look at overall employee well-being and help improve it where possible.

## Defining Digital Wellness

For the purpose of the survey we conducted, we defined a healthy state of digital wellness as being when people are protected from weak spots in their digital security, their privacy is protected, and they are in control of their personal data. It also often means they have a healthy, non-addictive relationship with technology.

Boston Children's Hospital's Digital Wellness Lab defines it as a positive state of mental, physical, and social-emotional health pursued through intentional, authentic, and balanced engagement with technology and interactive media.

## Factors Making Digital Wellness More Critical

There are a variety of factors making digital wellness increasingly critical. Although each one is important, they tend to influence one another in a systemic way.

## Physical and Mental Issues Related to Digital Habits

Excessive screen time and sedentary behavior associated with technology use can lead to physical health issues such as eyestrain, musculoskeletal problems, obesity, and sleep disturbances. It can also cause decreased interpersonal interactions and feelings of isolation.

When people spend hours engaged in social media on their smartphones, digital addiction becomes a real concern. Excessive reliance on technology and constant connectivity can negatively impact productivity, relationships, and overall well-being. Moreover, identity theft, data ripping, clickbait, and phishing scams make employees anxious and add to existing work pressures.

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## Costly Security Concerns

Indeed, various online security concerns seem more daunting by the day. The consulting firm McKinsey & Company, for example, reports that "mobile platforms, remote work, and other shifts increasingly hinge on high-speed access to ubiquitous and large data sets, exacerbating the likelihood of a breach." It also reports that amid these changes, many organizations lack sufficient cybersecurity talent, a shortfall that is increasing.

These online security concerns can have a large impact on employee well-being. Our study of HR professionals found, for example, that over 80% of respondents say that employees are concerned or very concerned about identity theft. A majority of them are aware of employees who have experienced identity theft, and many see fear about financial safety (58%) and reduced work performance (54%) as potential outcomes of such theft.

We also learned that 6 in 10 responding organizations have had cybersecurity breaches due to employee error and, among those, 53% resulted in financial losses.

## The Rise in Remote Work and Personal Device Usage

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a shift to remote and hybrid work arrangements, and it increased the prevalence of digital nomadism. In our survey, more than half of organizations agreed that remote work has reinforced the importance of digital wellness.

Moreover, working remotely or not, many employees are using personal devices for work purposes. Indeed, our study also showed that in 70% of organizations, at least half of employees use personal devices for work purposes.

These trends are complicating the issue of digital wellness and security.

## The Rise in Generative AI

The public release of OpenAI's ChatGPT and other generative artificial Intelligence (AI) applications has already heightened concerns about employee digital security and wellness.

Increasingly, hackers are using AI to automate attacks and evade detection systems. Dark Web forums are reportedly full of discussions on how to use generative AI platforms to execute phishing and social engineering attacks.

Many fear AI will also be used to create "deepfakes" that will enable bad actors to more successfully engage in identity theft and other crimes.

Of course, over time, AI applications can also be useful in improving cybersecurity. AI algorithms can detect potential security breaches, identify malicious activities, and offer real-time protection against cyberattacks, phishing attempts, or online harassment.

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## The Advantages of Digital Well-Being as an Employee Benefit

Given the rising importance of these and other factors, we believe that employee benefits aimed at boosting digital wellness will become increasingly attractive to employers and employees alike. In our study, when we asked about which benefits employees value the most apart from medical benefits, we found that digital wellness was highly ranked, second only to retirement benefits.
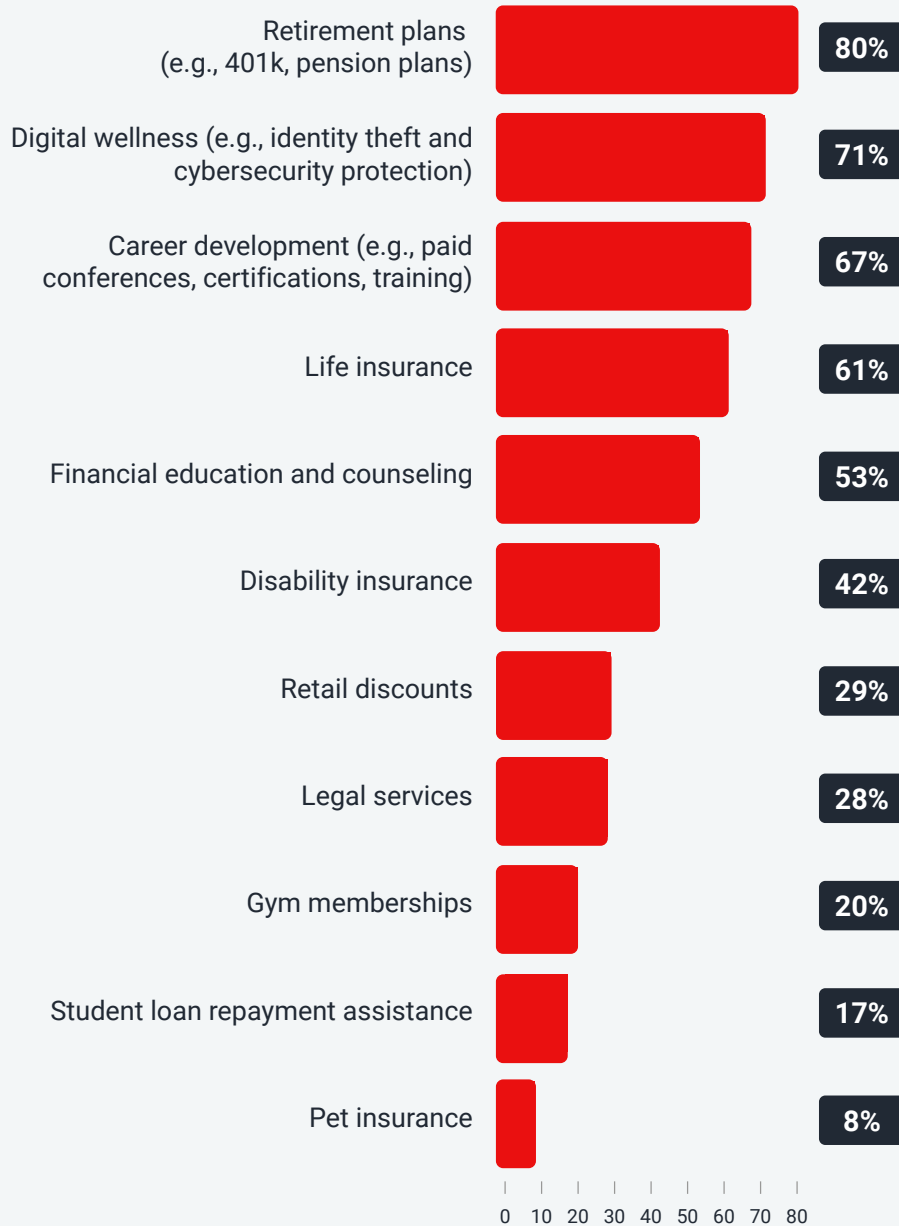
We view digital wellness as complementary to other benefits, including physical and mental health benefits.

Digital workers often struggle with setting boundaries, managing screen time, managing their own digital security, and disconnecting from work. By providing digital well-being support, organizations can help employees maintain a healthy work-life balance, improve productivity, and prevent burnout.

This can enhance employee recruitment and retention, particularly among younger generations who are more tech-savvy and seek healthy work-life integration.

In fact, our study shows that, to a high or very high degree, HR professionals at large organizations believe that digital wellness solutions are effective tools for enhancing cybersecurity (94%), helping with retention (87%), and improving safety and well-being (86%).

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**Survey Question:** Apart from medical benefits, which of the following benefits do you think are most important to employees in your organization? (select all that apply)

| Benefit | Percentage |
|---------|-----------|
| Retirement plans (e.g., 401k, pension plans) | 80% |
| Digital wellness (e.g., identity theft and cybersecurity protection) | 71% |
| Career development (e.g., paid conferences, certifications, training) | 67% |
| Life insurance | 61% |
| Financial education and counseling | 53% |
| Disability insurance | 42% |
| Retail discounts | 29% |
| Legal services | 28% |
| Gym memberships | 20% |
| Student loan repayment assistance | 17% |
| Pet insurance | 8% |

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## Developing Greater Employee Digital Wellness

But exactly how can employers boost the digital wellness of their employees? Following are some recommendations. These are far from all-encompassing but may help an organization get started.

- **Offer digital wellness support and services.** Among the services most widely cited in our survey are:

  - Using applications that defend against malware/viruses

  - Knowing how to remove malware from infected devices

  - Using virtual private networks (VPNs) that encrypt unsecured Wi-Fi networks

  - Knowing how to avoid unsecured Wi-Fi networks

  - Creating strong and unique passwords

- **Educate.** Teach employees about digital security and wellness. For example, train them to be cautious about the websites they visit, the apps they download, and the information they share online. Being proactive is essential when it comes to the digital world because the costs don't just stop at money. They extend to mental strain and emotional burnout.

- **Teach mindful awareness.** Employees should be intentional about how, when, and why they use digital devices. To avoid burnout, they can set clear boundaries around technology use, especially during certain times of the day or in specific areas of their lives.

- **Ensure EAPs can help struggling employees.** Employee Assistant Programs can typically help employees cope with a variety of stress and addiction issues. Internet addiction disorder should be something they can help with.

- **Offer digital wellness resources.** These can assist employees in managing screen time, protecting data and privacy, and maintaining a healthy relationship with technology.

## Conclusion

Digital well-being has emerged as a critical consideration in today's technology-driven world. As individuals become increasingly connected and reliant on digital devices, it has become necessary and crucial to recognize the impact of technology on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

As new technologies such as generative AI and virtual reality devices become more common, the need for digital well-being will grow in importance. Organizations need to recognize the significance of digital well-being as an employee benefit alongside traditional offerings. By prioritizing and successfully enhancing digital well-being, organizations can help attract and retain talent, improve productivity, and demonstrate their commitment to supporting holistic employee well-being.

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