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Reducing Employee Stress Through

Digital Wellness

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The epidemic of employee stress in today's workplaces is caused, in large part, by technology-related trends and issues. We believe that one way to help address such stress is by increasing the digital wellness of employees, a topic we explore in this article.

Just how prevalent is stress among workers? When the HR Research Institute asked HR professionals what work-related challenges their organizations currently face, the most widely chosen response was "dealing with employee stress in the workplace," cited by 73% of respondents.

The Role of Technology

Employee wellness is not a new concept, but The relationship between employee stress and technology is multifaceted. On one hand, technology solutions can provide employees with ways to manage their stress and well-being. These technologies range from fitness trackers to mental health apps. For instance, September is National Yoga Awareness Month in the U.S. Thanks to technology, we can choose to celebrate this from the comfort of our homes through a variety of online classes and apps.

On the other hand, technology itself can be a source of employee stress. Today's ever-evolving technologies often come with associated stressors such as always being connected to the workplace, potential invasions of privacy, data overload, and security threats. Moreover, there's stress associated with trying to keep abreast of today's fast-evolving technologies.

The Role of Wellness Programs

Organizations primarily deal with employee stress through wellness programs and initiatives. Wellness programs can improve employees' welfare, performance, and sense of self-efficacy. There are various types of wellness programs these days, with the most common ones focusing on:

- physical well-being
- mental/emotional well-being
- well-being associated with the work environment
- social well-being
- financial well-being

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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Enter Digital Well-being

Today, however, the well-being paradigm is being expanded into the area of digital well-being. Image showing a paragraph about the research and explaining what the article is about. After all, many people are now spending the majority of their work and personal lives in front of screens of some sort. 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.

Although people enjoy much of the time they spend online and on screen, it can also take a toll on both their physical and mental health. In fact, numerous reports have highlighted the detrimental effects of too much screen time on a range of areas such as sleep, mood, and communal interactions.

So, it makes sense that more employers are thinking about well-being from the perspective of employees' digital lives. For a recent study that the HR Research Institute conducted (see sidebar), we defined digital wellness as follows:

The Impact of Stress

Employee stress is a pressing organizational problem because it leads to burnout and disengagement. This translates to lower productivity and overall organizational performance. In addition to impacting productivity, declining mental health and well-being at work also lead to mental health disorders. This has become a pervasive problem. In the U.S. alone, 42.5 million people suffer from anxiety disorders.

The Costs of Stress

One of the effects of this increase in employee stress is the increase in healthcare costs. A recent study estimates that "more than 120,000 deaths per year and approximately 5%–8% of annual healthcare costs are associated with and may be attributable to how U.S. companies manage their workforces." The American Institute of Stress estimates that when considering "absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity, increased medical costs, and legal costs," the total economic impact of stress on US employers is estimated at $300 billion.

A healthy state of digital wellness means people are protected from weak spots in their security, their privacy is protected, and they remain in control of their personal data— who can access it and how it's used. It can also mean they have a healthy, non-addictive relationship with technology.

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The Rise of Technostress

Gadgets and technologies have become an indispensable part of many employees' professional and personal lives. On the plus side, these technologies have made our lives more comfortable and allowed us greater connectivity than ever before through Internet banking, telehealth services, and online shopping just to name a few. However, these technologies are also incredibly addictive. In fact, an average person taps or swipes their phones approximately 2,600 times per day. This sometimes leads to stress caused by the pressure to remain connected, resulting in an overall decrease in mood and well-being.

In the workplace, the introduction of newer technologies and having to adapt to them has led to what is commonly called "technostress." This is caused by expectations to learn new and complex tools in a short period. Further, technology often causes work interruptions in the form of instant messages and emails. Newer technologies can also cause job insecurity for employees who fear being replaced by technologies or by more tech-savvy employees.

Why the Future Digital Landscape Could Become Even More Stressful

The Role of Remote Work and Personal Devices

Today many employees are engaged in remote or hybrid work. This can cause an increased reliance on technologies for everyday work life. Two-fifths of the respondents to our survey indicate that over half of their employees work remotely at least some of the time every month. An overwhelming majority (96%) also agree or strongly agree that the increase in remote and hybrid work has made digital wellness more important in their organizations.

Further, employees often use their personal devices for work purposes. More than 7 in 10 HR professionals surveyed believe over half of the employees in their organizations rely on personal devices such as computers, and mobile phones for work purposes. This raises concerns about exposing the organization's confidential information. In 2022, an alarming 83% of organizations experienced more than one data breach.

While employers are liable for any data breach, three-fifths of respondents say their organizations have dealt with cybersecurity breaches caused by employee/human error. This can cause stress and loss of morale among employees in the event of such a breach.

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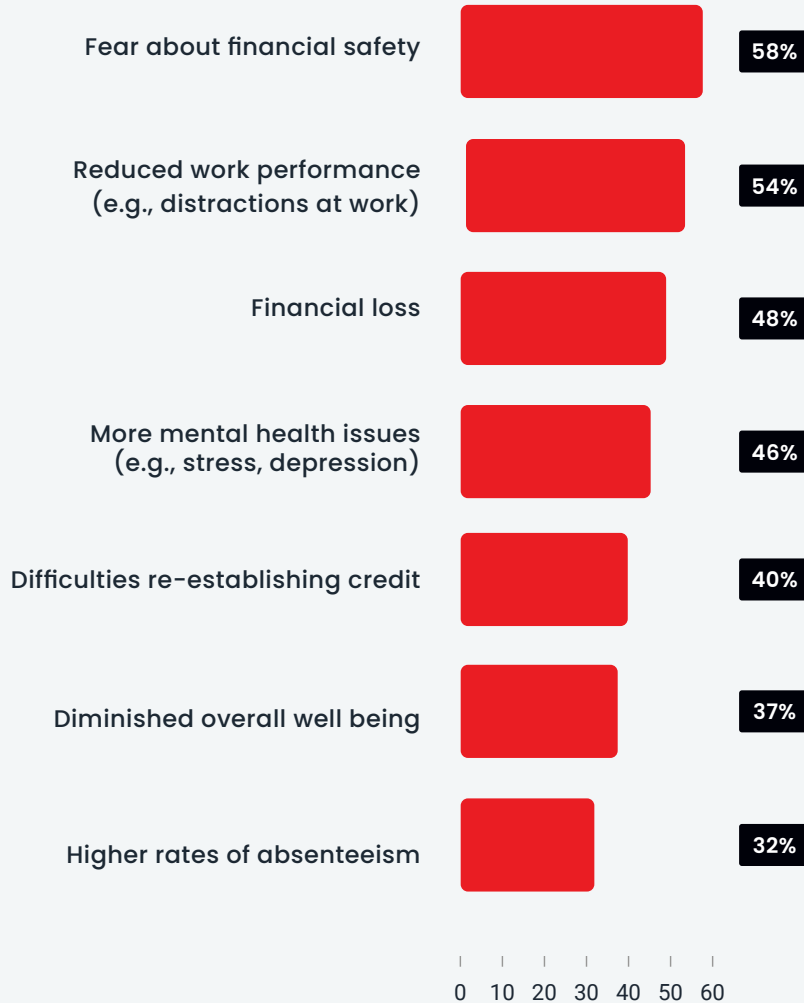Wellness™

The Role of Generative AI

Another potential factor is the rise of what's known as generative AI, such as OpenAI's well-known ChatGPT. That widely used AI reportedly exposed payment-related and other sensitive information of 1.2% of subscribers. There were also concerns when employees at Samsung accidentally leaked company information when using ChatGPT.

Despite the utility of generative AI for business growth, there remain concerns surrounding data security while using such technologies. For example, there are risks associated with incorrect or biased information. Further, generative AI can be misused to create and deliver malware and other malicious cyberattacks. Naturally, these contribute to increased stress for employees who now have to contend with these newer technologies.

Identity Theft and Other Security Concerns

Identity theft is another potential stressor. More than half of the respondents to our survey indicated that employees in their organizations are very concerned about identity theft. Potential outcomes of such an event range from fear about financial safety (58%), reduced work performance (54%), financial loss (48%), and mental health issues such as stress (46%). We believe that organizations offering a digital wellness solution to employees can address issues of identity theft proactively, all the while adding a cloak of protection over their cybersecurity measures.

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Survey Question: What do you view as the potential outcomes of identity theft for employess? (select all that apply)

Outcome	Percentage
Fear about financial safety	58%
Reduced work performance (e.g., distractions at work)	54%
Financial loss	48%
More mental health issues (e.g., stress, depression)	46%
Difficulties re-establishing credit	40%
Diminished overall well being	37%
Higher rates of absenteeism	32%

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Nearly half of respondents (46%) say mental health issues may follow from identity theft

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Digital Wellness Rx for Stress Management

A digital wellness solution encourages data security, device safeguards, and identity protections as well as education in a variety of areas such as proper device usage, stress monitoring, technostress-management techniques, stress-reduction exercises and more. Of course, the features of a digital wellness program will be influenced by the specifics of work processes and the work environment, but the goal is always the same: to boost employees' well-being by helping them cope better with their modern digital lives.
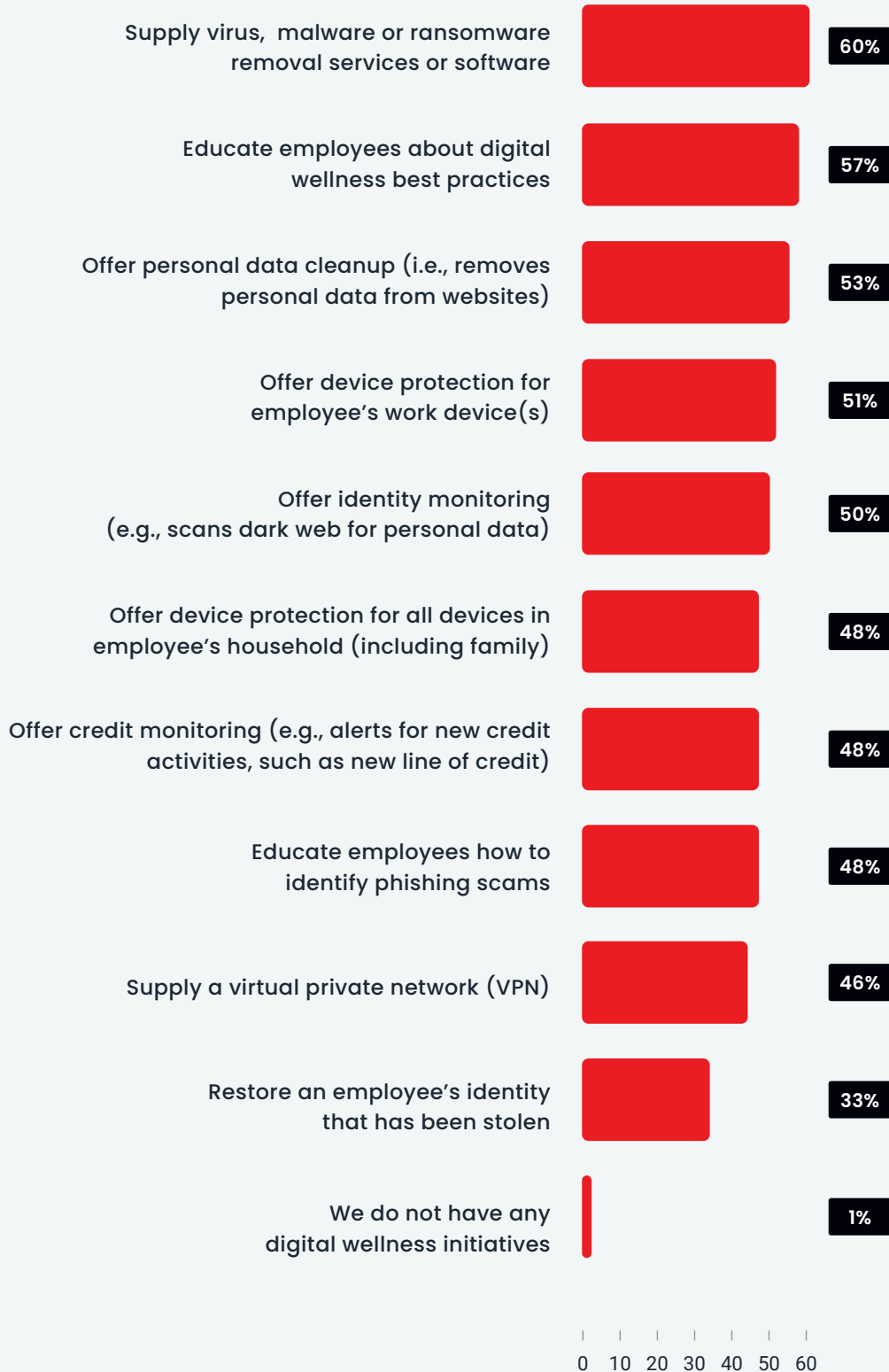
Many organizations have, in fact, started offering a digital wellness solution as part of their organization's current benefits package. The results of our research also indicate that more than 9 in 10 organizations offer some form of digital wellness as part of their core or voluntary benefits offerings. Most organizations believe that a digital wellness solution improves employee safety and well-being to a high (39%) or very high (47%) degree.

As part of the digital wellness initiatives, three-fifths of organizations surveyed say they supply virus, malware, or ransomware removal services or software, and more than half (57%) say they focus on educating employees about digital wellness best practices. Half or over offer personal data cleanup (53%), device protection for employees' work devices (51%), and identity monitoring (50%).

A comprehensive digital wellness solution aims to offer all-in-one protection for employees from threats involving identity, security, and privacy. This reduces employee stress by proactively protecting them from digital risks and restorative support in the event of such breaches or theft.

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Survey Question: What digital wellness initiatives does your organization engage in? (select all that apply)

Initiative	Percentage
Supply virus, malware or ransomware removal services or software	60%
Educate employees about digital wellness best practices	57%
Offer personal data cleanup (i.e., removes personal data from websites)	53%
Offer device protection for employee's work device(s)	51%
Offer identity monitoring (e.g., scans dark web for personal data)	50%
Offer device protection for all devices in employee's household (including family)	48%
Offer credit monitoring (e.g., alerts for new credit activities, such as new line of credit)	48%
Educate employees how to identify phishing scams	48%
Supply a virtual private network (VPN)	46%
Restore an employee's identity that has been stolen	33%
We do not have any digital wellness initiatives	1%

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Conclusion

We believe that organizations can and should address employee stress through digital wellness approaches. Among the digital wellness practices, we recommend include:

- discover the ways in which digital-related factors are driving stress in your organization

- develop a digital wellness plan for addressing such stress based on your findings

- consider a variety of key features such as:
    - device safeguards
    - data security
    - privacy and identity protection

- teach employees better habits related to technology use

- encourage work boundaries by making it clear that employees are not typically expected to respond to work-related communications outside of office hours,

- provide guidelines so that the usage of personal devices does not cause the types of cybersecurity issues that boost stress levels

- partner with IT on developing tactics that make technology usage less stressful and more user-friendly even while enhancing cybersecurity

By promoting healthy relationships with technology among employees and offering comprehensive digital security and protection, employers can reduce employee stress associated with technology. Not only can they safeguard organizations from cybersecurity threats, but they can also maximize employee productivity and engagement through digital well-being.

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