



IMPROVING EMPLOYEE HEALTH THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

By **Marc Giguère**

Technology is an integral part of our society. Although it has numerous uses, technology's ultimate purpose should always be to improve our lives. It helps us manage our time, access all kinds of information, and focus on what matters in our personal and professional lives. At the same time, the constant presence of mobile devices and social media often makes technology seem like a distraction. And when it comes to health and wellness, technology's primary role should always be to support individuals and organizations. .

The challenges associated with health promotion and program accessibility, as well as the increased use of the various technologies in workplace wellness programs, raise a number of questions from plan sponsors about the relevance of these solutions and support offered by insurance plan providers.¹ This article examines potential solutions from the perspective of integrating services by linking health care with technology.

Limitations of silos

Most group insurance providers offer some form of health management and assistance programs and tools. But plan providers need to ask themselves whether these are actually adapted to employees

and readily accessible. There needs to be serious dialogue on how these programs should be offered and promoted. For example, do plan sponsors really have the necessary information to provide effective communications and raise employee awareness about the services offered?

The vast majority of programs on the market today are offered in silos and are not interrelated. The use of technology alone, however, does not provide easy access to these programs, particularly because of how they are designed and promoted. Although changes are occurring within the industry, it is clear that offering non-integrated programs does not solve problems and challenges concerning health promotion, awareness, accessibility, and performance. The sheer amount of information plan sponsors and employees receive from providers and other market intermediaries can be completely overwhelming. Silo operations do not permit the horizontal health promotion² that is enabled through an integrated health navigation platform that incorporates user-focused functionality.

²The concept of horizontal promotion refers to functions that integrate and promote various subjects, content or tools, direct users to various support programs, and encourage users to take action.

Integrated platform

With its single access point, the integrated platform provides the flexibility needed to support a range of corporate services and encourage uptake of programs and services; integrated platforms are effectively a one-stop shop. The ideal health navigation platform is based on a structure that enables it to target a wide spectrum of health needs as well as provide centralized access. The platform should also do the following:

- Target user needs and behaviours
- Use a central Web and phone portal with multiple access points (email, chat and face-to-face) to self-management tools, personalized support and assistance, and counselling and training services
- Offer support for more complex situations
- Facilitate the promotion and organization of other health programs
- Enable integration of key content linked to other employer programs and benefits.

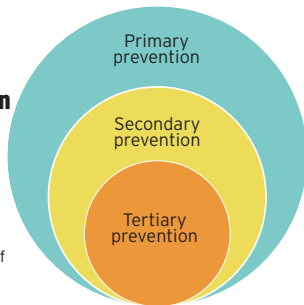
The design and functionality of the health navigation platform should also allow for the implementation of a prevention model similar to the one proposed by the Mental Health

¹Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey, 2014.

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Commission of Canada³ (shown in Figure 1 below); the model should also incorporate physical health conditions. The platform should work at three levels of prevention: primary (identify and reduce risk); secondary (identify problems and correct them before they get worse); and tertiary (reduce stress and identifiable performance problems).

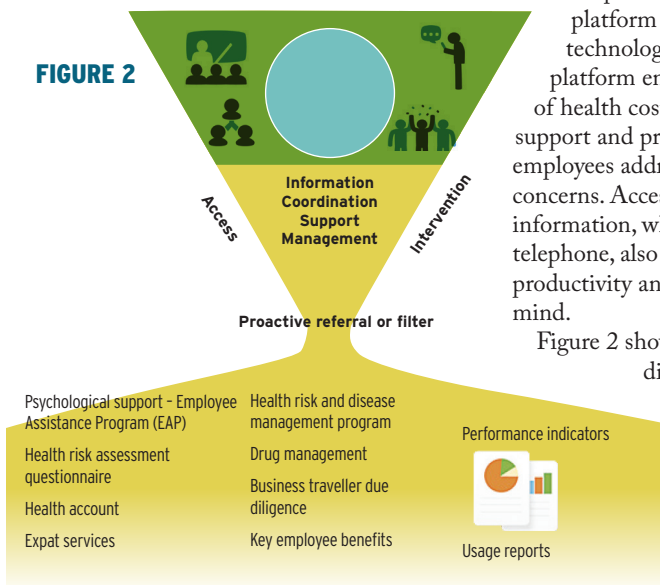
FIGURE 1
Levels of protection



Source :
Mental Health
Commission of
Canada

Integrated health platforms enable plan sponsors not only to lay the foundation for preventing health problems and developing healthy lifestyles but also to better meet organizational challenges. As a result, employers are better able to promote health care plans and the overall benefits plan as well as help employees learn about health issues and access personalized services. The integrated platform helps ease concerns employees might have about their health or that of a

FIGURE 2



CASE STUDY

PATIENT WITH TYPE 2 DIABETES

A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AGO, John (fictional name) was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. Following the diagnosis, he maintained a healthy lifestyle and took his medication as prescribed. He was able to successfully control his blood sugar levels, but he started noticing that his level was around 15 mmol/L first thing in the morning. (John's target level is 7 to 10 mmol/L.) His high levels in the morning caused him unpleasant symptoms such as nausea, fatigue, headaches, a frequent need to urinate, and difficulty concentrating. These symptoms had a major impact on his daily life and his performance at work, and he had already missed two days of work.

So John decided to access the health navigation platform offered through his employer's benefits program. He browsed the site, found a few articles of interest, and was directed to a tool that asked him a few questions about his symptoms and interest in taking action to improve his condition. His symptoms were having a major impact on his day-to-day life, so a proposal for assistance and coaching was triggered online. The confirmation for program registration enabled John to request an automated electronic reply from a nurse. This kind of integrated process provides users with the support they need and simplifies access to health care management programs, thereby helping avoid absenteeism. The integration is intuitive, guiding users based on their needs and associated health risks.

In a case such as this, nurses can support patients through the various stages to determine the probable causes of their symptoms and help them implement a plan to improve their health. The nurse advised John to check his blood sugar levels at pre-determined intervals throughout the day, note his symptoms, make the required adjustments to stabilize his blood sugar level, and make an appointment with his physician. In so doing, John was able to re-establish his blood sugar level within four days. A follow-up was done five weeks after his appointment with his physician to ensure the situation was under control and there were no other underlying problems.

loved one and improves responses to administrative enquiries.

Furthermore, the plan sponsor's role is simplified through the use of a platform that links health with technology and flexibility. The platform enables sound management of health costs while offering first-rate support and proactive assistance to help employees address health needs and concerns. Access to reliable health information, whether via internet⁴ or telephone, also fosters employee productivity and gives employees' peace of mind.

Figure 2 shows a platform version that directs employees to a single access point for benefits and internal policies. Participants can access key information and obtain the necessary support based on the

health concern and their willingness to take action (see case study above).

An integrated health platform should without question be more than the sum of its individual programs. Easier to promote, it provides a structure allowing employer content to be changed and augmented and supports the dual objectives of disease prevention and health care cost management.

The plan sponsor that is able to provide accessible health and wellness programs through an integrated platform—whether provided by an insurer or implemented internally—is unquestionably the best suited to meet the requirements of its membership and improve health performance and the organization's performance. ▀

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³ <http://bit.ly/1xFbNSq>.

⁴ For more information on using the Internet for health care information, see <http://bit.ly/V0FQHD>.