

MIT Sloan HSI Employee Population Health Lab Workshop

Evidence over Hype: Testing the Real Impact of Workplace Wellness

The MIT Sloan HSI Employee Population Health Lab provides opportunities for self-insured employers working to collaborate with MIT researchers and other industry participants to develop and rigorously test ideas that improve employee physical and mental wellbeing. In a time when businesses are increasing their investments in this area, hoping to also reduce healthcare costs and improve productivity, the HSI Lab aims to create and validate evidence-based recommendations with rigorous research that will result in real, sustained benefits.

The participants at the October, 2024 HSI Lab Workshop learned of new results from ongoing work with a Fortune 500 Healthcare Services Company, Amwell's [SilverCloud](#) group, and Erin Kelly's findings on worker wellbeing research. HSI Director Anne Quaadgras led a fireside chat with Ruben Sigala, Chief Marketing and Analytics Officer of [Well.co](#), exploring Well's data-driven approaches and potential collaborative research opportunities. The day's sessions closed with HSI Advisory Board member Rebecca Schechter moderating a panel on industry perspectives on fostering employee health that surfaced additional avenues for collaborative research.

Corporate Wellness Industry Overview

The day started off with an overview of the corporate wellness industry. In sum, there are billions of dollars at stake and the market is expected to increase. Currently, the United States accounts for 40% of the global \$42 billion industry, which is expected to grow to more than \$100 billion by 2033. The industry can be divided into three market segments:

- Wellness and workplace screening programs
- Disease screening and management
- Mental health support programs

Wellness and workplace screening accounts for about half of the market; the other two segments share the remaining half about equally. Given the potential revenue, companies are eager to enter the industry and employers are interested in offering some of these benefits.

However, the picture becomes murky when trying to make the business case. Many programs struggle with employee engagement, in both enrollment and retention. Further, there is scant scientific evidence of these programs' clinical effectiveness and positive return on investment.

Fortunately, rigorous analytics and appropriate interpretation are specialties of HSI researchers. Several research teams collaborating with HSI Lab member companies, Amwell Silvercloud, and a Fortune 500 Healthcare services company, are applying their skills to the most pressing questions. Providers of these services want to be able to prove that their offerings move the needle on health outcomes. Their potential customers, employers, want their employees to participate and capture the cost savings that may be associated with these programs.

The rest of the workshop consisted of presentations and discussions that addressed these challenges.

Workshop Themes

A few themes emerged across panels, speakers, presentations and discussions.

Technology:

Technology in and of itself is not a problem solver. Neither is talking up the benefits of AI/ML and new algorithms. Rather, discernment is required to use technology appropriately. Technology should foster the trust, actions and behaviors that lead to better health outcomes. There may be a place for a technology or program that does not lead to better health; it could be a recruitment tool. However, such a program is unlikely to foster retention.

Personalization:

Every session brought up the importance of personalization. One of the industry panelists said, “don’t think of employees as a monolith.” Well.co and Amwell Silvercloud both focus on ensuring that their programs are tailored to specific employees as much as possible. Well.co adapts lessons learned from the consumer goods industry, in which companies have many more interactions with customers than healthcare does. HSI researchers are collaborating on several research projects with Amwell Silvercloud to discover how to best match supporters and users based on specific characteristics.

Trust:

Trust is required on two specific vectors. A user needs to trust both the content of a program as well as the intent of the program’s developer. The information provided needs to be correct and the user needs to trust that their information is safe. Personalization and trust help a program to level-set so it meets users where they are. Users need to be given achievable and actionable goals in order to stay engaged.

Human Interaction:

Successful programs don’t solely rely on technology for personalization. Repeatedly, speakers spoke about the necessity of human interaction as a part of the technology platform. Personalization and human interaction together are more likely to inspire trust in the program. This gives the user a chance to develop more of a relationship with the platform, or as one person noted, “a trusted dialog”.

Engagement requires trust. Despite best efforts, however, engagement remains one of the most confounding elements of a successful wellness program. Wellness program providers struggle with both enrollment and retention. Some have found that financial incentives work, but there are also cases where incentives have failed to move potential users.

If engagement had a competitor for theme of the day, it would be program effectiveness. Clearly, employers are interested in programs that work, that move the needle on health. However, proving what works has not always been easy, and most programs have not been rigorously tested. Prof. Joe Doyle is applying randomized control trials (RCTs) to wellness programs in order to be able to make a causal connection between use of the program and a desired outcome. Two of his recent RCTs -- “hot spotting” in Camden and Geisinger’s Fresh Food Farmacy, which used healthy food ‘prescriptions’ to help patients control their diabetes – surprised proponents by showing no significant impact of the program: the control group did just as well (statistically) on the measured outcomes as the treatment group. Prof. Doyle plans to conduct a similar analysis on some of the programs discussed at the workshop. The goal is to come up with meaningful and actionable interventions that provide a path toward wellness that is attributable to the intervention.