



Five Emerging Employee Wellness Trends For 2024

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The health of people at work has never been more important than it is right now. External issues impacting the health of workers today, both physically and mentally, are related to both global and local factors.

Globally we are dealing with climate change, conflict, rising fascism, authoritarianism, and attacks on democracy.

Locally we have high inflation, a housing crisis, bitter political divide and those same attacks on democracy. Millennials, those born between about 1981 and 1996 now make up over 50% of the workforce, and along with their Generation Z colleagues, will be the first generations that will not have the same life expectancy as those generations to come before.

Add in the fact that these generations may never be able to afford to own their home and the situation is even more bleak. Birth rates for those in these generations are tumbling, and who could blame them given the outlook? At the same time, inflation of food and shelter costs put many at risk of not earning a living wage as compensation has not kept pace with the rate of inflation.

Internally, stress, anxiety, and depression levels are at all-time highs, and other individual chronic health issues, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, chronic pain and musculoskeletal conditions commonly impact people at work. These invariably drive-up costs and work disability rates, as well as absenteeism and decrease productivity for employers, particularly those that are self-funded, as well as health plans alike.

All these issues coalesce into creating workplaces that continue to be ripe for disruption as employers focus on attracting, recruiting, and retaining the best and brightest, and appropriate health and productivity benefits are crucial to that strategy. Retaining the right people, while protecting and promoting their health are key business drivers common to successful organizations.

As we have done in years past, we have met with employers and health plans, reviewed market and health trend analysis data, published research evidence, and reflected upon some of my recent conference keynote presentations and plenary sessions to focus on predicting what is around the corner.

We at MediKeeper anticipate the following key trends for 2024, many of which are related to one another, and to a positive employee health experience as well as a more supportive working environment:

- Engagement Doesn't Matter
- Employee Burnout Is Not Going Away Anytime Soon
- Artificial Intelligence Will Have an Even Greater Impact
- Remote and Hybrid Work Will Be Coveted by Employees
- The 4-Day Work Weeks' Time Has Come

Engagement Doesn't Matter

A common question for some employers is 'what is the engagement level of our employee wellbeing initiatives?' For some employers, and health plans as well, this question is related to *return on investment (ROI)*. While research demonstrates some modest returns, they are highly dependent on health benefit plan design, associated wellness programming attributes and even the culture of health among other factors.

The idea being that higher levels of [employee engagement](#) in health-related programming results in greater program success and outcomes, and ultimately a reduction in healthcare costs. I have written and presented on this subject extensively over the years. While employee engagement is a widely used metric, it is related to productivity and job satisfaction in a broader human resource sense and is quite different than the topic discussed within the context of wellness programming. In the employee wellness context, wellness program 'engagement' really means *program participation*.

So why doesn't engagement matter? It comes down to the population's health status. Many employee wellbeing initiatives do a great job of sustaining participation in those who already live a healthy lifestyle, sometimes driven by incentivization. It is ironic that monetary incentives drive many elements of lifestyle medicine, even though the health and life longevity improvements associated with appropriate physical activity, diet, sleep and smoking status should be enough of an incentive on their own! If an employee wellness initiative has a participation rate of 50%, it could be that the majority of those are already healthy, or at least healthier to begin with than others in the population of workers.

What really matters is **program participation by those most at risk** for chronic diseases related to lifestyle behaviors, or those already with conditions (e.g., under condition management programming). This is called stratification; these employees or plan members are historically a more difficult cohort or group of people to reach and convince to embark on a *health improvement journey*. This is because there are numerous factors that limit or inhibit their participation in wellness programming. Inflation, Social Determinants and even Diversity, Equity and Inclusion can all play a role. The identification of who they are, and their readiness for change from a lifestyle medicine intervention perspective should be key, and will ultimately yield the greatest success, including from a ROI perspective, as well as a *value on investment (VOI)* perspective.

This approach should be a primary driver of wellness programming in 2024, leveraging and targeting the most at risk members, perhaps using the pareto principle (e.g., 80% of health costs are attributable to 20% of the population). The results of such programming efforts that are far more focused on a smaller and the most unhealthy cohort will ultimately achieve the greatest success for the organization, and for the workers.

Employee Burnout Is Not Going Away Anytime Soon

The mental health crisis is not showing any signs of abating, and many employees are feeling burned out. The stressors of the past few years, from the COVID-19 pandemic, and pressures to *return to the office* (RTO), and inflation among others are compounding. Burnout is caused by work stress and is defined as a state of emotional or physical exhaustion.

I like to use a battery analogy, most of us have cell phones, and some of us panic when our battery level is low. We search out electrical outlets or carry battery pack reserves with us when we are on the move. We know that a quick charge will relieve cell phone battery anxiety and put our minds at rest, since we won't lose access to the world through our phones due to a dead battery. Our bodies operate on the same principles, and we need time to recharge to be at our best, and healthiest. Sleep is an excellent way to recharge on a daily basis, but most adults don't get the recommended amount, 7 to 9 hours per night of quality sleep.

But we also need time to recover away from work, hence in the invention of weekends or time off! If we are working multiple jobs, and not recovering on a daily basis, or weekly or monthly, our battery reserves become chronically and critically low, and we are no longer able to function at our best, nor are we healthy. Paid Time Off (PTO) or vacations are designed to help offset the pressures of work accumulation by providing extended time away, e.g. more than 2 days. Most people don't use their full allotment, resulting in a negative impact on their health as stress piles up and wears people down while they can't recover appropriately.

Burnout is not just about peoples' resiliency and ability to show up and be engaged, the workplace itself contributes to the rise in this rate. Toxic workplaces, long hours, understaffing, lack of recognition, interpersonal conflict, policies that don't make sense to workers, among many others contribute to the issue. Many of these problems don't manifest overnight, the stressors won't go away overnight either. This is an issue that employers must have on their radar and continue to take seriously and provide both short- and long-term, meaningful solutions to best support their people.

Artificial Intelligence Will Have an Even Greater Impact

A chat-based generative artificial intelligence (AI) application was launched in late November 2022 that made AI accessible to everyone with an internet connection. This application, ChatGPT, has the potential to quickly revolutionize many aspects of work, and its possibilities are virtually limitless. AI is technology that mimics human thinking and behaviors, and as a result has the potential to impact roles that are repetitive in nature and require basic or intermediate cognitive processing abilities. I have tested the application by asking it to perform various tasks related to human resources functions and processes, including workplace benefit plan design, workplace health and wellbeing programming, work disability management solutions and condition management. The results are impressive, but not without drawbacks. You still need to have enough subject matter expertise to identify where the output may not be the best or most appropriate, but it can be foundational and a good building block on which to apply your knowledge, creativity and experience.

There are numerous problems with training bias, copyright and other limitations which will eventually be overcome with this type of application. Similarly, there are many workplace health applications which claim to have artificial intelligence or machine learning elements but are nothing more than sophisticated algorithms, so the buyer should be aware and be sure to ask the right questions of your technology partners and vendors. Fancy marketing does not necessarily mean that AI techniques have been properly applied.

Despite these limitations, these approaches and tactics will continue to evolve in the near future and will grow in popularity and impact workplace health and productivity strategy and programming.

Remote And Hybrid Work Will Be Coveted by Employees

As I noted in the [2023 trends report](#), it is expected that the concept of remote and hybrid work will continue for the near future and beyond. It is very difficult for many to go back to the pre-pandemic ways if they were able to pivot to remote work. Research evidence is clear, many employees are at least as, if not more, productive when working remotely. Similarly, they are more engaged than on-site workers.

Employees prefer to work fully remotely or in a hybrid sense, for example 1, 2 or 3 days in the office per week, and the return to office strategy from employers must be justified in their minds. Workers tend to be more productive when working remotely, and since they are also more engaged, and contributing to the positive culture, employers should be wary of any mandate to return workers to the office.

Employee engagement is low and decreasing for on-site workers, which should worry employers. Employers will lose talented workers and see higher turnover rates in favor of employers who do not mandate this approach.

The argument that offices are necessary is without support from the research literature and is an outdated approach. It seems to be mostly embraced by many in the office and commercial real-estate sector, or by organizations that have a lack of trust in their employees.

I think that an elegant solution to the housing crisis is to convert a lot of the unoccupied office space into housing, which would alleviate some of the pressure on the housing supply problem. Unfortunately, this is something that cannot happen overnight, and is more of a longer-term solution.

Nevertheless, employers should be prepared for continued pressure to accommodate worker desire for remote and hybrid work options, and the research supports this approach. If employers want to have the best and brightest on their team, then a supportive fully remote or the least a hybrid approach is necessary.

The 4-Day Work Weeks' Time Has Come

The concept of alternative work schedules, for example those other than traditional 9 to 5 or 8 to 4, in a 5-day on, 2-day off work week has been around for a while. Many 24-7 operations have alternative schedules in place, and for good reason, but a large proportion of workplaces operate on the 5- and 2-day schedule.

There is mounting evidence that the switch to a 4-day work week is associated with positive benefits for all stakeholders. The 4-day work week is generally defined by the 100-80-100 strategy; 100% productivity results, 80% of time at 100% compensation. Essentially, resulting the same (or improved work product) at the same compensation rate, but over less time.

Research demonstrates that productivity stays the same, or increases, while burnout and other mental health issues decrease. Physical health improves, as does stress, anxiety, fatigue and sleep. There is less absenteeism, since people can schedule their daily living requirements in the additional time. There is a positive environmental impact, which is good news for climate change.

The business case is strong, since productivity has increased substantially over the decades, while wages have not increased at the same rate, meaning there is capacity in the system to increase compensation. This would certainly alleviate some of the impact of inflation on housing and food costs. Similarly, research demonstrates that the more hours people work, the less productive they are. And as more hours are worked, people are proportionately healthier. Each year nearly 750,000 people die from heart disease and stroke alone that is related to working long hours.

There is a clear need for employers to consider a 4-day work week as part of their wellbeing strategy, and we believe this should be on everyone's radar for 2024 as the results are clearly supportive of workplaces justifying such an approach.

Tying it all Together

Our 2023 employee wellness trends were very accurate, and we believe the ones for 2024 should certainly be or continue to be on every employer or health plans' list of emerging issues that should be addressed and serve as foundational for a healthy and successful 2024.

Click [here](#) to read the 2023 report.

Click [here](#) to read the 2022 report.

Click [here](#) to read the 2021 report.

About MediKeeper

MediKeeper offers a comprehensive suite of population health management tools intended for employer groups, health plans, brokers, TPA's, and wellness companies. MediKeeper's [Wellness Portal](#), and [Health Risk Assessment](#) tools enable healthcare consumers to make smarter health-related decisions. Founded in 2003, MediKeeper's technology gathers and analyzes disparate health data to help inform strategy and programming. By providing de-identified population reporting in a seamlessly integrated portal, MediKeeper's customers are better able to manage their population's health and make smarter wellness investments. Learn more about how we may help you by [requesting a demo](#).

About The Author

Dr. Tyler Amell is an internationally recognized thought leader on the topic of workplace health and productivity. He is Chief Health and Strategy Officer at MediKeeper. He also serves on the executive board of directors of the Work Wellness Institute and the National Wellness Institute. In the past, he served on the executive board of directors of the Integrated Benefits Institute (IBI) and the Canadian Association for Research on Work and Health. He is a past CRO, CHO and advisor at a wellbeing technology company, Partner and Vice President at a global HR consulting and technology company, CEO of a HR technology company and Vice President of a large independent health care, occupational rehabilitation and return-to-work company. Dr. Amell has consulted directly with employers, insurers and health technology companies on their strategy, and he holds an adjunct faculty position at Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences. He has given keynote presentations and seminars at more than 300 events globally.