THE NEXT WAVE OF WELLNESS:

5 Emerging Trends Transforming Workplace Health

CORE HEALTH

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Introduction

As global markets fluctuate, healthcare policies evolve, and new medical innovations emerge, the landscape of workplace wellness continues to shift. For HR leaders, staying ahead of these changes is essential to controlling costs, supporting retention, and achieving organizational goals. This report distills the latest research on trends shaping employee wellness in 2026 and beyond - so you can focus on strategy, not sorting through data.

1. The AI Implementation Gap

AI adoption is accelerating across nearly every industry, including health and wellness. Yet many organizations are discovering that the excitement around generative AI is outpacing their ability to use it safely, effectively, and with meaningful results. This disconnect - commonly referred to as the AI Implementation Gap - highlights the difference between AI's long-term promise and the limited, early-stage impact many employers are experiencing today.

In wellness specifically, leaders are eager to explore how AI might personalize employee experiences, surface insights from health data, and streamline program administration. However, questions around safety, accuracy, privacy, and practical workflows continue to slow progress. Without clear strategies, many organizations are experimenting without fully understanding how to deploy AI responsibly or measure its impact.

In 2026 and beyond, the challenge will be to bridge this gap in a way that justifies the investment and maintains the integrity of sensitive data. To achieve this, executives and HR professionals must understand AI's strengths and limitations in relation to employee wellness.

Did you know?

1. *95% of companies that have implemented generative AI have not received any tangible return on their investment – a phenomenon that the research team dubbed 'high adoption, low transformation.*[1]
2. *Only 13% of healthcare and health system executives agreed that their organization had a clear strategy in place to implement AI safely into their workflows.*

AI Workplace Wellness Opportunities & Risks

Part of the problem is that during the early AI gold rush, there has been virtually no regulation, allowing many companies to overpromise and underdeliver. This has left some organizations holding the bag when their AI-powered wellness initiatives fell flat, despite substantial investment.

The reality is that, like any tool, generative AI excels in certain areas and struggles in others. For example, AI is already integrated in many of the most popular fitness and nutrition apps, giving personalized workouts, meal plan recommendations, and more.

It is exceptional at aggregating healthcare data and for other novel uses, such as camera-assisted ergonomics coaching, which can reduce workplace injuries. It has also been successfully used to create benefits manager chatbots that help employees choose the right package and answer questions on demand, improving access and reducing strain on HR departments.

Workplace Wellness: AI Strengths

- Data aggregation
- Health monitoring with wearables
- Benefits chatbots
- Personalized fitness & nutrition coaching via apps

AI has the potential to accelerate the personalized wellness movement that has been driving workplace wellness for decades. It can streamline wellness workflows, enhance the user experience, and provide real-time, data-driven feedback in fitness and nutrition apps. All of which can be further optimized by using the right wellness platform.

But its use in workplace wellness comes with significant risks in the current regulatory environment.

AI Wellness Obstacles

Many generative AI tools are not secure, and the companies themselves have warned users that the data they input is not confidential.[3] In addition, because AI is trained on data from the past that is imperfect, there are significant concerns that bias and inequality will be exacerbated, as AI has been found to produce racist outputs and give unsafe health advice.[4]

Worst of all, AI has been known to 'hallucinate', that is, when it presents inaccurate, false, or nonsensical information as fact.[5] These types of errors are especially dangerous in the health and wellness sector and have resulted in real harm to users, such as in the mental health chatbot space.[6]

Workplace Wellness: AI Weaknesses

- Mental health chatbots
- Personal health and organizational data safety
- Biases
- Depersonalization of care
- Decision-making power
- Informed consent coaching via apps

Despite these concerns, AI technology is rapidly changing the health and wellness industry and is likely here to stay. For that reason, it is crucial that HR professionals educate themselves on the uses of AI in their industry, serve as curious gatekeepers to make sure that it is used safely and effectively, and provide education and support to employees regarding AI-driven changes within the workplace.

2. Obesity Medication Market Disruptions Continue

Since their approval for treating obesity in 2021, GLP-1 medications like Ozempic and Wegovy have experienced significant growth in popularity, with prescriptions increasing by 364% from 2019 to 2024.[7] Unsurprisingly, interest from employees seeking coverage for these drugs has also surged.

While these medications offer tremendous health benefits and the potential to change the game for treating obesity, they are expensive in the short term, costing around $1,000 monthly.[8] Additionally, it's generally believed that people must continue taking the medication to maintain their health benefits (although more research is needed).

It is for these reasons - not to mention drug shortages and compounding concerns - that the future of obesity drug coverage and support in employee wellness remains hazy.[9]

GLP-1 Fast Facts

- 43% of large companies cover GLP-1 medication use for obesity
- 59% of those companies said the use of these medications for weight loss was higher than expected
- 67% of companies that don't cover said they aren't likely to start in the next 12-24 months
- 34% of covered companies require a meeting with a dietitian, case manager, or therapist, or participate in a lifestyle program to receive the coverage
- 77% of large employers say managing overall GLP-1 costs is extremely or very important[11]

For a deeper look at how GLP-1s are reshaping employee expectations and wellness programs, see our guide: **GLP-1s and Employee Wellness: A Strategic Guide for Service Providers**.

So what does all that mean for employee wellness in 2026 and beyond? GLP-1 medications have forever changed how conditions like diabetes and obesity are treated. However, due to their high costs, many companies have slowed down coverage adaptation and have leaned more heavily into resource utilization tools to curb costs.

Reuters estimates the obesity market will be worth 200 billion by 2031, and with 16 new medications due to hit the market by 2029, this trend shows no signs of slowing.[12] Therefore, it's even more crucial for companies to address affordability by negotiating hard with vendors, encouraging generic usage when it becomes available, offering wellness reimbursements, and using thoughtful utilization management strategies. Other proven strategies such as health coaching will also likely improve employee outcomes and cut down on healthcare costs long term when used with these novel drug treatments.

3. Rising Healthcare Costs

One pattern that has been accelerating in recent years is the ballooning cost of healthcare. Between 2000 and 2023, healthcare spending in the US tripled, and costs rose 10.4% from 2019 to 2020 alone.[13] These increases have organizations bracing for impact and scrambling to find creative solutions to reduce costs.

So, what is driving these increases, and what can be done to address them?

Breaking Down the Numbers

The causes of these cost increases are multifaceted and complex. First, the US has a rapidly aging population that requires more care and services. People are living longer lives and therefore often live with chronic and expensive health conditions. To further complicate matters, due to the rising costs of living across the board, many older employees are staying in the workforce longer.

Did you know?

Between 2000 and 2023, healthcare spending in the US tripled, and costs rose 10.4% from 2019 to 2020 alone.

59% of employers will make cost-cutting changes to their plans in 2026 — up from 48% making changes in 2025 and 44% in 2024.[14]

Some reasons healthcare costs are rising are more positive. Thanks to rapid advances in medicine and technology, we can diagnose and treat conditions like cancer more effectively and at an earlier stage. But these treatments are often significantly more expensive than their predecessors.

Factors Contributing to Rising Costs [15]

- GLP-1 medication use
- Cancer
- Mental health utilization increases
- Healthcare policy changes
- Older employees are staying in the workforce longer
- Worsening population health
- Pharmaceutical costs

Similarly, breakthroughs in drug treatments, such as GLP-1s, which are revolutionizing the treatment of costly conditions like type 2 diabetes and obesity, may ultimately reduce healthcare costs but are expensive upfront.

Other contributing factors include big increases in mental health resource utilization, healthcare policy changes, and overall worsening health across the US.

US healthcare spending is a runaway train that shows no signs of stopping. It is essential, then, that HR leaders and executives take a close look at their benefits and wellness program offerings and regularly evaluate the ROI of each component. Cost containment has never been more critical, but so too is the mental and physical health of employees for organizational success.

This current environment calls for bold and creative action to rise to the challenge and meet the demands of an increasingly volatile market. From utilization management strategies to negotiations with vendors and increased cost sharing with employees, companies must carefully balance cost containment with policies and programs that support employee wellness, engagement, and productivity.

4. Mental Health Benefits Moving from "Perks" to Essentials

Since the 1980s, employee wellness has undergone a gradual shift to recognize that mental health is just as crucial as physical health. This shift has led to additional benefits and offerings becoming increasingly common over time. But thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, it's clear that what began as a perk has finally crystallized as an essential part of the benefits package and a core pillar of employee wellness programming.

This trend mirrors the broader societal movement to understand and destigmatize mental health issues. This has encouraged people to seek care and acknowledge that our mental health plays a massive role in how we show up at work.

In the post-pandemic world, employees have higher-than-ever mental health hygiene, that is, practices and habits that promote mental well-being–and therefore, mental health benefits usage has also increased.

This improved education around mental health, coupled with startling increases in conditions like depression - one that affects a staggering 18% of the US population - has shifted the way employees think about and relate to employee wellness and work.[16] Younger generations, in particular, want more options for mental health and wellness services, and employers are taking notice.

Most Common Mental Health Services in Employee Wellness

In addition to traditional mental health benefits, including coverage for psychiatric medications, counseling, therapy, and education, the most common and sought-after benefits include:

- *73% cover telehealth*
- *33% cover ongoing treatment for chronic conditions*
- *26% cover culturally competent care*
- *75% cover meditation or mindfulness apps*
- *62% offered financial therapy*

According to a 2025 survey published by the Employee Benefit Research Institute, a staggering 97% of surveyed plans offer mental health services, and 67% also cover substance use treatment.[17] And the movement is growing, as according to Mercer, 94% of large employers reported that they have strengthened their coverage for mental health care, increased support, or implemented new programs or systems to help in the last three years.[18]

Despite these additions, 59% of US workers say their organization provides too few resources to support their mental health.[19] The gap between the mental health services offered and what employees want covered represents an opportunity for cutting-edge organizations to step into the future.

The leading companies of tomorrow will fully embrace this new reality and offer robust, holistic mental health benefits and wellness supports to meet these needs and attract top talent.

5. Healthcare Policy Changes Abound

2025 was a pivotal year for significant healthcare policy changes that will impact the employee wellness sector and the broader healthcare industry for years to come. Signed into law in July 2025, H.R.1 - One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBB) enacts tax reforms that include sweeping funding cuts of everything from healthcare to food assistance to student loans, and much more.[20]

While many HR professionals may have only glanced at this headline because, in theory, the bill does not directly affect most of their employees, there are significant changes that will impact Americans everywhere, both directly and indirectly.

Direct Impacts [21]

1. Improved access to telehealth services for those with HDHPs
2. Paid family and medical leave tax credit is now permanent
3. Increased employer-provided childcare tax credit
4. Direct primary care is now eligible for people with HDHPs/HSAs

Indirect Impacts[22]

1. Massive cuts to Medicare & Medicaid are projected to cut 500,000 jobs for healthcare workers in the next decade.
2. Healthcare access, especially in rural areas, will dwindle further as up to 400 hospitals may be closed.
3. These job losses and facility closures could lead to missed diagnoses, delayed treatments, and poorer health outcomes, even for those with employer-sponsored insurance.

It's clear that healthcare policy changes, such as the OBBB, have a significant impact on employees, though they may not be aware of it. From their benefits packages to their overall healthcare access, only time will tell how these changes will influence employee wellness. What we do know is that now more than ever, employees will rely on HR professionals to educate and guide them in making the best choices for themselves and their families.

Key Takeaways: Take Action on the Latest Trends

1. To Bridge the AI-Implementation Gap

The Trend: AI promises transformative results, yet many organizations struggle to turn hype into measurable impact - a phenomenon known as the 'AI-Implementation Gap.' With minimal regulation, the market is flooded with bold claims of ROI, leaving HR leaders cautious about adoption.

The takeaway: AI is here to stay and can meaningfully enhance employee wellness when applied strategically. Experts recommend starting with a single, well-defined use case, ensuring adequate data, oversight, and time for success before scaling to broader applications. **What specific wellness challenges in your organization are most ripe for an AI-enabled solution? What are non-negotiables when it comes to safeguarding employee data?**

2. To Roll with Rising Healthcare Costs

The trend: U.S. healthcare costs have skyrocketed - tripling since 2000 and rising over 10% between 2019 and 2023 - putting significant pressure on employer-sponsored benefits.

The takeaway: HR leaders must rigorously evaluate benefits and wellness programs for ROI, balancing cost containment with employee health and engagement. Creative strategies - from vendor negotiations to thoughtful cost-sharing and utilization management - are essential to protect both organizational performance and workforce well-being in a volatile market. **Are you investing in programs that actually shift high-cost drivers, or simply maintaining legacy offerings out of habit? And how will you balance cost pressure with the expectations of a workforce that increasingly sees comprehensive wellness benefits as non-negotiable?**

3. To Cope with Obesity Medication Market Disruptions

The trend: GLP-1 medications have transformed obesity treatment, with usage up 364% since 2019. These drugs deliver significant health benefits but require ongoing use and cost roughly $1,000 per month.

The takeaway: As more obesity medications enter the market, HR leaders must proactively manage affordability and access. Strategies include vendor negotiations, promoting generics, offering wellness reimbursements, and implementing targeted utilization management to balance employee health needs with organizational costs. **Are your current benefits structured to provide meaningful access without creating unsustainable costs? How might you leverage other proven wellness initiatives like health coaching to help employees alongside medication use?**

4. To Meet Employee Mental Health Benefits

The trend: Comprehensive mental health benefits are now essential, not optional, for a competitive employee experience.

The takeaway: HR leaders should audit their mental health offerings to ensure coverage for medications, therapy, and education at a minimum. Advanced programs may include telehealth, culturally competent care, mindfulness tools, financial therapy, and more. Closing the gap between what employees need and what's offered is a strategic opportunity to enhance retention, engagement, and talent acquisition. **How well do your current mental health benefits align with the diverse needs of your workforce? Where could gaps in access or program effectiveness be quietly impacting retention or engagement metrics?**

5. To Understand Healthcare Policy Changes

The trend: The H.R.1 – One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBB) of 2025 brings sweeping changes, from expanded telehealth access for HDHP holders and strengthened tax credits to potential healthcare job losses and rural hospital closures.

The takeaway: With such complex and far-reaching policy shifts, HR leaders must stay informed to guide employees through benefits decisions and strategically plan for organizational impacts. **How prepared is your team to interpret these policy changes and translate them into actionable guidance for employees? What contingencies are in place if new regulations significantly alter costs or access to critical healthcare services?**

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