

Wearing Your Health on Your Sleeve

Wearable technologies and fitness applications are flooding the consumer market, but the jump to the corporate sphere has many concerned about employee privacy.

With some 50,000 health- and fitness-related apps available and the wearable fitness market estimated at \$330 million in 2013, people clearly enjoy tracking their personal health journeys. But something changes when the word “corporate” is added to the mix.

“I’m glad I’m the boss of my own company, so I don’t have anyone keeping track of how many hours of sleep I get or how much red wine I consume or how much exercise I get,” said David Sumner Smith, CEO at Next Dimension Media, which manages social media communities, including groups on LinkedIn and Twitter. “I think if I was somebody’s employee and my employer was to say, ‘Oh, by the way, we’re gathering all this information on you. I hope you don’t mind,’ I would really struggle to accept that. I would see a lot of that as an intrusion of my privacy.”

Smith struck a nerve with LinkedIn users in general when he raised the question of employee privacy in regards to health apps and wearable technology becoming part of workplace wellness programs. Based on responses from LinkedIn members, his concern is valid.

A 2013 study from Allied Business Intelligence Inc., a technology market intelligence company, found that during the next five years more than 13 million wearable devices with embedded wireless connectivity will be integrated into company wellness plans.

From a health perspective, wearable devices have the potential to measurably affect employee wellness by making employees aware of exactly how much or how little activity they log in a day.

“People will grossly overestimate their activity levels when you ask them to self-recall how physically active they are,” said Jonathan Dugas, director of clinical development at The Vitality Group Inc., a wellness program provider, who also holds a Ph.D. in exercise physiology. “It’s a kind of black and white there right in front of you. It helps assign value into how little or how much you’ve done that day.”

A five-year study of more than 300,000 adults published by The Vitality Group in April 2014 found that those who remained active as a result of a wearable activity device saw their health care costs decrease up to 16 percent.

Unfortunately, the numbers alone are not enough to convince employees to hand over their vital statistics to their employers. A Gallup Inc. survey this year found that at companies offering wellness programs, only 24 percent of employees are participating.

“Some individuals will think, ‘If I do get a device that counts my steps every day, then really what’s going to happen is that my employer is going to go behind my back and look up my

activity levels and they're going to see that I'm not doing anything and they are going to work to make my work life miserable' because they're not engaging and they're not doing what they should be doing," Dugas said. "It's a Big Brother thing."

Some employees don't realize that their privacy is protected under the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or HIPAA. Among other provisions, the legislation protects the confidentiality and security of an individual's health care information. Regarding wearable technology in the workplace, this means that employers are prohibited from viewing any single employee's health stats.

"It's a compliance issue where we only share that information in an aggregate format," Dugas said. "Here is how many steps the whole company did in that week or on that day. It allows meaningful information to go between the client and us without really identifying anyone. That protects them from being discriminated against."

Though employees are technically protected against improper use of their health information, there are steps that employers can take to quell employee concerns. Smith suggests rolling out wearable technology programs slowly, starting with smaller-scale projects that demonstrate the benefit from the employee's point of view.

"If an employer was to find out this information and change working practices as a result, then that is going to have a much more positive message to employees," Smith said.