



Assessing employees' consumerism skills may help employers better target health plan communication and financial strategies while helping employees make better health care choices.

Grades Aren't Just for Providers: Measuring Consumerism to Improve Health Care Strategy

by | **Liz Webler Rowell**

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Provider quality scores are a potential leap forward in health care transparency, if employees use them. While all aspects of an employer health program aim to provide the highest quality, most cost-efficient health care, individuals are not equally prepared to use them. What if plan sponsors could gauge employees' skills and willingness to engage with the latest tool, plan design or health behavior?

Health care consumerism has been a major focus for more than a decade. The theory is that, given the right tools, patients can use their purchasing power to improve their personal health care outcomes and manage or lower costs for themselves and plan sponsors.

To encourage consumerism, employers have focused largely on supporting health plan choice and providing education and tools to help employees determine which insurance option is best. Meanwhile, other tools continue to flood the marketplace. Some help consumers choose health services with information like hospital quality scores, while oth-

ers extend the health care system itself, enabling consumers to better manage their conditions outside traditional health care settings, such as health tracking programs and virtual doctor visits.

Employers are important stewards of these consumer innovations because they, like their employees, aim to improve clinical outcomes and manage plan costs. Collectively, though, important indexes don't paint a rosy picture. An Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI) study finds that for the 73% of people who experience rising health care costs, their best defense is to "try to take better care" of themselves.¹ This attitude has been consistent for the last decade. Yet, if people were skilled and motivated to take better care of themselves, the rates of lifestyle-related illness should be trending down. Instead, over the same period, type 2 diabetes² and obesity rates³ have increased steadily. Further, those experiencing rising health care costs often are diverting funds away from retirement plans and other personal savings⁴ to make up the difference.

First, Measure Employees' Consumerism Skills

What if employers flipped this strategy around? Instead of introducing new programs and new plan designs, what if employers measured their employees' health care consumerism skill set first?

An example: Consider a transfer student entering an intermediate Spanish class. What does *intermediate* really mean? Smart teachers will test a new student's skills—so they know if the student is behind or ahead of the class.

Employers can assess their employees' readiness for their health program too. For instance, how ready are employees to ask their doctors about the cost of a procedure? How ready and committed are employees to maintain their personal best health? How willing are employees to search for a doctor online and compare their scores?

Research has shown that high patient activation scores have been correlated to better health outcomes.^{5,6} High consumer engagement correlates to better health status and cost consciousness.⁷

Engagement Measures

With a brief questionnaire, an individual can be rated on their level of engagement, such as commitment to healthy behaviors, informed choice and skill using the health system. To determine their ability to participate with their doctors in shared decision making and their willingness to use the modern tools now available to seek the highest quality, cost-efficient health care, the measures ask individuals questions like "I have brought my own information about my health to show my doctor." Or, "I feel comfortable talking to my doctor about my health." There are at least two validated measures that test people's attitudes and behaviors about their health and how they navigate the system.^{8,9}

"Employers are very interested in benchmarking their employee population against other organizations around consumer engagement," said Chris Duke, director of Altarum Institute Center for Consumer Choice in Health Care, which has developed a patient engagement measure. "Employers know intuitively that their employees have varying degrees of motivation and skills to be health care consumers. The question becomes: How can you appropriately support them? What plans and programs do you offer? What financial incentives? How do you send a message to employees who aren't motivated? Once they are motivated, what tools

do you offer to enable better behaviors? Benchmarking tells you where to focus your energy."

Three Ways to Leverage Engagement Scores

There are three ways a team could use a patient engagement measure to refine its strategy and execution: choosing vendor tools, deploying targeted participant communication and structuring health program design.

1. Develop the Right Suite of Consumer Tools

Often organizations have a variety of tools available from existing vendor relationships—administration partners, brokers, insurance companies. Many employers also contract with independent companies to offer consumer information resources.

Employees rarely have a single sign-on to access all of these tools, so it's difficult for employers to find out how employees are using these tools and whether they improve engagement or encourage consumerism. By using engagement measurement tools, employers could benchmark the total population and periodically measure the change in score or determine which tools work best for different populations.

This analysis can help an employer develop ways to:

- **Enable confident plan choice.** Employers gearing up for major plan design change might decide that a high-touch model of health care advocacy services during enrollment would work for employees with low engagement scores. Employees could talk through the options with an unbiased counselor. However, employees with high engagement scores may be ready for more independent tools like an online cost calculator. Tools that make recommendations for a health plan could work for all engagement levels—as long as more



knowledgeable employees could quickly find details and less informed employees could be moved quickly and confidently to a decision.

- **Support everyone's personal best health.** An employer's workforce of employees and their dependents will always include those who are very healthy and very sick. Tools that support individuals across the range of health issues make sense. Engagement scores, however, could suggest which products to try out. If a large portion of the population has low scores, tools like movement tracking or location-based fitness challenges would be a better fit than complex point systems for various lifestyle habits. To support those managing chronic health issues, digital health tools could make sense for engaged groups. For instance, a mobile phone app that prompts diabetics to monitor their blood glucose levels or send an update to their doctor is great if the diabetics are committed to managing their health. If employers knew that employees were comfortable asserting themselves with their doctor, a smartphone app that provides detailed nutritional information and daily tracking functions would be worth trying. Conversely, low-scoring groups would be a better fit for low-tech interventions like on-site weight management programs. (See the sidebar.)

2. Tailor Health Program Communication

The gold standard of human resources is a manager who can offer personalized, unbiased recommendations for health plan enrollment and beyond. After a one-on-one meeting, employees might leave with some advice based on their personal situation. In today's world of high-deductible health plans, cost-transparency tools, provider quality ratings and a suite of voluntary benefits, employers would need a full-day training session for each employee. Most communication teams instead build a strategy for the whole, complex, heterogeneous employee and dependent audience with simple, easy-to-read communication elements, such as videos or newsletters. An employer that has measured engagement will know where there are knowledge gaps and tailor health program communication to meet employees' specific needs rather than making a best guess. Employers should consider these tips when tailoring communications:

- **Sequence educational tactics.** Employers that are about to introduce major benefit changes for the first

Case Study: Engagement Scores Help Health System Tailor Medical Advice

The Pacific Business Group on Health (PBGH), together with member companies Boeing, the California Public Employees' Retirement System, and Pacific Gas and Electric Company, succeeded in improving care for patients with chronic conditions. In the intensive outpatient care model, care coordinators work with medically complex patients to jointly develop goals to address the patient's health issues.¹⁰

Patient engagement was a critical component to the program's success, said Jennifer Eames Huff of JEH Health Consulting and formerly of PBGH. "Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, the care coordinators can start with the patient's engagement score. By understanding their current motivation and ability, they can deploy the right tools for the individual. It creates a situation where the patient can be a winner, which generates momentum for sustained engagement."

PBGH found that by tailoring the approach and creating easy wins, the patient gains satisfaction for the success he or she is achieving. In behavioral economic terms, it begins to develop intrinsic motivation for lifestyle changes; no financial incentive is needed.

time in ten years and intend to ramp up their communication accordingly need to make decisions about when to start reaching out to employees, how frequently to do so and how to build momentum. They need to reach all learning styles, so varying the media format is important regardless of engagement level. Low engagement scores suggest employees would benefit from frequent, bite-sized media elements such as brief videos, postcards and e-mail series to grow awareness and motivation. Environmental media, such as breakroom posters, lunchroom table tents and desktop reminders that connect the message to the workplace and a new culture of health also might be effective. High engagement scores suggest employees are ready for more sophisticated behaviors and sophisticated information. A campaign might revolve around health fair participation, where employees can receive training, get wellness exams or try out new tools and resources. Isolating trends in engagement scores—for instance, by location or job function—can allow employers to target subpopulations. For instance, low engagement among hourly workers at a fulfillment center would suggest that employers invest more heavily in

takeaways

- Patient engagement measures test employees' attitudes about their health and how they navigate the health care system.
- These tools can be used by employers to measure their employees' consumerism skills and commitment to personal health.
- Employers looking to make plan design changes could use engagement scores to determine what type of assistance they should provide to employees to guide them through the process of selecting the best plan.
- Scores also can help determine communication methods, frequency and content.
- Measuring a person's attitudes and abilities to participate in the desired health consumer behaviors can help employers figure out what financial strategies will work best for their health plans.

communicating the message at work. In addition to posters and other workplace signage, employers can create a script of a few talking points for operation team leaders to share monthly with workers.

- **Use language people can absorb.** Low engagement scores point to a need to hammer home the foundations of health care consumerism: Employees should be reminded to take time to think through their health plan choice, try generics first, ask their doctor about cost or consider an urgent care clinic instead of an emergency room. Narrative techniques like employee profiles can be effective. With sensitivity for the company culture, employers could consider using humor and create bold and creative messages to motivate employees to adopt new behaviors. Highly engaged workforces need specific direction, particularly for new programs. For example, a detailed Q&A could address the nitty-gritty steps of comparing the costs and quality of knee surgery at three local hospitals. Further, highly engaged groups are more ready to absorb clinical content. For example, treatment options for the top health conditions could be presented in chart format, so individuals can see at a glance the patient and clinical trade-offs. Employees also might be open to sophisticated messaging techniques such as *negative framing*, which points out how employees might lose if they don't take a specific step.

3. Choose Financial Strategies That Encourage the Next Best Step

To stem total health care cost increases, as well as to steer individuals toward consumer behaviors, employers take great care to set premiums, tweak cost-sharing features and add or subtract ancillary wellness and health programs. While claims data provides valuable information about attitudes and behaviors, it doesn't tell the whole story. Without measuring a person's attitudes and abilities to participate in the desired health consumer behaviors, the financial incentives may not work as intended and valuable health and wellness programs may not be used as expected.

"You wouldn't train someone who has never run a marathon the same way as someone who has participated in an Iron Man," says Jennifer Eames Huff, of JEH Health Consulting and formerly of Pacific Business Group on Health. "Similarly, the young invincible's attitude toward health care is very different than someone with a debilitating condition. By meeting people where they are, there is a greater chance of stretching them beyond their comfort zone and changing how they participate in health care."

Financial strategies should:

- **Guide people toward cost-efficient, high-quality care.** "Highly engaged people could be a good match for a high-deductible health plan because they are more aware of their current and future health care costs," Duke said. "An important focus of our patient engagement measure is the navigation domain, which is strongly related to asking about price and using price comparison tools. That's a critical skill if you have to pay out of pocket for a lot of your health care costs. Otherwise, you'll have the unintended consequences of employees indiscriminately rationing their own care. That's not a good scenario for the individual or the employer." Conversely, since narrow networks and accountable care organizations (ACOs) guide patients toward high-value care and carefully vetted providers, they're a good fit for those with lower engagement levels. Yet some more engaged employees may chafe against the smaller network of providers. Employers that offer a choice of very different options need targeted communication and smart enrollment tools to ensure the best match. As deductibles increase, employers are considering whether voluntary benefits like cancer, accident or hospital insurance could pro-

vide extra financial security. For highly engaged groups, maybe. Less engaged populations will find the puzzle pieces very hard to put together.

- **Encourage reasonable, not ideal, behaviors.** Many organizations offer financial incentives—from health savings account contributions to gift cards to noncash prizes—for employees to participate in a range of educational tools and wellness programs. Engagement scores could help guide how best to use financial incentives. For instance, biometric screenings with a cash reward may be very motivating for those with low engagement scores. On the other hand, premium discounts for sustained participation in chronic condition programs better align with high engagement scores. A second-opinion program may not be a good fit for employers with low engagement levels; trusting doctors is the cultural norm, and bucking that trend won't be easy. Running a location-based contest for trying out the new advocacy services would be a good bet for low-engagement populations.

What Data Will Guide You?

Regardless of the size of the organization, the cost of a health plan is enormous—for coverage premiums and claims, for participant education and for staff management. And employers get a lot in return—employees with well-managed health who are grateful for the financial security and their health. Through the measurement of plan member engagement, both the employee and employer may achieve better results. 6

Endnotes

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bio



Liz Webler Rowell is the founder of Vital Tales, an Evanston, Illinois-based consulting firm where she serves research institutes, including Altarum Institute, digital health companies and plan sponsors. She formerly was a communication consultant for Benz Communications and Aon Hewitt Associates. Webler Rowell has a B.A. degree from Smith College and an M.F.A. degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.