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As organizations pivoted to virtual fitness programs, they found employees eager to participate

Faced with a workplace crisis, innovators created online programs that boost engagement and culture.

By Kathie Harris Feb. 2, 2021



During the long, hard months of pandemic, one bright spot has become clear: Organizations are learning to engage their people effectively through virtual communications, and in many cases, they're even enhancing the employee experience and workplace culture.

In particular, virtual fitness programs have seen not just continued participation, but in some cases it even increased. Here's a look at how four organizations migrated their fitness offerings to the virtual realm.

Best Buy creates a popular Facebook group

In mid-March, the electronics retail giant Best Buy had to shut down its 16,000-square-foot fitness center, The Wellness Zone, in Richfield, Minnesota. But its 1,400 corporate employees were working from home and still needed an outlet for exercise. The wellness team swung into action. It shifted Facebook page from an announcement hub into a full-fledged fitness resource.

The wellness team now shares live group exercise classes, educational articles, and fitness challenges via the social platform. It allows for support and engagement among employees. Best Buy also offers virtual personal training opportunities through Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

The numbers support the positive feedback from employees. Engagement with the company's personal-training benefit went up seven-fold in the first month of the program's existence.

Emory University offers impressive options

Emory University also took the health of its 31,000 employees seriously in 2020. In March, the university's employees-only Blomeyer Health Fitness Center in Atlanta closed its doors as COVID-19 cases grew in Georgia.

Instead, the wellness team quickly shifted to a virtual fitness concept to fill the gap. The employee-wellness staff partnered with the student recreation and wellness team to offer classes, consults, and more through multiple online platforms. Emory uses Zoom for 30-minute live classes offered eight times a week. It uses this platform for "coffee breaks," as well, where employees and wellness staff can discuss health topics.

On its YouTube channel, short, pre-recorded workout videos are offered for employees looking for a quick break from the home office. Using the cloud-based gym platform ClubConnect, Emory offers weekly workout and nutrition tips in its Workout of the Week program. Facebook and Instagram are used to post daily workout routines.

The trend to meet the needs of workers is showing up across the wellness industry, even in smaller companies. For example, San Francisco-based TalentLMS, with 110 employees, offers an employee-training platform both nationally and in Europe.

Before the pandemic shut down the in-office gym, TalentLMS offered its employees yoga, pilates, and plyometrics classes along with free weights and other equipment. Twenty percent of the company's employees used the gym, mostly for classes.

After the shift to working from home, the staff asked the company's instructors for tips to stay healthy. The online fitness program grew from there. The company chose to use Zoom for its live classes. "We have a lot of participants now," says Christina Gialleli, head of people operations. "I guess the fact that people don't have to commute and can just join remotely from home makes it easier to participate."

TalentLMS shares the class schedule with employees via the company's Google Suites e-mail. Attendance across the board has been steady, but there are more drop-in participants for the pilates and yoga classes now that they're online. "We got a lot of positive feedback," says Gialleli. "People don't feel safe joining gym classes yet, and being able to participate in a program from home increases your physical as well as mental well-being. It also helps

with maintaining a sense of normalcy during all this.”

Not everything adapts well to the virtual environment. Gialleli says high-impact workouts have been put aside for now to prevent injuries. And social interaction at the gym is hard to recreate online. The company has grown since the pandemic began, so the higher numbers in the virtual fitness program mean that it might choose to keep the virtual option open even after returning to the gym, says Gialleli.

A CEO sees community impact from virtual program

XYPRO Technology, a tech-security corporation based in Simi Valley, California, saw more employee participants when its yoga class went virtual. The company moved entirely to remote work in March, which meant employees no longer had access to the in-house gym. Before COVID, free weights and treadmills were available, and the company hired a local yoga instructor to come in twice a week to lead a class. Class participation averaged around 10 out of XYPRO’s 95 employees before restrictions went into place.

CEO Lisa Partridge saw a need for both her employees and the local yoga instructor, who needed an income. Using the company’s internal e-mail system, she ran a survey to gauge interest. The feedback was positive. After a discussion with her HR and office managers, she created an online yoga class and re-hired the local yoga instructor.



Lisa Partridge

The result was even more employees attending the virtual program than the live class, almost doubling participation. The core users from the in-house gym showed up, and several drop-ins as remote work continued. “People who weren’t comfortable working out in front of others could turn the camera off,” says Partridge.

The class’s popularity led XYPRO to add a mindful meditation class and a morning “brouhaha” for workers to chat over coffee about the topic of their choice. Partridge says the company culture is to have at least one thing every day that’s social and non-work related.

Nothing can replace the intangible benefits of being in the presence of another human being, she notes, but she’s always trying different things, such as happy hours with guest speakers. “We’ll keep it going as long as people are interested,” says Partridge. “Because we made the decision to go virtual, we got one more connection with our employees.”

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