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Deliver what matters: The value on investment of employee mental health programs

It's time to stop chasing the ROI of employee mental health and instead consider a progressive alternative: VOI.

By **Dr. Nick Taylor** | April 26, 2021



Whatever is negatively affecting one area of an employee's life has the potential to effect others and have a direct impact on their mental health and job performance. (Photo: Shutterstock)

Until recently, employee mental health was frequently an afterthought: a check-the-box benefit hidden under wellness and "whole employee" products, wrapped up in a nice, tidy box under the Employee Assistance Program. But the pandemic forced a culture shift that's here to stay.

Benefits brokers can remain trusted advisors, retain clients, and attract even more new business when they realize what this trend means and how to help clients quantify its worth. They can also gain traction with the C-suite and be better equipped to demonstrate the worth of employee mental health programs.

Related: Infographic: The employee mental health crisis is coming
 (<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2021/04/01/infographic-the-employee-mental-health-crisis-is-coming/>)

In the last few years, employee and employer expectations around benefits and support for employees have been shifting. The pandemic took all of that up a very large notch. As feeling 100% on top of our game seemed to become a far-off dream, benefits aimed at supporting total employee wellbeing moved from nice-to-have to a necessity for companies seeking to support their employees and continue appealing to job seekers, clients, and prospects. Wellness itself nearly became a luxury. Who has time to call the Employee Assistance Program (<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2021/04/13/how-to-meet-the-growing-needs-of-employees-mental-health/>) line when you're busy homeschooling your kids, caring for your elderly parents, and expected to meet that next work deadline?

Despite all that, the challenge still plaguing leaders in HR and benefits is how to quantify return on investment (ROI) for many voluntary benefits, including employee mental health solutions. It's time to stop chasing the ROI of employee mental health and instead consider a progressive alternative that makes more sense: value on investment (VOI), measured in four company attributes.

As Canopy Health (<https://www.canopyhealth.com/en/employers/articles/value-on-investment-employee-wellness-program.html>), the physician- and hospital-owned medical network defines it, VOI "better reflects the broader financial impact wellness programs can have on an organization." They argue — and we agree — that the value of a wellness solution can be measured in qualitative business attributes, including:

- Morale
- Recruiting
- Retention
- Employee engagement
- Productivity
- Presenteeism
- Positivity

Break it down and you'll see that all of those organizational attributes roll up to four overarching, critical business outcomes, and the value of each grows with a proactive mental health program that supports every employee and the entire employee experience.

The value starts with a whole-person, whole-organization approach

A mental health solution that starts with a clinically based approach to employee mental health treats the whole person proactively and provides self-assessments, tools, and support for every worker, not just the 1 in 5 Americans with reported mental health concerns. As a result, the whole organization is reached and



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positively affected.

The whole-person approach — and the best value of an optimal employee mental health solution — addresses all three spheres of the human condition:

- Psychological — mindset, our thoughts, and emotions
- Social — human interaction and relationships
- Physical — the body (including the muscle called the brain)

Translation: Whatever is negatively affecting one sphere of an employee's life has the potential to affect the other two and have a direct impact on their mental health and job performance. So the next question is: What influences those three spheres of the human experience? What aspects of daily life nourish them and lead to mental wellbeing — and how can a mental health solution support that? Consider these seven aspects of well-being:

- Happiness
- Sleep
- Coping
- Calmness
- Health
- Connection
- Fulfillment

If one or more of these areas is off-kilter, it can damage work performance. If not addressed, it can create a ripple that potentially harms a company's culture and reputation. Meanwhile, most traditional employee mental health programs fall short of engaging the employee. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) use is remarkably low at 3% to 5%.

Maybe that's because employee mental health can't take a "one size fits all" approach. Brokers need to offer, and employers need to look for, a partner platform that offers expert guidance, scientifically backed tools, data-driven outcomes, and a proactive approach — accessible resources and tools that inspire anyone in the workforce to self-assess and take action to be their best selves.

But how do you prove the business value of all of that?

4 business outcomes that prove the value of employee mental health investment

Moving past ROI and into the VOI of employee mental health starts with setting a baseline and considering a company's current employee wellbeing goals. The questions seem easy enough to answer:

- What is your desired vision of a mental health solution?
- What critical business challenges in your organization can a mental health platform solve?

Regardless of how you answered those two questions, employers all share a common denominator: A wise investment in a mental health solution will reveal itself in four business areas that are critical to any organization and have measurable outcomes.

- **Company culture.** One major long-term study found that companies with the best corporate cultures — companies that encouraged all-around leadership initiatives and highly appreciated their employees, customers, and owners — grew 682% in revenue. During the same 11-year period,

companies without a thriving company culture grew only 166% in revenue. A mental health culture fosters appreciation and connection. The opposite is also true. When you foster appreciation and connection as part of the employee experience — especially when that occurs in the context of an employee mental health platform that provides a way for every employee to take care of their mental health — you move a step closer to embodying a mental health culture.

- **Company reputation.** This is quite simply the way the world — including your employees — perceives your mission, vision, and values. What isn't as clear is how you choose to deliver the value of your company brand. Employers that take a consistent, proactive approach to mental health and build their support of mental health into the total employee experience will benefit from a stronger employer brand and a greater company reputation. You'll increase engagement and be more attractive to job-seekers.
- **Employee performance.** Take a step back from the traditional, ROI-based tactics of performance assessment and talent management technology. Focus instead on another path to improving employee performance. How would employee performance improve if every employee were equipped with the tools to manage their individual, personal challenges? To be supported in life in general? To be able to make incremental changes in their well-being and ability to do their jobs? Maybe that sounds like just another spin on "bring your whole self to work." But it's more than that. It's improving performance by ensuring employees have the most impact in the least amount of time. An employee is more productive when they're focused, healthy, and on their game for three hours than if they're stressed or not well and stringing out the same amount of work over several more hours.
- **Enhanced existing well-being spend.** The most expensive piece of employee health care is spent on reactive solutions (e.g., traditional core benefits focused on treatment) and programs that employees aren't taking full advantage of (like the EAP). It's far more costly to treat a problem than it is to prevent it.

An optimal mental health platform will emphasize the message that employees don't come to work alone, but as part of a wider ecosystem, provide self-assessments and knowledge, and guide employees to the appropriate resources and programs their employer is already paying for.

Case in point: Gymshark, an internationally recognized, up-and-coming fitness apparel brand, recognized the need for a proactive, whole-person whole-organization and scientifically backed employee mental health platform. Specifically, it needed to empower and engage its millennial staff. Gymshark has seen an impressive engagement increase in:

- 65% signup rate
- 87% good or excellent app rating when surveyed by employees
- Increased focus
- Improved communication
- Data-driven decisions that led to employee-centric solutions

Where to go from here

Not sure where to start? A good beginning — and a place where brokers can help — is for employers to:

- Optimize what they already have
- Invest in technology that delivers proven results and engagement
- Choose a vendor employers and brokers trust
- Do their research
- Prioritize what matters

Retire ROI and discover VOI. It's time to measure the value of employee mental health solutions in a way that has better odds of proving their worth and of gaining acceptance throughout any organization. That means making the case for the value of employee mental health programs — and selling that argument up the ladder.

Read more:

- **One year into a pandemic: Helping employees build mental resilience**
(<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2021/03/11/one-year-into-a-pandemic-helping-employees-build-mental-resilience/>)
- **Employers: We need to do more than just talk about mental health**
(<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2021/03/15/employers-we-need-to-do-more-than-just-talk-about-mental-health/>)
- **Stress in the workplace and the risk of employee burnout**
(<https://www.benefitspro.com/sites/benefitspro/2020/11/16/stress-in-the-workplace-and-the-risk-of-employee-burnout/>)

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