

The Boutique Fitness Studio: the Holy Grail for Health & Wellness Programs?

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EDM Cycling. Surf Set
Fitness. Punk Rock
Dance Class. Aerobic
Kickboxing (yes,
really!). Hot Yoga.

Class Rowing. Barre. Boutique fitness studios and newly fashioned fitness crazes held in small group settings are growing in popularity and helping millions of people get active. Creative instructor-led group classes cater to multiple generations of consumers and are highly effective at engaging members to live an active, healthy and fun lifestyle.

Access to boutique fitness studios is becoming one of the most asked-for voluntary benefits in urban and suburban offices across the U.S. Now, some employers are sponsoring access to both small studios and big box gyms with the help of tech-forward companies that aggregate multiple fitness facilities into single-point networks.

The boutique fitness studio trend has injected adrenaline into employer-sponsored health & wellness initiatives.

That's because boutique fitness studio classes appear to engage employees in healthy long-term

behaviors. Some progressive HR pros are wondering if they've finally found the holy grail of employer-sponsored fitness programs. The answer: maybe.

Wellness programs have changed drastically from the days when employers handed out pedometers at wellness fairs. Today, many businesses provide discounts to traditional, big box gyms. Employees track each visit (often through a gym's app or their membership system, but sometimes still by hand!) and receive monetary reimbursement after visiting a specified number of times in a year-say \$150 for 150 visits.

While traditional gym reimbursement is a stride forward, it can still limit engagement to a specific type of self-motivated employee and family member. Big box gyms often offer a limited number of classes that are appealing to the masses.

The boutique fitness studios is increasingly popular because of small class sizes that allow instructors to focus more attention on participants and creative approaches to fitness that engage participants.

Beyond of what most Americans remember from ninth grade Phys Ed class, the vast majority of adults

don't know how to exercise outside of basic running and calisthenics.^{1,2} High-impact exercise on an untrained body can lead to injury, which means that employees need more personal guidance at the start of an exercise regimen that boutique studios can deliver.

Motivated employees may also miss out if they prefer a not-so run-of-the-mill fitness program. Employees who would rather cycle for 45 minutes or take part in hot yoga may not get credit from their employer's wellness program just because they choose to work out at a boutique fitness studio or other instructor-led classes outside of a traditional gym.

Tech-forward fitness companies like ClassPass, Peefit and GymPass enable employees to pay a monthly subscription fee to attend classes at different boutique fitness studios-as well as traditional gyms. Here's how it works: An app shows nearby studios. Employees can register for individual classes, whether it's cycling, boot camp, yoga or kickboxing. Some apps also use algorithms to recommend new or different fitness classes or fitness trends depending on user behavior.

As more people use the service, the apps compile feedback from users and suggest highly rated classes based on positive experience and popularity.

Boutique fitness studio apps can help make a difference with instruction, coaching, motivation and flexibility by:

- Encouraging users to exercise regularly; some also incorporate peer motivation so employees can sign up for classes and encourage their colleagues and friends to join them.
- Helping users set goals and stay on track with push notifications and messages (a benefit particularly useful for those just starting their wellness journey).
- Including audio coaching for interval running on a treadmill, weight lifting, aerobics and meditation.
- Showing a participating boutique fitness studio in their area or work out alongside a streaming on-demand video.

Employers that wish to offer this service can often do so at a discount to their employees. The specific pricing structure depends on the app or service chosen; however, they are typically competitively priced.

A boutique fitness studio benefit could be offered as a sole gym membership benefit, or it could be added to a more traditional gym membership reimbursement program to give employees more flexibility in getting and staying fit.

Employers that have established health & wellness programs can also incorporate boutique studio subscriptions into their programs, or build a wellness program around them. The fitness apps provide data to track participation and encourage use. Some vendors will go as far as to build an application programming interface (API) that will work with a pre-existing wellness technology platform used by

an employer. APIs feed participation data to an employer's wellness platform so employees get credit for it.

Providing boutique fitness studio subscriptions can address two focuses for employers-keeping employees healthy and catering to an increasingly diverse workforce. This type of benefit provides more flexibility to employees, gives them better access to fitness classes (which is a big advantage for teams spread across multiple locations) and has the potential to increase engagement in health & wellness programs.

For more information, please call [1.877.426.7779](tel:1.877.426.7779)