I Track, Therefore I Am: Exploring the Impact of Wearable Fitness Devices on Employee Identity and Well-being

Emergent Research Forum

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Abstract

Corporate wellness programs can help employees improve their health and well-being. There are many advantages to a healthy workforce including increased productivity and lower health insurance premiums. A growing trend in corporate wellness programs is to offer wearable fitness trackers to employees to help them monitor their activity so that they can make better choices about their health. It is estimated that more than 13 million wearable fitness devices will be used in corporate wellness programs by 2018. Our research will explore this phenomena by investigating the effect of wearable fitness devices on employee identity and well-being. We will use a case study about a financial institution that has recently implemented the use of Fitbits as part of its corporate wellness program. Our results will have the potential to shed light on the impacts of wearable fitness device initiatives on employees and organizations.

Keywords (Required)

Wearable technology, corporate wellness programs, employee identity, employee well-being.

Introduction

Corporate wellness programs can help employees improve their health and well-being (Centers for Disease Control 2013). There are many advantages to a healthy workforce including increased productivity and lower health insurance premiums. Many organizations are adding wearable fitness trackers to their corporate wellness programs as a way to encourage healthy and active lifestyles among their employees. It is estimated that nearly 2,000 companies worldwide offer fitness tracking devices to employees (Solon 2015) and that more than 13 million wearable fitness devices will be used in corporate wellness programs by 2018 (Martin 2014). These devices track the number of steps taken, sleep patterns, heart rate, and calorie usage through a wristband worn by the user. Although there are indications that wearable fitness devices are successful in encouraging consumers to make healthy choices (Etkin 2016), we do not know the full impact of these devices on users when the devices are used in an organization in conjunction with a corporate wellness program.

A Pew Research Center study on self-tracking found that nearly 21% of Americans engage in some form of self-tracking with technology (Fox 2013). Self-tracking, or self-quantifying, is the act of collecting data about oneself to change behavior and improve personal outcomes. Self-quantifying is made possible through various technologies and tracking apps that help individuals track events such as mood, physical activities, and sleep patterns. With the proliferation of wearable tracking devices comes the entrance of wearable devices into the workplace. In addition to wearable fitness devices, companies employ wearable technology for various tasks. For example, Amazon warehouse employees use wearable GPS devices that...
inform workers of the fastest route to take when gathering items for an order (Solon 2015). In this case, Amazon implemented the use of the GPS devices to maximize employee efficiency.

This trend of tracking employees through wearable technology does not appear to be slowing down. As wearable technology advances, corporations will have the ability to track many facets of employee work. This trend will potentially change the way employees engage with work and how organizations interact with its employees. Still, research investigating the wearable technology phenomena is scant. Previous research on wearable fitness devices has primarily focused on consumer use and the implications for self-tracking (Cowley and Czellar 2012; Dobrow 2013; Wilson 2012). There is also a stream of research focusing on wearables for patients in the healthcare industry (Gimpel et al. 2013; Lupton 2013). However, we are not aware of research investigating the impact of wearable fitness devices on employees and organizations. We seek to fill this research gap by investigating the following research questions:

1) How does the use of wearable fitness devices in corporate wellness programs affect employee identity and well-being?

2) How does the use of wearable fitness devices in corporate wellness programs affect organizational outcomes?

Given the extensive use of fitness tracking devices, such as Fitbit, in corporate wellness programs, research on the benefits and consequences of this technology is needed. In order to investigate these research questions, we will conduct a case study in 2016 about an organization that is now using Fitbit devices as part of its corporate wellness program. In the following sections, we provide background on corporate wellness programs and the use wearable fitness devices as part of those programs. Then, we describe our case study and follow with our research plan. Next, we present specific areas of interest in our research study. We conclude by discussing implications for research and practice.

Corporate Wellness Programs and Wearable Fitness Devices

Since the 1970’s, corporations have spent an estimated $100 billion on workplace wellness programs (Springbuk 2015). The goal of these programs is to improve workforce health and employee morale. Corporate wellness programs take many forms. Some organizations have weigh-ins and contests while others provide onsite workout facilities. Additionally, some insurance companies will offer lower health insurance premiums to employees who work out at a gym on a regular basis. In fact, insurance companies or organizations may offer a reduced rate on gym memberships to encourage members to exercise. Research indicates that well-designed corporate wellness programs can improve job satisfaction, employee mood, and employee fitness levels and at the same time reduce job stress and employee absenteeism (Falkenberg 1987). These programs may also improve certain health conditions such as diabetes (Conn et al. 2009). In order to further improve the success of corporate wellness programs and to increase social support and employee motivation to participate, some companies have begun incorporating wellness competitions (Brownell et al. 1984).

In recent years, many companies have moved toward offering wearable fitness devices as a primary option in their wellness plans. Companies, such as Target and BP, distribute Fitbits to their employees and offer incentives to employees to use the device and share their data (Martin 2014). Fitness tracking devices are marketed to help individuals monitor their activity and fitness so that they can make better choices about their health. As such, the devices are believed to help improve the effectiveness of corporate wellness programs. Another reason wearable fitness devices are gaining popularity for corporate use is because these devices can provide companies with vast amounts of data on their workforce. This data can be used to inform company policies and procedures to make its employees more productive and efficient (O’Connor 2015; Wilson 2013).

Case Site

In order to investigate our research questions, we will conduct a case study at a financial institution in the southern United States which we will refer to as SET Bank. This company provides a wide range of financial services including financial planning, investments, insurance, and banking services. SET Bank began operations nearly 45 years ago and it currently operates 24 banking centers. The bank’s mission is to serve its communities by providing superior customer service, state-of-the-art products and community
involvement. With approximately 280 employees, SET Bank hopes to continue to help its customers with their financial needs. Unfortunately, the bank has suffered from high health insurance claims and high absenteeism.

SET Bank’s health insurance provider presented the organization with statistics on its employee’s health conditions, revealing that many employees suffered from chronic health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Consequently, SET Bank’s marketing specialist decided to promote healthy living among the organization’s employees. The marketing specialist is a certified exercise instructor and her desire is to help her fellow co-workers make healthy choices. In addition, the CEO is an active runner who not only used a fitness tracking device (e.g., Garmin), but he had also read about the benefits of corporate wellness programs involving pedometers and their success in reducing insurance premiums. As a result, in March 2015, the organization started a workplace wellness program that incorporated wearable fitness devices by providing each employee with a free Fitbit Flex or by subsidizing a portion of an advanced model Fitbit.

About 71% of the employees are currently participating in SET Bank’s wellness program. As part of its wellness package, SET Bank offered Fitbit devices in order to motivate its employees to be healthier. Additionally, SET Bank hopes that its wellness program will decrease the insurance costs that have been weighing heavily on the bank every year. It is through this wellness initiative that the bank began to offer individual incentives to participate in the program and later moved into team incentives in order to promote active participation in the health program.

**Research Plan**

We will conduct our study in spring 2016 by sending out an electronic survey to all SET Bank employees to get information on the participants, their motives for participating in the program, and the extent of their use of Fitbit features. Additionally, we will survey non-participants and ask them about their choice to abstain from the wellness program. We will also ask several open-ended questions designed to give us insight into how Fitbit use, or non-use might affect employees. After the participants have completed the survey, we will collect and analyze the results. We will follow up the survey with in person interviews at several of SET Bank's offices. We will interview participants, non-participants, managers, and those responsible for starting the program at SET Bank. Our plan is to have completed the interviews by July 2016. As such, we will have a sense of the data and initial findings before AMCIS in August.

**Topics of Interest**

Our goal with this research is to explore both positive and negative impacts of wearable fitness devices on employees and organizations. We will use open ended survey questions and interviews to gather qualitative data from employees at SET Bank to identify salient issues regarding the implementation and use of wearable fitness devices. We will specifically look at the wearable device being used in this program, which is Fitbit, and how its features work to help employees connect to others at work and increase social support. However, there are some specific areas of interest that we will ask employees about in our survey, namely, workplace identity and well-being.

**Employee Identity**

One area of particular interest in this study is the impact of wearable fitness devices on employees’ workplace identity. Identity is an important construct to study in the workplace because it affects how people behave and perform at work (Leclercq-vandelannoitte 2014). Information systems research addressing identity indicates that technology influences how individuals see themselves and acts as a medium to present themselves to others (Carter and Grover 2015). Moreover, technology enables users to confirm their identity and protect identity through online forums or social media (Whitley et al. 2014). Given that wearable fitness devices can affect how a person identifies himself or herself, it stands to reason that wearable fitness trackers, when worn by an employee at work, might affect an employee’s workplace identity. Some employees may respond to perceived disruptions or threats to their workplace identities by experiencing stress, which reduces well-being (Meister et al. 2014). In our survey, we ask several open ended questions to understand if and how wearing a Fitbit in the workplace might change how employees see themselves, their co-workers, or supervisors.
Employee Well-being

Employee well-being is also a variable of interest in our study. The purpose of corporate fitness programs is to increase employee health and well-being. Although research suggests that wearable fitness device are helpful in encouraging individuals to achieve their fitness goals, there is also research that indicates that quantifying activities may have a negative impact on individuals. Etkin (2016) found that self-quantifying could reduce the enjoyment of activities that are quantified because tracking activities can make them feel like work, thereby reducing enjoyment. The author also contends that once this happens, the amount of time individuals spend on the activity is reduced, as well as their subjective well-being (Etkin 2016). Since we will survey and interview participants and non-participants, we will be able to detect differences between both groups. This will help us gain an understanding of how this technology might exclude individuals or cause problems for those who choose not to participate or who are excluded from participation because of circumstances preventing the employee from wearing his or her tracking device.

Conclusion

Wearable technology is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. Gartner estimates that by 2020, there will be 500 million wearable devices in the hands of consumers (Levy 2015). Wearable fitness devices make up the majority of the wearable tech market and have moved from consumer use to corporate use. We endeavor to understand the impacts of wearable fitness devices on employees as well as the organizations using this technology. We believe that this research will have important implications for organizations currently using, or considering using wearable fitness devices. Our research will shed light on the ways that wearable technology affects employee identity and well-being. Although one goal of using Fitbits in organizations is to increase employee well-being, this goal may be mitigated by introducing a new technology (i.e., Fitbits) into the firm. As such, this research might reveal some of the unintended consequences of using wearable fitness devices in the workplace. Finally, we hope that this study will provide insights on how organizations can effectively utilize wearable fitness devices to improve the lives of its employees and the firm’s bottom line.

References


