

Benefits Insights

Brought to you by the human resources professionals at
Employco USA, Inc.

Wearable Technology and the Workforce

Wearable technology isn't a new feature. For years, personal gadgets such as smartwatches have been gaining popularity among people who want better insight into their health trends. According to Pew Research Center data, nearly 1 in 5 Americans (21%) say they regularly wear a smartwatch or fitness tracker. In fact, wearable technology has grown so commonplace that employers have been exploring ways to leverage it among their workforce.

This article outlines the basics of wearable technology and its potential workplace benefits.

Wearable Technology Overview

“Wearable technology” typically invokes images of smartwatches or fitness trackers, but it isn't limited to those electronics. Rather, wearable technology can be any device kept on someone's person that connects to the internet and logs activity—even a cellphone can be considered wearable technology.

Typically, such devices interface with apps or websites that present tracked data in a readable or visual format. For instance, a smartwatch might track someone's heart rate during a workout; the person wearing the device could then go to their corresponding phone app and see a graph of their average heart rate for the week.

In recent years, wearable technology has evolved from the realm of personal activity monitoring into a viable business solution. Essentially, employers are looking into how they might be able to track worker productivity, identify potential efficiencies and otherwise leverage this burgeoning technology.

The adoption of wearable technology has been particularly prevalent among manufacturing and warehousing employers.

Some of these employers are exploring technology that monitors how employees physically move when accomplishing daily tasks as a way to identify and prevent ergonomic issues. Other employers are using devices to help employees track their work schedules, communicate with co-workers and find products located in a store or warehouse.

Beyond workflow efficiencies, wearable technology has also seen adoption among workplace wellness plans. Some employers provide fitness trackers to employees as a way to incentivize healthier habits. Workplaces may even offer prizes based on monitored data, such as most steps walked in a week.

Potential Benefits for Employees

At its core, wearable technology is intended to gain better insight into how employees work and improve efficiencies. Knowing this, there are a variety of ways employees can benefit from using such devices, depending on the solution adopted. Beyond helping with daily tasks, preventing ergonomic issues and providing employees with an easy way to communicate with their workplaces, most wearable technology offers a look into an individual's well-being habits. As such, an employee could also use the technology to keep track of their health trends and make personal improvements.

Potential Benefits for Employers

Wearable technology offers a detailed view of how employees work on a daily basis and allows employers to analyze this data in impactful ways. Mapping these trends can help improve productivity and reduce worker injuries, such as in the case of ergonomic issues.

Certain devices can also provide more tangible benefits by allowing employees to communicate with their workplaces more efficiently. This could include asking a floor manager a question from across a store or having a system-generated checklist of daily workplace duties updated in real-time.

Summarily, wearable technology can make workplaces more efficient by mapping critical productivity trends and giving employees meaningful tools to monitor their own health and productivity.

Potential Pitfalls

There are two primary pitfalls surrounding wearable technology employers should be aware of:

- 1) Employee buy-in
- 2) Legal concerns

Employee Buy-in Concerns

When it comes to employee buy-in, some pushback can be expected. To some, wearable technology that tracks their performance might feel like having a manager peeking over their shoulder at all times. Introducing such technology would also likely cause employees to ask, "Exactly what data is being collected?"

Employers can proactively address wearable technology pushback by explaining the concept in detail to employees before adoption. Employers should clearly articulate the purpose of the tech, what data is being collected, when the data will be collected, how the data will be used and how the data may apply to workplace policies. During this conversation, employers should be sure to emphasize how the technology can help employees with their day-to-day responsibilities.

Legal Concerns

In terms of legal issues, there are various potential concerns for employers when it comes to wearable technology. Unfortunately, the guidance surrounding this topic varies widely depending on the technology, how it's used and the workplace location. It will fall on employers to research laws that may apply to them and their specific technology solutions.

Generally speaking, wearable technology policies may be governed by laws including but not limited to:

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Affordable Care Act
- Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act
- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act

At a federal level, these laws regulate the accessibility of workplace programs and specify how data may be collected and used. For instance, an employer will violate the ADA if employees are subject to continuous observation.

Employers should speak with legal counsel when determining a potential wearable technology policy for their workplaces to ensure compliance with all applicable laws.

Conclusion

Wearable technology presents an exciting opportunity for workplaces. For employees, it can improve daily workflows, team collaboration and personal well-being; for employers, the technology enables game-changing metrics and adaptability. Individual employers will need to examine available wearable technology and choose solutions that will be most impactful to their organizations.

Reach out to Employco USA, Inc. for additional workplace guidance.