10 Questions To Ask
Your Wellness
Portal Vendor

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In an attempt to control healthcare costs, increase productivity, and improve employees' overall health and wellbeing, forward-thinking companies of all sizes are implementing workplace wellness programs to encourage individuals and their families to get active and stay healthy.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, nearly two-thirds of U.S. corporations offer wellness programming as a part of their employee benefits packages. However, despite the concerted efforts of HR and business administrators nation-wide, much of this wellness programming falls short of its ultimate potential. To combat this shortfall, thought-leaders from a broad range of industries are looking to technology to boost engagement and help deliver results.

By utilizing the latest in wellness portal technology, business administrators can now track, analyze and manage the health of their employee populations, and intervene to reduce the risk factors that prove detrimental to the wellbeing of their companies. By creating and delivering wellness programs in unique and exciting ways, businesses are now able to combat the debilitating effects of rising healthcare costs and lost productivity by transforming health and fitness from a chore into an engaging, culture-building adventure.

There are a variety of factors to consider when choosing a wellness portal vendor that best suits the needs of your company and its employees. To help select the right wellness technology provider for your business, here are ten important questions to consider:

Is the vendor a technology provider or a wellness company?

Wellness portals have usually evolved from one of two places: they may start as a technology platform that has been designed to support the implementation of a wellness program, or they begin life as a wellness program that has now had to add a portal to deliver the program.

There are significant differences between a wellness company that attempts to incorporate technology into its offerings and a technology company that specializes in wellness.

Employers generally take one of two approaches toward corporate wellness technology: 1) they utilize whatever existing portal product their wellness vendors provide them; or, 2) they seek out an independent portal product, which allows them to create and manage a one-stop-shop that integrates all of their health and wellness applications, services, and information.

When a company controls its own wellness ecosystem through the use of an agnostic portal provider, it is able to incorporate the offerings of virtually any best-in-class vendors that fit its vision and culture. Contrastingly, when a company utilizes the portal, products, and services from an all-in-one vendor, it may suffice for a short while, but company administrators tend to run into problems when their program's requirements outgrow their vendor's capabilities and restrictions. Further, if you become dissatisfied with one element of your program or portal, you could be forced to cut your losses and seek out a new vendor altogether.

Using independent, adaptable, and scalable portal technology empowers program directors to retain control over exactly which service providers they choose to work with in their effort to provide comprehensive wellness programs to their employees.

Does the portal feature a wide array of applications and services that stays current with technology trends?

Best-in-class portals begin with a suite of core applications and features for both users and administrators. You will want to check that the vendor's offerings include a wide range of applications and services, including but not limited to: customizable Health Risk Assessment questionnaires, mobile optimization, wearable device integrations, online health education, real-time aggregate reporting, enterprise messaging, incentives and rewards, and more. As an administrator, you will want to make sure that all of your wellness program components can be seamlessly integrated and managed through the portal in order to simplify internal processes.

In addition to managing program components, wellness portal technology should be capable of evolving to accommodate the latest trends in technology. For example, a portal should be able to pull data from the latest wearable fitness and activity trackers on the market such as Fitbit and Jawbone. Collecting this objective tracker data is particularly valuable for wellness administrators in their efforts to fairly judge company challenges—especially when offering a reward.

In order to evaluate a prospective wellness portal vendor's capacity to adapt to evolving technologies, be sure to ask for a product roadmap to ensure that the portal provider is forward thinking. In doing so, you'll not only future-proof your wellness program, but also save yourself the time, hassle, and cost of switching portal vendors down the road. As an added bonus, keeping the portal fresh ensures that engagement rates will stay high, and the user-experience will remain modern and sleek.

What are the portal's integration capabilities?

The ability to integrate a variety of applications, products, and services into the portal is essential to making corporate wellness programs run smoothly. By collecting and organizing data sets on an easy-to-read dashboard, an integrated health and wellness portal will help administrators and end-users sort disparate data into meaningful categories.

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Before you begin evaluating portal technology providers, make a list of current and future wellness partners that you would like to incorporate into your overall wellness program. Be sure to ask portal providers whether they can integrate with the partners you've listed using whatever integration techniques are necessary including SAML 2.0, web services, and token-based single-sign-on (SSO) methodologies.

It is also useful to prioritize which data sets (e.g., medical claims, pharmacy claims, biometric screening results) are most important to your program, and to ask your potential technology provider how information will be integrated. From proprietary API's to batch and real-time data exchanges, virtually any type of information should be made available to users and administrators alike.

What level of customization is available?

Selecting a wellness portal that can be modified to your company's specifications should be a top priority. At minimum, you should have the ability to brand (or co-brand) the portal with your company's logo, as well as the ability to pick and choose the appropriate product options.

More robust portals offer advanced customization options such as the addition of custom questions to the Health Risk Assessment, the creation of custom surveys and polls, and the ability to create your own Incentives and Rewards programs. Use the below checklist to evaluate customization options:

- ☐ Branding details, including your company's name, logo, and color palette

- ☐ Program-specific Informed Consent, Privacy, and Confidentiality statements

- ☐ User portal applications and icons that can be turned on and off as needed

- ☐ Self-selected health tracker options, including wireless devices, charts, and graphs

- ☐ Multiple login and registration options, including SSO and eligibility file uploads

- ☐ Health Risk Assessment options, including naming and custom questions

- ☐ Analytics options, including role-based access to PHI and PII (if required and allowable by law)

- ☐ Self-servicing data management options, including the ability to upload biometric files

Is the portal scalable, and if so how readily can you add or disable functionality?

Avoid outgrowing your wellness portal by choosing a modular platform that you can implement gradually, and that easily scales to your company's changing needs. If you're launching a new employee wellness program, you may want to initially limit applications to a health risk assessment, biometric screening results, and a few other basic options. However, as your wellness program grows, you'll likely want to add some more sophisticated functionality such as incentives and rewards, social challenges, and digital health coaching.

Always consider "what if" questions when selecting a wellness portal, such as "what if my company grows?" or "what if I don't like a particular wellness vendor?" Find out how easy it is for your technology provider to make changes to accommodate your company's goals and vision for a wellness program. The portal should meet your program requirements, instead of the other way around.

Is the solution flexible?

Being able to provide a world-class user experience to a small office of 25 employees or a large corporation of 25,000 is something to look for in a wellness platform. At the very least, be sure that your vendor is experienced in catering to companies of your size and structure.

Ideally, the platform should be able to provide targeted programing and aggregate reporting for a variety of sub-groups and sub-populations. For example, you may wish to provide differentiated experiences for the regional offices of a large company, the various departments within a smaller organization, or any potential portal-resale clients. Each sub-group should be able to manage its own data and customize the portal to best suit its users' specific needs, without necessitating handholding or micromanagement by the portal provider.

Are reporting and analytics available in real-time?

For immediate access to data—whether it's medical or pharmacy claims information, laboratory results, or health assessment statistics—look for a wellness technology provider that offers real-time web-based reporting. Ask how data is displayed, what reports are available, and how often reporting is updated. Also, check that reporting is available across devices including computers, tablets, and smartphones; thereby ensuring that your information is always accessible.

Does the portal incorporate secure targeted messaging? What about text messaging?

The ability to send secure messages to specific subsections of a population makes it easy for administrators to drive engagement by delivering targeted content and behavioral interventions to select users.

For instance, you may wish to target all users who indicate on their Health Risk Assessment that they are interested in quitting smoking, and invite them to a smoking cessation class or seminar.

By utilizing a wellness portal that seamlessly integrates HIPAA compliant enterprise messaging with aggregate reporting, administrators can greatly enhance the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs. Ideally, this messaging should be able to incorporate links, embed videos, and attach files. Further, communications should be able to be created and sent "on the fly" or scheduled for future release.

Can the portal support social challenges and gamification as well as custom incentives and rewards?

Social challenges are an interactive way to get employees excited about participating in a wellness program.

By incorporating an element of friendly competition and team-based achievement, users are more likely to engage regularly with the portal. Linking incentives to challenges turns health care from a boring chore to an exciting game.

Wellness administrators should have the capability to create, customize, and launch challenges that best suit the needs of their company's employees, and best fit their company's culture.

Ideally, the challenge creation process should be flexible enough to address whatever health, wellness, or behavioral concerns that an administrator is interested in, and should facilitate the process by automatically syncing data from wearable devices to earn points and track whether specific criteria have been met.

How does the portal provider ensure the security of PII and PHI? Is the portal HIPAA compliant?

Complying with HIPAA regulations and ensuring the protection of users' personally identifiable information (PII) and personal health information (PHI) not only builds trust in your program, it is required by federal law. In order to make sure your wellness portal technology is secure, a few key questions need to be considered.

First, what security measures and protocols are in place to protect PII and PHI at rest, as well as during transmission? Ask where the portal provider's physical servers are located. Are they located in the vendor's office building, or in a state-of-the art hosting facility complete with a multi-homed network, redundant power, and redundant web farms, servers, and switches? Is the portal provider's application hosted in the cloud?

Regardless of where data resides, ask if detailed security protocols are followed when data is exchanged; examples of such protocols include SFTP, PGP encryption, certificate encryption, and data source verification among others.

Finally, ask to see SOC audits of the portal provider's data center or hosting facility; if they cannot provide independent security audits, your data may be at risk.

A second area to assess is privacy. How and where are users' PII and PHI stored? Who, if anyone, has access? What algorithms are in place to encrypt data? Be sure to ask if PII and PHI are stored together, or separately to mitigate risk in the event of a data breach. With the exception of HIPAA compliant third parties, employers should not have access to PHI and PII.

Accordingly, check that all aggregate reports are de-identified in compliance with HIPAA regulations; rendering it impossible to identify individuals based on their anonymous PHI alone. Further, are HIPAA enforcement and breach notification policies documented?

Be sure to ask for a portal provider's standard service-level agreement and security audit reports ahead of time, to ensure that the technology vendor is adhering to industry best practices. Ask to see the portal provider's disaster recovery plan and ask when it was last tested.

Conclusion

Since there are so many vendors offering portal solutions, it is important to spend the time to understand how your wellness portal provider addresses these ten key questions. Portal technology can be tricky, but finding an ideal solution for your company doesn't have to be.

About MediKeeper

MediKeeper offers a comprehensive suite of population health management tools intended for employer groups, health plans, brokers, TPA's, and wellness companies. MediKeeper's tools enable healthcare consumers to make smarter health-related decisions. Founded in 2003, The MediKeeper technology gathers and analyzes disparate health data. By providing de-identified population reporting in a seamlessly integrated portal, MediKeeper's customers are better able to manage their population's health and make smarter wellness investments.

Learn more about how we may help you by calling us at (858) 251–3250.