

# Open the Digital Health Front Door For Employees

Written By Laura Carabello

**N**ewly installed digital front doors are opening vistas to improved healthcare access and options for enhanced, more cost-effective and personalized care. With an increasing demand for cutting-edge technologies, cost effective digital solutions are providing comprehensive care to patients in all situations and closing gaps in care that cannot be met by existing resources.

Digital health products and solutions help save time, improve accuracy and efficiency at every stage of the treatment process -- from diagnosis and treatment selection to monitoring outcomes. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advises that digital health products "...can empower consumers to make better-informed decisions about their own health and provide new options for facilitating prevention, early diagnosis of life-threatening diseases and management of chronic conditions outside of traditional health care settings" .<sup>1</sup>

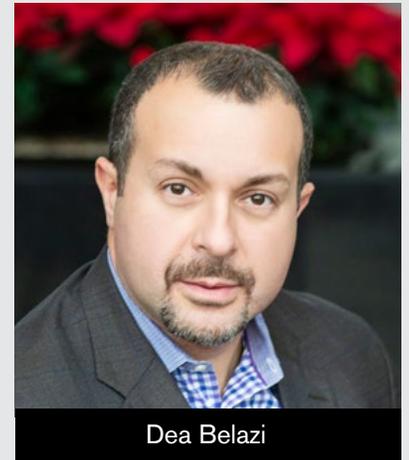
Thanks to robust digital health investment which has already reached \$21.3 billion across 541 deals in 2021<sup>2</sup>, with an average deal size of \$39.4 million, innovative digital products and services can provide self-insured groups of all sizes with opportunities for greater employee engagement: meeting individuals where they live and work and contributing to enhanced physician/patient relationships that lead to better health outcomes at lower cost. Digital solutions have become particularly valuable in light of reports that health insurance costs for employer rose<sup>3</sup> the most in over a decade this year.

Amid dozens of emerging digital health developments, there is even a new proposed category – though not yet a separate category in FDA regulations – of “prescription digital therapeutics” such as those for opioid use and broader substance use disorders<sup>4</sup>. Many envision that that clinicians would prescribe these solutions as they would a drug or a device.

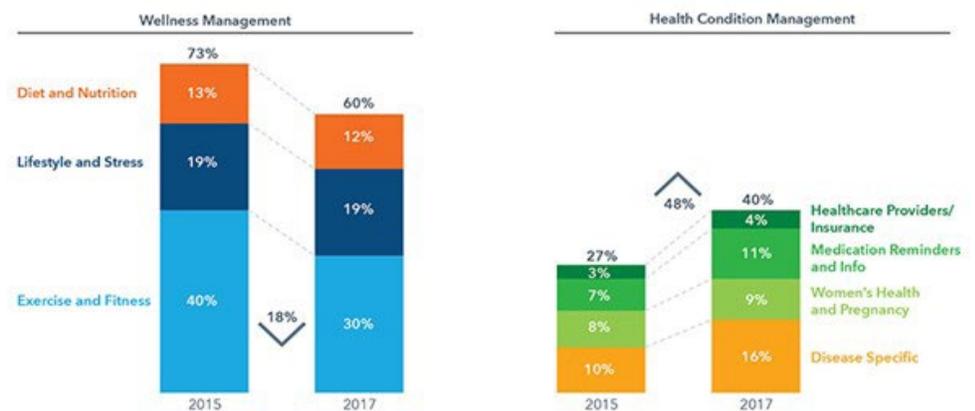
This is all positive news for self-insured employers and their consultants that are expecting to further leverage digital solutions that enhance quality and lower the cost of care.

Dea Belazi, president and CEO, AscellaHealth, a global specialty pharmacy and healthcare solutions company, points to the increased adoption of digital solutions and patient engagement strategies that impact the management of complex and/or chronic conditions and rare or orphan diseases.

“Technology advancements are positively impacting the clinical outcomes of specialty patients, making compliance and persistency tools more efficient and user-friendly,” says Belazi. “As self-insured employers facilitate the next generation of digital health strategies, these innovative health advancements for medication adherence and compliance are especially valuable and support a truly improved health experience for every employee.”



**GROWING VALUE OF DIGITAL HEALTH SERVICES**



Sources: 42 Matters, Jul 2017; IQVIA AppScript Database, Jul 2017; IQVIA Institute, Jul 2017  
Report: The Growing Value of Digital Health, IQVIA Institute for Human Data Science, Nov 2017

**KEY TRENDS IN DIGITAL HEALTH IMPACTING EMPLOYER BENEFITS**

**1. Telehealth '2.0'**

Following a telehealth boom in 2020 propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual visits for both primary and specialty care – beyond simply providing urgent care -- stabilized but achieved elevated levels compared to pre-pandemic demand. Telehealth use overall has leveled off at levels 38 times higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from 13% to 17% of visits across all specialties,

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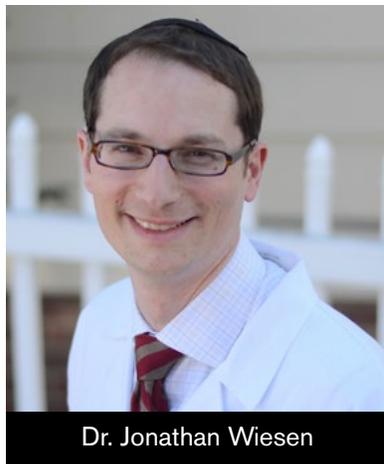
Michael Gorton

according to an analysis from McKinsey released last summer<sup>5</sup>.

Michael Gorton, CEO of Recuro Health, forecasts widespread adoption of virtual primary care given its potential for explosive scalability at little to no incremental cost and with minimal loss of service quality. "The availability of digital data related to diagnostic tests, monitoring devices and treatment compliance programs further amplifies the role of PCPs conducting telehealth visits. Payers and providers in every payment model – including fee

for service or Direct Primary Care – now see the value."

While the COVID19 pandemic did not create the need for telemedicine, it highlighted its importance and the inevitability of its contribution to the future of medicine. Jonathan Wiesen, MD and CEO of MediOrbis, asserts, "Well beyond the acceptance of the improved access to care that telehealth provides, the healthcare community has begun to race to solutions that enhance the modality of care, that provide simplified and streamlined remote solutions for managing chronic and complex specialty conditions. Moreover, the impressive satisfaction and promoter scores of these programs speak to their ability to engage patients in their care and allow them to take autonomy of their health."



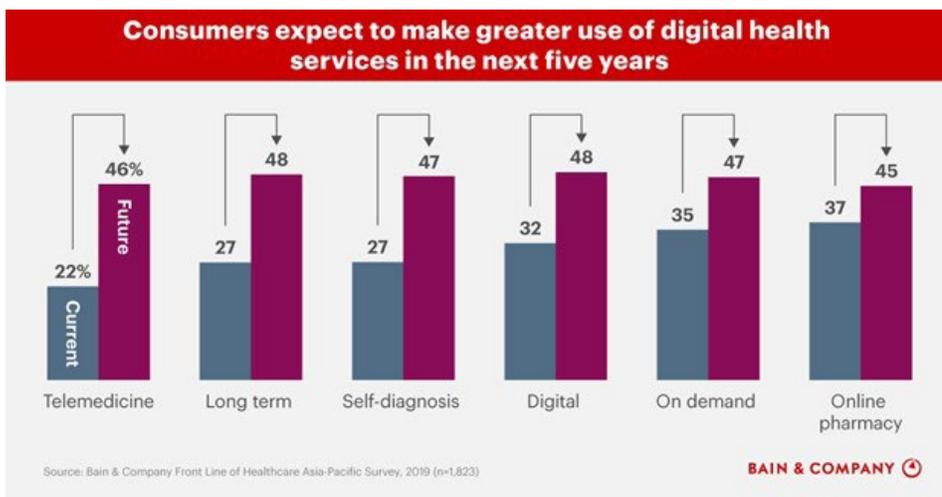
Dr. Jonathan Wiesen



Mike King

Mike King, SVP of Strategic Partnerships, Teladoc Health, says that today's consumers have different expectations for the healthcare experience, particularly with how they interact with the system, and employers are taking note.

"In looking for both modern and affordable plan designs, there is a meaningful opportunity for employers to go beyond urgent and acute care needs and establish more longitudinal, preventative care via virtual primary care," says King. "This model emerges as a key area of long-term investment for self-insured employers and is expected to gain even more momentum over the next several years as the virtual-first approach can be used to prevent downstream health complications and costs through prevention and screening."



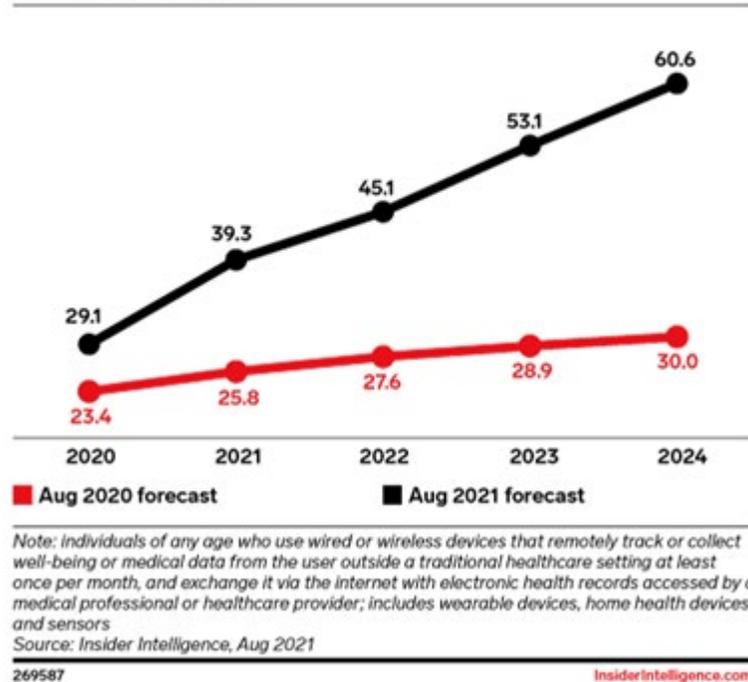
He says for any employer – particularly those who choose to self-insure - the ability to provide a unified, integrated care experience is paramount, adding, “Ultimately, virtual primary care should act as a hub for other virtual care offerings such as mental health, chronic condition management and specialty care, and be paired with a hybrid, in person experience when medically appropriate.”

## 2. Wearable Technologies to Monitor Health

Wearables to monitor individual physiological functioning 24 hours a day have evolved from hospital bedside monitors to wearable electronic devices that consumers can wear. Smartbands and smart watches are designed to continually collect health and track the daily living activity data of users. Increasingly, these technologies are sending the user’s health information to the user’s smartphone or even straight to a doctor or other healthcare professional in real time.

As more consumers share data from these devices with their doctors, wearable ECG monitors and wearable blood pressure monitors will see greater utilization. Monitoring one’s blood pressure or heart rate with wearables allows people to gauge the impact of their lifestyle, including diet or daily activities, and make better, more informed choices that may help to reduce the risk of serious diseases. In fact, heart rate monitors are now standard on most smartwatches, and some have FDA approval for detecting abnormalities such as atrial fibrillation, a major cause of stroke<sup>6</sup>.

**How Has Our Forecast for US Remote Patient Monitoring Users Changed?**  
millions, 2020-2024



Deloitte predicts strong demand for wearable wellness technology in 2022<sup>7</sup> with 320 million consumer health and wearable wellness devices expected to ship worldwide in 2022. By 2024, that figure will reach 440 million units, the company predicts. This growth is likely being driven by new offerings hitting the market and more healthcare providers becoming comfortable using them.

## 3. Mental/Behavioral Health Digital Solutions

The stress and anxiety brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted employers with real-world issues that include increased absenteeism, compromised work performance and more dire outcomes related to depression and substance abuse. The National Institute of Mental Health (NAMI) reports<sup>8</sup> that nearly one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness. In this environment, there is accelerated demand for virtual behavioral health services, including mobile mental health apps.

### THE TOP 10 MENTAL HEALTH APPS CAN BE DOWNLOADED FROM THIS WEBSITE

Buckeye Recovery Network: <https://buckeyerecoverynetwork.com/10-best-mental-health-apps>

Many are pointing to the value of behavioral telehealth that allows an individual



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to consult with a health care provider via phone or video chat. This approach to treatment reduces costs of services and improves access to services for those who cannot see a mental health professional in person – especially with the shortage of



Kim Darling

providers: over one-third of Americans live in areas lacking mental health professionals<sup>9</sup>.

Employers simply cannot afford to ignore this tidal surge in demand for mental health support and many are taking a proactive approach even if an employee is not currently experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression.

In response to this challenge, Kim Darling, CEO, Competitive Health, projects significant uptake of strategically aimed behavioral health solutions that address critical challenges faced by

working parents and their families. “We now

recognize the critical need for employees to have access to an innovative, virtual behavioral health platform built specifically for children and teenagers – the entire family unit. More than ever, kids and teens are struggling with issues that fall under the behavioral health umbrella.”

She says that pandemic-induced anxiety and stress add to the challenges, and these difficulties are often problematic for parents. “These problems can pose obstacles to job retention and optimal performance. In fact, research found that more than 1 in 5 parents are intending to leave the workforce in 2022 to better care for their children’s needs.”

By opening-up needed access to on-demand, virtual behavioral care, parents and caregivers may not be forced to choose between leaving their careers and supporting their families. “Employers, healthcare plans and consultants will deliver a seamless system of access and extraordinary behavioral health care to families, when and where they need it.”

Dr. Jeff Dobro MD, Chief Innovation Officer, Transcarent, anticipates that 2022 is going to be an exciting year for new, different, and better mental health digital solutions.

“The problems are still the same: slow or non-existent access, delayed and inaccurate diagnoses, uneven insurance coverage, ineffective use of residential services and the continued impact of COVID on increasing anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues facing employees and their families,” explains Dobro. “Increased demand and ever more limited access to care are driving the need for more effective and more available digital mental health solutions. Behavioral health is as confusing, complex, and costly as any other part of our health care system – that needs to change.”

He points to the emergence of technology that is providing exciting capabilities to deliver new and different



Dr. Jeff Dobro

prescription digital therapeutics (PDTs), expanding on the known benefits of digital cognitive behavioral therapy, or digital CBT: a branch of online or blended therapy where CBT-based treatments and interventions used to help clients manage mental health symptoms.



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“Digital CBT and other modalities are impacting areas like substance abuse, OCD, autism, eating disorders and others,” he explains. “Mental health screenings and AI driven voice biomarker analytics are being embedded in standard telehealth encounters, facilitating real time diagnoses and treatment as well as referrals into appropriate digital tools, rapid access therapy and triage to other services.”

### WHAT'S AHEAD

Additional trends including expansion of digital women's health and evidence-based therapeutic interventions via software, like mobile health and wellness apps. These innovations are projected to replace or complement the existing treatment of a disease.

Another harbinger of growth is the entry of traditional retailers entering the digital health space, especially as larger slices of their businesses move toward e-commerce. Giants like CVS Health and Walgreens have introduced consumer-facing health care solutions such as virtual primary care, while regional players such as Hy-Vee, a midwestern chain of supermarkets, is launching a new subsidiary to provide low-cost telehealth and online pharmacy services.

The appetite for employers to adopt digital health is expressed by Chris Michalak, CEO, Virgin Pulse: “More than any other time in recent history, CEOs and C-suite leaders are turning their attention to the health and wellbeing of the workforce. This new focus has been prompted by four fundamental changes affecting the world around us and the businesses we lead: the global pandemic, social injustice challenges, new ways of working and the newfound power of workers in a highly dynamic employment market.

CEOs are focusing on three actions designed to address the whole self, meet employees where they are, and provide all the tools and resources necessary to help employees maximize their engagement and contribution: 1) Delivering the message from the top, 2) Ensuring the company has a health and wellbeing strategy and 2) Providing a comprehensive set of wellbeing programs to address the needs of the workforce



Chris Michalak

However, the rapid expansion of digital health offerings over the last two years has overwhelmed employers with the many point solutions on the market. Organizations that invest in a unified solution that offers a highly personalized, data-driven user experience will be empowered to engage employees in wellbeing initiatives to drive business outcomes successfully. In 2022, organizations that provide better experiences for their employees will ultimately lower overall costs associated with turnover and productivity obstacles due to current challenges both inside and outside the workplace.” ■

Laura Carabello holds a degree in Journalism from the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University, is a recognized expert in medical travel, and is a widely published writer on healthcare issues. She is a Principal at CPR Strategic Marketing Communications. [www.cpronline.com](http://www.cpronline.com)

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