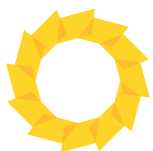# Building a better business case for occupational health IT investment

enterprise**health**

Employee health through a pandemic lens

Oh, the irony. For many years, occupational health was viewed as a compliance-driven operational necessity — a mechanism for managing worksite injury and illness and meeting medical surveillance requirements. The perceived importance of the investment in occupational health was often proportional to the size of the on-site clinic, which all too often was a modified broom closet.

More recently, many organizations have recognized the value of looking at employee health through a wider lens, realizing that present, productive and healthy employees have a positive impact on the company culture and the bottom line. Modern employers have proactively invested in employee health, expanding beyond compliance to address primary care, chronic disease management and overall health and wellness — including mental health. Often, new on-site employee health clinics resemble the most modern physician practices.
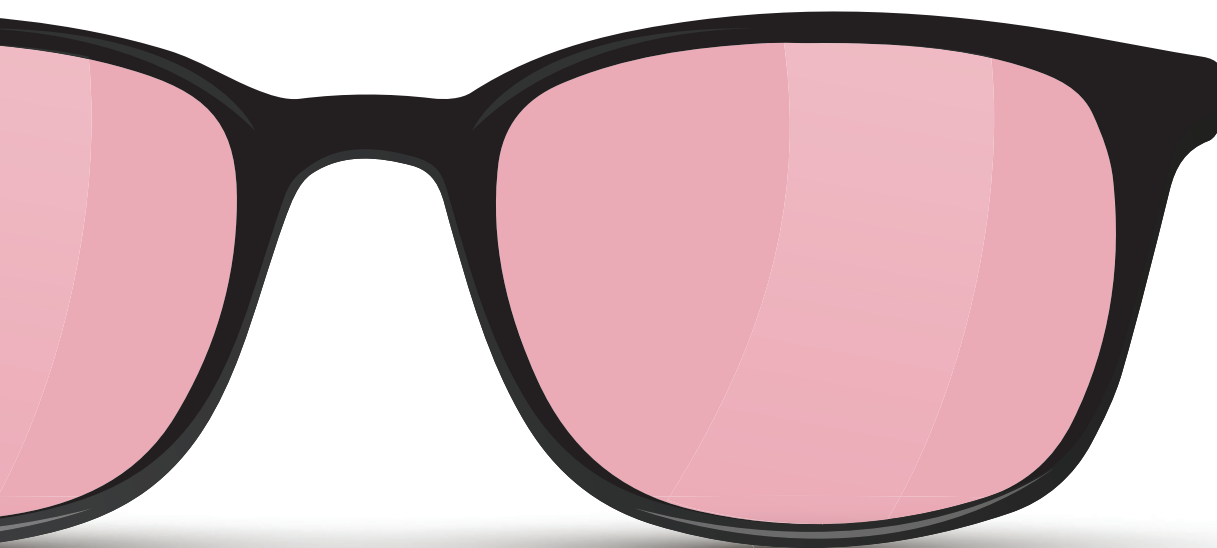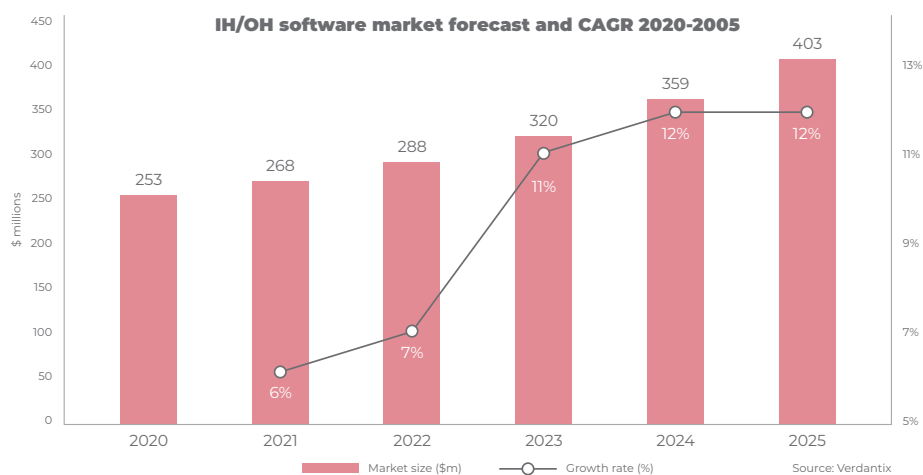
But it is the COVID-19 pandemic that is shining a bright spotlight on the absolutely critical importance of a strong occupational and employee health function — including a robust health information technology infrastructure.

The lens is rose-colored

According to Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) analytics firm Verdantix, the global spend on industrial hygiene and occupational health (IH/OH) software is expected to reach $253 million in 2020, with OH software comprising $152 million or 60 percent of the total. Verdantix projects the global spend on IH/OH software will grow at a CAGR of 9.7 percent to reach $403 million in 2025.

While the short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will likely moderate growth rates in 2020 and perhaps 2021, the coronavirus outbreak underscores the value of a strong digital infrastructure to support occupational and employee health programs and should set the stage for more significant downstream growth potential. **The "H" in EHS just became far more important,** and Verdantix projects IH/OH software market growth rates of 6 and 7 percent for 2021 and 2022 respectively, with an increase to 11 percent in 2023 and 12 percent in 2024 and 2025.

IH/OH software market forecast and CAGR 2020-2005

Year	Market size ($m)	Growth rate (%)
2020	253	
2021	268	6%
2022	288	7%
2023	320	11%
2024	359	12%
2025	403	12%

Market size ($m) — Growth rate (%) Source: Verdantix

Client experience

Experiences among the Enterprise Health client community substantiate this increased attention on employee health, as the medical directors, physicians, nurses, administrators and other medical professionals who use our employee health applications are on the front lines of managing COVID-19 response. On-site employee clinic operations at corporate, health system and government agency clients have temporarily shifted their primary focus to monitoring employees for COVID-19 symptoms, managing return to work, deploying testing regimens, conducting telehealth visits and putting contact tracing mechanisms in place.

While this may be seen as all in a day's work for many occupational health professionals, organizational domains from HR to production to the C-suite are developing a newfound appreciation for the important role that occupational and employee health should play. **The clear consensus from the top is that core occupational health services are here to stay** and a key component of employee safety and retention strategies. Keeping employees present, productive and healthy is no longer a health promotion slogan displayed on posters in the employee health clinic — it is an organizational imperative for businesses that have been deeply affected by slowdowns and shutdowns resulting from this pandemic.

Advisory board insights

The Enterprise Health advisory board, an external group of occupational health professionals who provide strategic direction to our organization, further magnified this increased attention on employee health. As one member pointed out, there is now recognition at the local level that employee health does more than recommend that you eat less salt. **Unexpectedly, COVID-19 has created a Super Bowl for occupational health.**

As another advisory board member put it, the folks in human resources who have been trying to manage employee return to work are realizing they need the assistance of their on-staff medical professionals. Employee health operations has the clinical expertise to do things like appropriately reintegrate people with underlying conditions back into the workplace.

Perspective from the pipeline

We are seeing similar interest among the organizations in our prospect pipeline. When the coronavirus first hit, most of our prospects politely informed us they were up to their eyeballs in dealing with the pandemic and would re-engage once they came up for air. In the last month or so, these employers are reaching back out, asking if they can quickly deploy our COVID-19 functionality and implement the balance of our solution later. These prospects are sharing tales of attempting to manage their employee populations on paper, spreadsheets or hijacked applications not suited to the task, **only to quickly realize these makeshift solutions will not scale.**

As the employee health director at one large health system explained, "I am almost glad that COVID came along, as it has demonstrated to our leadership how woefully inadequate our employee health IT infrastructure is, and we now recognize the need to invest in better technology."

The business case conundrum

Therein, however, lies the rub. While recognition and appreciation of the value of occupational and employee health are high, making the business case for increased investment must be done at a time filled with economic uncertainty. While there may never be a better time to make the case, justification will need to expand beyond a return on investment analysis to a value of investment calculation.

While budgets are under intense scrutiny, the coronavirus pandemic has money tied to it in myriad ways that command the close attention of those who matter. Occupational and employee health leaders must be prepared to make **a better business case for increased investment** in programming and the digital infrastructure to support new initiatives.

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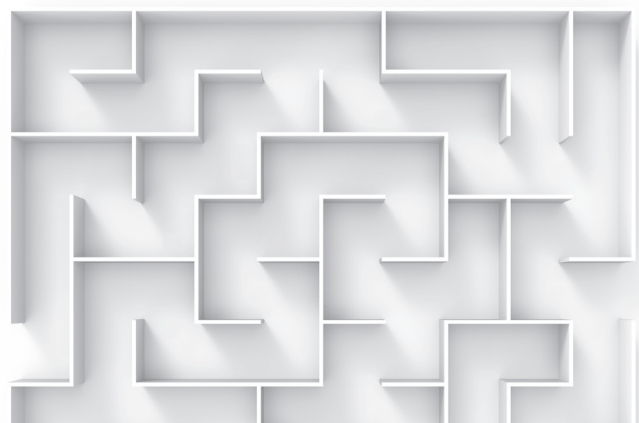
components of a better business case for employee health IT

Employee trust:

Our clients, prospects and advisors are reporting the same thing — many employees are now understandably scared to show up on the job. As one of our advisors stated so well, the role of employee health goes beyond ensuring the organization is compliant with regulations and extends to creating a safe environment to come back to work. Employees have valid concerns, and it is critical to build trust and allay fears — not only to facilitate widespread return to work but to build an atmosphere where individuals are not operating under a cloud of apprehension. Employers who have established the proper policies, procedures, controls and digital infrastructure are in an optimal position to show employees their health and safety will always be front and center.

Protected and secure health data:

In the wake of COVID, employee health information is being fed to employers like never before. Information on symptoms, test results and underlying health conditions is finding its way into the hands of individuals who lack the expertise and the authorization to see, handle and store the data. Managing protected health information on paper or spreadsheets is ill advised and insecure, and only erodes employee trust. Employers need secure applications certified to protect employee health information. Providers need to emphasize to employees how they keep their medical and occupational data separate and confidential. Data should only be accessible to authorized users, and granular security roles are needed to ensure that only the right people see the right information at the right time.

Lost production/revenue:

COVID-19 puts a fine point on the importance of a healthy, present and productive workforce. While this pandemic has demonstrated that most office workers can successfully operate from home, those responsible for the output at factories, plants, laboratories and processing facilities need to be on site to deliver critical work. A single

day of lost production and revenues can have a devastating effect, and even adjusted line speeds to account for a diminished workforce can severely impact the cost of goods sold and slow the innovation pipeline. Avoiding lost production is extremely important to those who make investment decisions.

Risk mitigation/avoidance:

Many organizations with on-site employee health clinics initiated their occupational health programs for compliance reasons, with risk avoidance as a major driver. In the age of COVID-19, a lack of infrastructure to manage employee monitoring, testing, contact tracing and widespread return to work is a ticking time bomb that significantly increases reputational risk. Employers must be in a position to show good faith efforts and investments to protect workers and mitigate risk in anticipation of inevitable lawsuits and regulatory investigations. In this environment, there is a direct correlation between measures to protect the health of the workforce and the health of the enterprise.

Streamlined automation:

Digital tools are an absolute necessity for collecting and managing employee health information — especially when those employees are often working remotely and social distancing measures demand a hands-off approach when people are present. A robust employee health IT solution must include email and SMS/text notification; easily accessible web portals for employees, applicants and supervisors to schedule appointments, capture questionnaire responses and symptom data, and share lab results; mobile applications; telehealth capability; mass immunization functionality; COVID-19 monitoring and response and a host of other features necessary to manage occupational and employee health. These capabilities not only support health operations at scale, they help build employee confidence and engagement.

Scalability:

As COVID-19 has shown us, employee health information has to be tracked, and managing that information at scale is not humanly possible on spreadsheets for all but the smallest employers. While it may feel like we have been dealing with this pandemic for a long period of time, the impact on most employer organizations did not kick in until February or March of 2020. COVID-19 will be with us for at least another year, and employers need to be prepared to manage even more information as cluster outbreaks occur, testing becomes more widespread and the eventual tracking of COVID vaccination status becomes a reality. This is over and above the routine management of medical surveillance, worksite injury and illness, clinical care and all of the associated data. The cherry on top is the backlog of surveillance tests and exams piling up as employees have been off and clinics have been closed. A mountain of audiograms, pulmonary function tests, respirator fit tests and other procedures still have to be conducted and documented.

Best-in-class partner:

This is not the time to purchase a make-do application barely sufficient for short-term needs or a mile-wide but inch-deep collection of functionality acquired and cobbled together by a single vendor. This is the time to invest in a focused and robust occupational and employee health IT solution that combines occupational and employee health, clinical care and employee engagement on a single platform purpose-built for this exact point in time. The ideal partner will offer a comprehensive set of capabilities out of the box, with the ability to configure a standard solution to support client-specific use cases and workflows. The ideal partner will also maintain the agile footing absolutely necessary in a dynamic and changing daily environment, compressing normal development cycles to weeks or even days to help clients respond to COVID-19 and other emerging challenges. Employers need a solution that can serve as a trusted, secure, best-in-class information hub to manage the data traffic coming in and out of occupational and employee health — connecting and supporting medical professionals, employees, supervisors and executives.

As occupational and employee health leaders work to build better business cases for increased investment in their health initiatives, it's a good idea to research how other organizations in the same sector manage employee health and wellness. Another recommendation is to look for alternative sources of funding. Today, health clinics are not only providing services to make sure employees stay healthy and in compliance, but also strategic services to a broader cross section of the business. As such, demonstrating that additional value can really strengthen the business case.

Enterprise Health is a leading provider of occupational and employee health IT solutions for global corporations, health systems and government agencies. Working closely with our clients, we have rapidly developed telehealth capabilities and a COVID-19 employee monitoring module that we are offering as a standalone application to help organizations monitor and manage the health of their employee populations.

Learn more at **enterprisehealth.com**

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