

Wellness on Demand

Medforma's Health Portrait platform can help employers encourage better health behavior—without involving the insurance company.

BY ELIZABETH MILLARD

BIZ BRIEFING

Medforma

Headquarters: St. Paul
Inception: 2001
Employees: 5 direct, 12 including contract employees, plus access to 40 research staff at the Stanford Prevention Research Center

Description: Provider of Internet-based health behavior change programs utilizing exclusive content from Stanford University
Website: medforma.com

LEADER PROFILE

Catherine "Kye" Anderson

Title: Founder, president
First job: Supervisor of the Cardiopulmonary Diagnostic and Research Laboratories at the University of Minnesota Hospitals and Clinics.

Education: Bachelor of science in medical technology, College of St. Scholastica
Family: Husband, Stephen; Daughter, Amy; Son, Carver

CORPORATE WELLNESS STRATEGIES abound, with companies offering everything from in-office yoga to weight loss contests to smoking cessation options. But the results of these initiatives can be tough to track, especially if participation rates are mediocre at best. St. Paul-based Medforma believes it has the answer: a blend of personalization, interactivity, and Stanford University research.

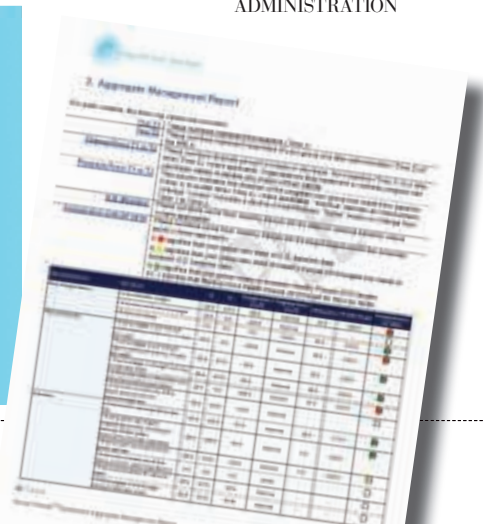
The company's founder, Catherine "Kye" Anderson, has been a major fixture in the Twin Cities medical entrepreneurial scene for decades, and in 1976, she started medical device company Medical Graphics Corporation. As an employer, she noticed a lack of cost-effective prevention and wellness programs that addressed each employee's unique health challenges. That realization led to a partnership in 1996 with the Stanford Prevention Research Center, which was creating programs tailored to an individual's behavior and attitude toward health.

The next year, Anderson brought the first interactive health improvement program online by joining forces with MSNBC.com. She worked the program into the corporate landscape by founding Medforma in 2001, with a license to bring Stanford's interactive system into workplaces. The result is an Internet-based wellness platform called Health Portrait, and it aims to eliminate the hurdles encountered by other corporate wellness initiatives.

Most notably, the platform is independent from employers and health plans. An employee can input data into the system—which asks questions ranging from exercise frequency to cholesterol levels to eating habits—and get statistics that put his or her health status into context. The employee can work through issues with the help of "health kits" that improve behaviors or track progress, and the entire process is private, so personal health data isn't shared with insurance companies, fellow employees or employers. That means employees don't need to fret about whether their health behaviors will affect insurance premiums or spark discussion with employers.

"The platform is set up to be a digital tool set," says Barb Reindl Pjevach, senior vice president of Medforma marketing and administration. "The thinking behind it is that if you can get someone to

"Research has shown that people tend to be averse to change, but if they can make one small change and stick with it, they'll do more, and then become healthier over time." —BARB REINDL PJEVACH, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF MEDFORMA MARKETING AND ADMINISTRATION



make one little healthy change, they'll come back and do another and then another. It's not like *The Biggest Loser*, where everything they do is different. Research has shown that people tend to be averse to change, but if they can make one small change and stick with it, they'll do more, and then become healthier over time."


The interface for employees has been recently revamped to have more of a social networking feel—a user can include photos, although health portraits aren't linked together the way Facebook might be. Instead, the photos are used to personalize the employee's section and encourage repeat visits.

Pjevach notes that about 30,000 people have used Health Portrait, and every employer saw decreases in high-risk issues like depression, tobacco use, poor exercise habits, and high stress.

Medforma's newest offering, Group Portrait, allows employers to see collective data about the company, to get an idea of health trends. Again, privacy is paramount, so a manager wouldn't be able to see, for example, that Joe from finance is still smoking even though he said he quit, or that Jean in HR has alarmingly high cholesterol levels. But an employer could find out if exercise levels among participating employees seem low, or if there are certain health behaviors that could be changed.

Companies can only get the data sets if there are more than 50 participants, so a small firm with only a dozen employees can't benefit, but for mid-size to larger employers, seeing these type of trends can be useful for boosting wellness. Pjevach says one employer was facing increased health insurance premiums, and presented the insurance firm with the trend data, which showed that employees had improved their health numbers in only a year. The insurance firm, impressed, lowered the premiums instead.

"Everyone is trying to have a healthier workforce," says Pjevach. "For some companies that haven't been able to do much in terms of wellness, we think this is an excellent set of tools that can help employees to make changes that stick."

That doesn't mean that Medforma's platforms will eradicate those yoga classes or weight loss contests among a company's departments. But since Health Portrait emphasizes gradual change and allows employees to discuss their health missteps in private, it could be another valuable tool for encouraging healthier behaviors in the workplace. 

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