



A Guide for Employers:

Choosing the Best Digital MSK Solution for Your Workforce



Introduction: Why Focus on MSK?

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Musculoskeletal (MSK) pain is a common cause of disability and lost productivity in the workplace today. Whether lifting heavy objects, hunched over a computer, or on their feet, your employees are constantly at risk for developing injuries that can lead to acute or chronic pain.

In fact, up to half of your workforce are struggling with an MSK condition¹—comparable to the total percentage of U.S. adults living with chronic lung or heart disease.

Much of the financial burden for treating these injuries is falling on employers, who spend over \$200 billion each year to address MSK disorders—more than the cost for cancer and mental health combined. MSK care is far and away the top driver of rising healthcare spend for most large companies.

For these reasons, companies are increasingly looking to add an MSK program to their benefits suite. But evaluating and selecting from among the many vendors available can be a daunting task.

This guide will take you through the process of choosing a digital MSK solution that's right for your population and fits your specific needs.

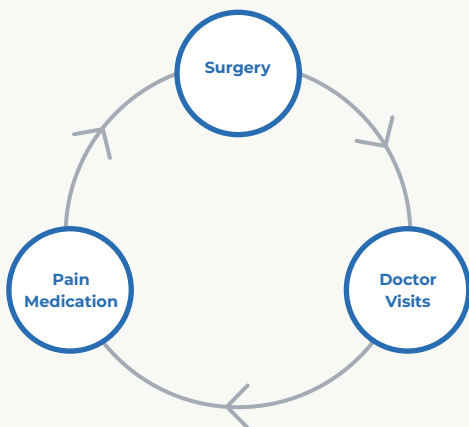


¹ <https://www.boneandjointburden.org/>

The Cost: What's Behind Soaring MSK Spend?

First, let's talk about the **direct costs**.

MSK pain creates a redundant cycle of surgery, imaging, and pain medication. An employee who is experiencing back pain might begin her health journey by visiting her primary care doctor, who refers her to a specialist, who is likely to prescribe medication for pain relief. These specialists will often call for diagnostic imaging to assess the need for surgery.



Whether the employee goes through with surgery or not, physical therapy is frequently the final step—despite that it is often a cost-effective *first step*.

In addition to expensive procedures such as surgery and MRI scans, workers with MSK pain will push up claims for spinal injections, emergency room visits, chiropractic treatments, acupuncture, and other treatments. ER visits account for the fastest-



growing category in MSK care, followed closely by outpatient hospital care facilities.¹

Then there are the **indirect costs**: lengthy sickness, disability claims, and lowered productivity. MSK accounts for more than 216 million missed workdays, more than four times as many as depression patients. Workers with MSK disorders also report six times as many bed days as people with depression and circulatory conditions, totaling more than 752 million bed days due to back and joint pain. Add worker's compensation into the mix, and you can see how these indirect costs can quickly amount to millions.

216
million

missed workdays

752
million

bed days

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2584273/#CR28>

The State of MSK: What's Happening Now?

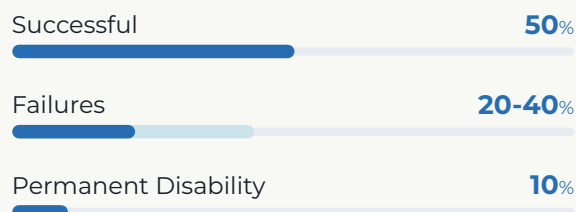
The Current System is Broken

Today, the care pathway for someone with an MSK condition is inefficient, confusing, and costly.

1.6 million back surgeries are performed each year in the United States. Only half of these procedures are considered successful, while some 20-40% are considered failures, requiring a second surgery or leading to a lower quality of life. Meanwhile, the prevalence of chronic lower back pain continues to rise, growing by more than 4% each year.

The best and most affordable intervention—physical therapy provided by licensed clinicians—is often the option that is least discussed with patients.

1.6 million back surgeries



Rise of Digital MSK Care Programs

Virtual care is experiencing exponential growth as companies understand its value: lower costs, better outcomes, and increased engagement.

According to the [2021 Large Employers' Health Care Strategy and Plan Design Survey](#), 29% of companies will offer musculoskeletal management virtually in 2022. Another 39% are considering adding it by 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these trends as more employees have come to expect remote care options.

¹https://journals.lww.com/md-journal/fulltext/2017/05190/trends_in_diagnosis_of_painful_neck_and_back.3.aspx

The Key Criteria for an Effective MSK Solution

Now you understand the value of a digital MSK solution.

While no two vendors are alike, look for these five pillars of care to ensure the program you select is able to deliver highest quality care virtually:

1. Programs that are tailored to a member's specific injury, pain levels, and comorbidities (related conditions)
2. Treatments supervised by licensed doctors of physical therapy—not health coaches
3. High engagement and completion rates
4. Technology that's easy to use, interactive, and feedback-oriented
5. A solution that focuses on mind and body, with behavioral coaching

In addition to evaluating programs for these five essential pillars, you should be asking these five critical questions of any digital MSK solution you're considering:

Clinical Oversight

Feedback

Education & Coaching

Cost Savings

Outcomes

Is the program designed and supervised by a licensed physical therapist?

At Sword Health, 100% of care—from start to finish—is delivered by a certified doctor of physical therapy (DPTs). DPTs are the musculoskeletal experts of choice when it comes to managing complex MSK conditions.

DPTs recognize underlying red flags and are trained to identify the root source of a member's pain. They're also trained in behavioral coaching, using cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to help members face comorbidities such as depression and anxiety.

In this space, providing highly-tailored treatment from licensed physical therapists is the exception, not the norm. Many digital MSK vendors claim to offer physical therapists as care specialists, yet only offer access to a PT for the initial assessment, and leave the rest of the clinical oversight to non-clinicians, such as a "health coach." In most U.S. states, there is no licensure required to become a health coach. In fact, many health coaches do not even have four-year degrees.

"If I was doing something wrong I got immediate feedback, and that was one of the most helpful things for me."

Pamela, hip pain



Does the member *and* the physical therapist get feedback on performance and progress?

Biofeedback is critical to ensure members are doing their exercises correctly. However, feedback is meaningless without a physical therapist to analyze and make adjustments to the treatment plan ongoing.

At Sword, every member receives an FDA-listed Digital Therapist kit at their home. This kit includes devices which register feedback, including a video tablet and motion sensors. The sensors are highly sensitive, recording **50 movements per second** with a degree of accuracy that is **4x more sensitive than the human eye**. When a user performs incorrectly, the devices can generate up to 30 different error messages for each exercise.

We use this data to keep our DPTs in sync with their members' healing. Our DPTs adjust each member's care plan as frequently as 2-4x per week.

“The words we use to empower our patients are critical. Discussing pain from a less-trained perspective can result in increased fear, decreased belief in one's ability to heal, and avoidance of activities – all of which can contribute to the persistence and aggravation of pain.

Physical therapists are trained to incorporate pain education into their treatments, helping patients understand that hurt does not equal harm, their bodies are strong and adaptable, and that they do not need fixing – they are the most important factor in their own rehabilitation.”

Megan Hill, Clinical Specialist, DPT



50 movements per second, 5,000 types of feedback, and 4x more sensitive than the human eye.

Does the program focus on education *and* coaching?

Our physical therapists develop coaching programs that incorporate education and motivational techniques. As a result, members build habits, reach highly specific goals, and are held accountable by a clinical expert. These programs are specific to each member and are adjusted as they progress along their journey, so they don't just get better, they stay better.

What kind of cost savings can we expect?

With soaring medical expenses, you want a solution that helps you control your spend on direct costs such as surgeries, ER and primary care visits, outpatient procedures, and medication. You also want a solution that will alleviate many of the indirect costs such as lost productivity, sick days, employee satisfaction, and retention.

We believe vendors should offer third-party validation of their cost effectiveness, in addition to their own published PMPY or PMPM (per member per year or month) cost savings. At Sword, we are transparent about our cost savings because we know this is a critical factor in your organization's decision making process. On average, employers who use Sword see 34% savings in healthcare spend.

Sword is also the only MSK care provider in the market that has been awarded both Level 1 and Level 2 certification from the Validation Institute, an independent firm that studies health benefits programs.

According to this independent, third-party evaluation, Sword delivers a savings per member per year of **\$2,472 — 10% greater savings than our nearest competitor**. For Fortune 100 customers, this quickly translates into **millions of dollars saved every year**, based on a **hard 2.47x ROI**, a number unmatched by other digital MSK solutions.

Does the program have clinically validated outcomes?

The biggest question you should be asking is: How effective is an at-home digital MSK solution? After all, you're looking for the best outcomes and results for your employee population—how much healthier and more productive will your workforce be after you implement an MSK care solution?

Sword saves clients

\$2,472

per member per year

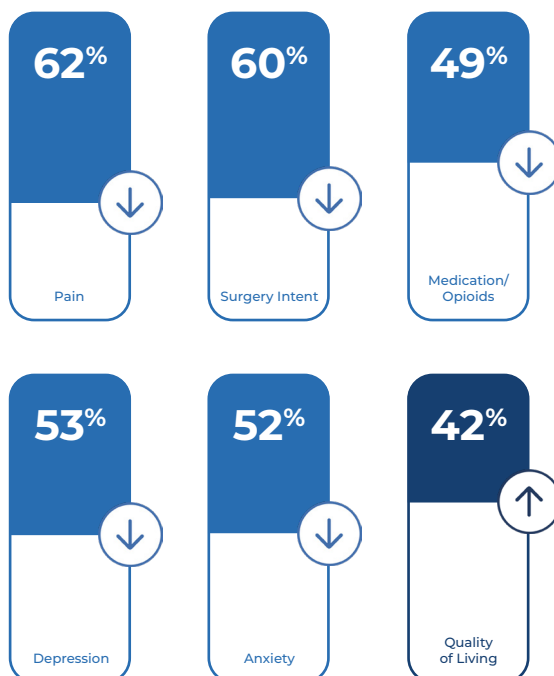
Look to clinically validated results, preferably ones that have been published in well-respected, peer-reviewed medical journals. Peer-reviewed studies are the gold standard for determining whether an MSK solution is as effective as it claims. Never rely on a vendor's self-published outcomes alone.

“Before, my pain was so bad that I couldn't sleep. Now... I've completely stopped my medication. It really has changed my life.”

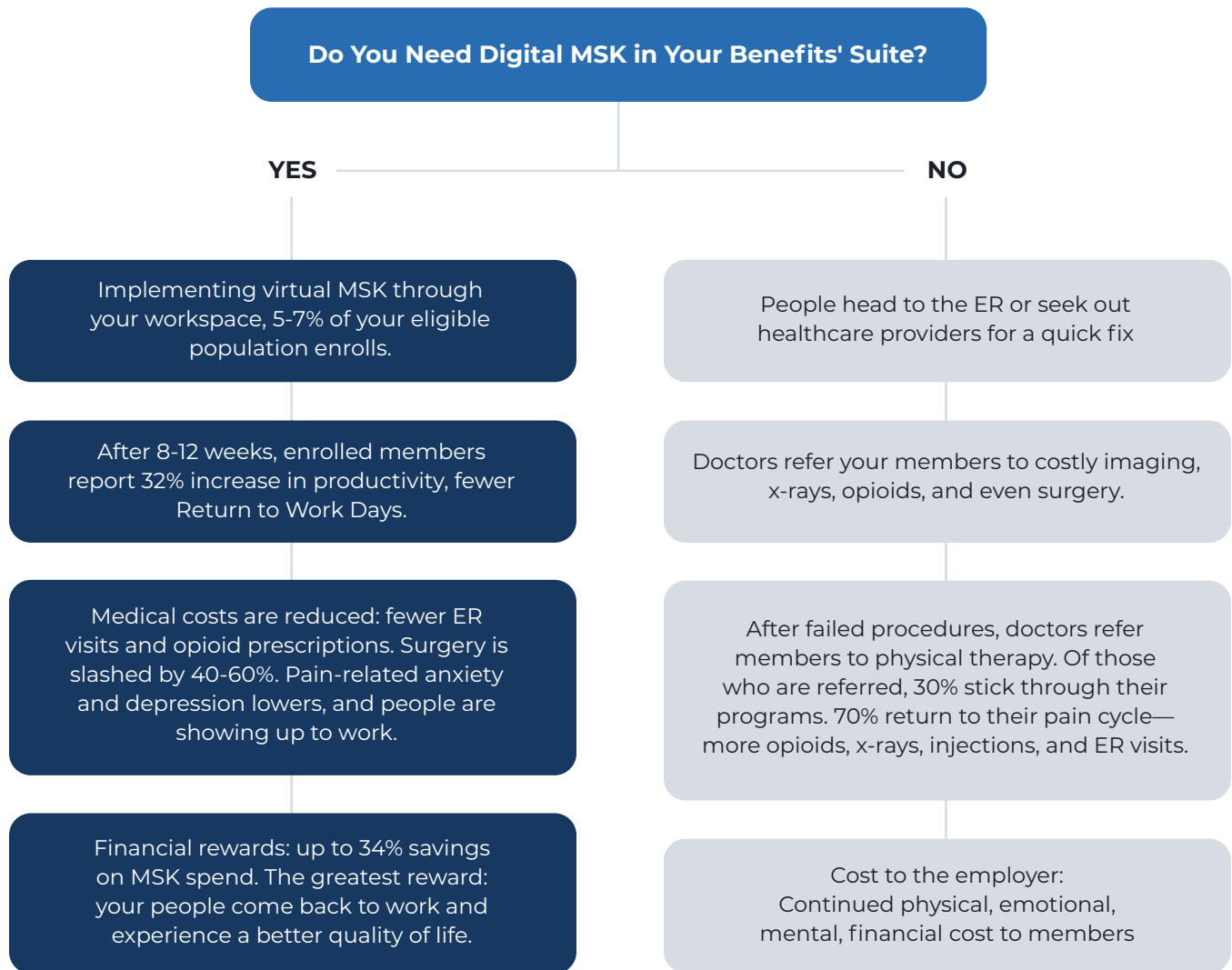
Sara, lower back pain



Our Level 2 certification from the Validation Institute shows how Sword's clinical solution offered significant improvement compared to conventional care. Sword is the first and only digital MSK care provider to demonstrate outstanding clinical outcomes in acute MSK conditions, and continues to have the highest completion rates of all companies in this space.



Getting Started



Once you've made the decision to cut costs and add MSK, there's the matter of positioning yourself to find the right vendor. To do so, you need to build a robust RFP that can help you find the solution with the best technology, the clinical experts of choice, and the strongest outcomes.

Download our Sample RFP to guide you on your way:
go.swordhealth.com/digital-msk-RFP

See what types of questions you should be asking your vendors.

How Can Sword Help

Sword Health is the most clinically validated MSK care provider in the market, pairing licensed physical therapists with an easy-to-use Digital Therapist. We help people prevent and overcome chronic, acute, and post-surgical pain faster and more cost-effectively than the gold standard — and our results speak volumes.

We lower your direct medical costs

We strike at the root of MSK spend by stopping the costly, ineffective care loop of pain. By giving people access to highly engaging, at-home MSK – exercise, education and coaching – we reduce their risk of surgeries and opioid addiction. Overall, employers who use Sword see 34% savings in healthcare spend.

We get people back to health faster and better

Because MSK conditions lead to more lost workdays than any other condition, getting people back on their feet sooner can have a big impact on your business. Our overall adherence is 89%, 3x the national healthcare average. Because our members have quick access to their sessions and care, they recover faster and better.

We give your people the tools (and experts) to outsmart their pain

A doctor of physical therapy is the expert of choice for addressing MSK pain. Our high-touch approach means that PTs are always aware of the member's situation, and adjustments to their programs are made 2-4x a week on average.

Additionally, we offer Sword On Call, giving your members 24/7 access to a text-based service that puts a PT in your pocket for MSK-related questions. Members have the ability to ask and receive instant responses to concerns. This reduces ER visits and doctor's appointments.

A better way to overcome pain, for everyone

When your employees are free from pain, they're happier, more productive, and contribute to a healthier work environment.

Tackling the MSK problem in your workplace is less of a challenge with the right partner by your side. To learn more about how Sword Health can help you reduce your MSK costs by as much as 30% and improve your employees' lives, contact us today.

Contact Us

Headquarters

Sword Health Technologies, Inc.
13937 Sprague Lane, Suite 100
Draper, Utah 84020

Contact info

info@swordhealth.com