

ACTION BRIEF

Employer Strategies that Drive Health, Equity and Value



BRAIN HEALTH AND COGNITIVE DECLINE:

SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING, CAREGIVERS, AND WORKFORCE PERFORMANCE



Cognitive decline is a growing workforce issue, with implications for employee wellbeing, caregiving, productivity, and healthcare costs.

Brain health affects how individuals think, learn, remember, communicate, regulate emotions, and perform daily activities. For employers, it is closely tied to workforce wellbeing and performance. Yet cognitive decline, mild cognitive impairment, Alzheimer's disease, and other dementias remain overlooked drivers of healthcare costs, productivity loss, caregiving burden, absenteeism, and workforce disruption. Employers can begin addressing these issues by building on existing priorities, including chronic disease prevention and management, mental healthcare, and caregiver support.

Cognitive decline, including Alzheimer's disease, is becoming an increasingly important workforce issue as employees remain in the workforce longer and more people experience dementia before age 65. While 7.4 million Americans ages 65 and older are living with clinical Alzheimer's dementia, an estimated 200,000 Americans ages 30 to 64 are living with younger-onset dementia.¹ And because Alzheimer's-related changes in the brain can begin more than a decade before symptoms

“The effects of cognitive decline may be hiding in plain sight—showing up through caregiving strain, productivity loss, and healthcare costs. As the workforce ages, employers should pay attention now and prepare for its growing impact.”

*—Kim Thiboldeaux, CEO,
Northeast Business Group on Health*

ACTION STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

1. Assess brain health's impact on your workplace.
2. Build a brain-healthy workplace culture.
3. Review wellness benefits, navigation, and employee support.
4. Prepare for the evolving brain health and cognitive care landscape.

Brain health is closely connected to but *distinct* from mental health.

Brain health refers to how well the brain functions across areas such as:

- Thinking
- Learning
- Memory
- Emotional regulation
- Daily functioning

Mental health focuses on the emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing of a person.

While some use a broader definition, this brief's definition of **brain health** focuses on promoting cognitive function and preventing brain-related diseases, including Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

appear,² the effects may emerge during an individual's working years, affecting employees and the organizations that employ and support them.

The impact extends beyond employees experiencing cognitive health challenges to those caring for loved ones with cognitive decline. Nearly 13 million Americans provide unpaid care for people with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia³ and about 70% of dementia caregivers are under age 65, requiring many to balance work and caregiving responsibilities.⁴

Approximately one-quarter are "sandwich generation" caregivers, meaning they provide care for both an older parent and at least one child.⁵ More broadly, nearly one in four employed family and unpaid caregivers of older adults report absenteeism (time away from work) or presenteeism (reduction in function at work).⁶ Across employed family and unpaid caregivers of older adults, caregiving-related productivity loss is estimated at approximately \$5,600 per caregiver annually.⁷

The economic toll of cognitive decline is substantial. In 2026, Alzheimer's and other dementias are projected to cost the U.S. \$409 billion in healthcare and long-term care spending.⁸ A broader societal estimate—including medical and long-term care costs, unpaid caregiving, lost earnings, and reductions in quality of life—places the total cost of dementia at \$818 billion in 2026.⁹ Even earlier stages of cognitive decline increase costs before a dementia diagnosis: people with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) have substantially higher all-cause healthcare costs than similar individuals without MCI or dementia.¹⁰

Our understanding of Alzheimer's and other dementias continues to evolve, and recent research suggests that addressing 14 modifiable risk factors across the lifespan could prevent or delay up to 45% of dementia cases worldwide.¹¹ This creates an opportunity for employers to support risk reduction and encourage earlier action by building on existing workplace strategies—including those focused on healthy behaviors, chronic condition management, social connection, sleep, and physical activity. These efforts can support employee wellbeing and workforce performance while addressing a growing driver of employer health and productivity costs.



**7.4 million
Americans**

**ages 65 and older are living
with Alzheimer's**



Nearly

1 in 5

U.S. adults

**ages 65 and older participated in
the labor force in 2025¹²**



**200,000
Americans**

**ages 30-64 are living with
younger-onset dementia**



Up to 45%

**of dementia cases worldwide
could potentially be prevented
or delayed by addressing
modifiable risk factors**



**Alzheimer's and other
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*"Protecting brain health is relevant
to working people of all ages. The
key is reaching people early and
helping them take action decades
before retirement."*

*—Jeanine Donnelly, MPH,
Director of Brain Health Programs,
Alzheimer's Association*

U.S. POINTER Study Shows Structured Healthy Behaviors Can Support Cognitive Function

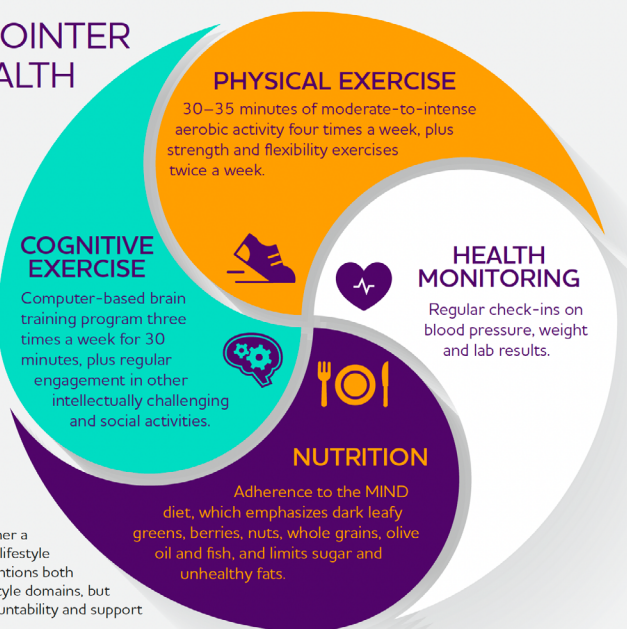
The Alzheimer's Association's U.S. POINTER study found that lifestyle interventions including regular physical activity, cognitive exercise, healthy eating, social interaction, and health monitoring were associated with improvements in global cognitive function among older adults at risk of cognitive decline.¹³

Participants in both the structured and self-guided intervention groups saw cognitive improvement, though benefits were greater among those receiving more structured support. Improvements were seen across sex, ethnicity, genetic risk, and heart health status.

What this means for employers:

- ▶ Healthy behaviors can support cognitive function among adults at elevated risk of cognitive decline, reinforcing the value of prevention-focused benefits and wellbeing strategies.
- ▶ Existing programs may already support brain-healthy behaviors, including physical activity incentives, nutrition support, social connection, cognitive engagement, preventive care, and management of cardiovascular and metabolic risk factors.
- ▶ Understanding the connection between brain health and everyday habits could provide additional motivation for employees to adopt healthy lifestyle changes.

THE U.S. POINTER BRAIN HEALTH RECIPE*



*Participants followed either a self-guided or structured lifestyle program. The two interventions both focused on the same lifestyle domains, but differed in structure, accountability and support provided.

The Cognitive Care Landscape Is Changing

Recent advances are changing how cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease are prevented, detected, diagnosed, and treated. Together, these developments are making cognitive care more proactive, more accessible, and increasingly focused on identifying and addressing disease earlier.

- ▶ **Blood tests:** Blood tests are making it easier to detect Alzheimer's-related biological changes through less invasive testing. FDA-cleared tests are expanding the tools available to support diagnosis (e.g., Lumipulse and Elecsys pTau181).
- ▶ **Digital screening tools:** Digital cognitive assessments (e.g., Linus, CognICA, MoCA, and BrainCheck) are helping make cognitive screening easier to administer and track over time, giving clinicians another way to identify when more evaluation may be needed.
- ▶ **Consumer access to screening:** Some wellness providers such as BetterBrain and Neurogen Biomarking now offer some Alzheimer's blood tests and cognitive screening tools directly to consumers to help them better understand their individual risk profiles.
- ▶ **Prevention research:** Studies such as U.S. POINTER are adding to evidence that physical activity, nutrition, cognitive engagement, social connection, and health monitoring can support cognitive function in adults at risk of cognitive decline.
- ▶ **Disease-modifying therapies:** New FDA-approved treatments are indicated for people in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease and aim to slow disease progression, rather than only manage symptoms.

What this means for employers:

As cognitive care evolves, employees may seek information, screening, diagnosis, treatment, or caregiver support earlier than in the past. Employers should ensure their health benefits, navigation resources, and workplace programs are prepared to help employees understand and access appropriate care.



ACTION STEP 1

Assess brain health's impact on your workforce.

Brain health may not appear as a distinct line item in employer data, but its effects can surface across multiple areas. Cognitive concerns may contribute to disability, leave, performance challenges, or increased healthcare utilization. Caregiving responsibilities may contribute to absenteeism, reduced hours, turnover, or difficulty remaining in the workforce. Employers should look across data sources rather than relying on a single measure.

Sample Strategy for Using Data to Get Ahead of the Curve

At least once a year, require medical and pharmacy carriers (or analytics vendors) to provide data in response to the following questions:

- ▶ **Benefits and utilization:** enrollment and use of caregiving programs, employee assistance programs (EAP), care navigation, and relevant healthcare services

“It does not take a large team or a major investment to begin. What matters is understanding which outcomes are critical to your organization and building the business case around them.”

—Krystal Sexton, PhD, Founder and CEO, Cognitive Capital Group; former health analytics and human performance leader at Shell

- ▶ **Workforce indicators:** trends in medical and family leave related to caregiving or cognitive conditions, disability, absenteeism, presenteeism, turnover, and reduced hours
- ▶ **Employee health:** management of conditions associated with elevated dementia risk, including hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and depression
- ▶ **Employee experience:** feedback on caregiving demands, access to support, and barriers to care

Where data is limited, employee surveys, focus groups, and listening sessions can help fill gaps. Employers should also consider whether certain populations face greater risk because of age, job demands, geography, access to care, or social determinants of health.

ACTION STEP 2

Build a brain-healthy workplace culture.

Stigma and uncertainty can delay help-seeking and make it harder for employees and managers to respond when cognitive concerns arise. Employers can reduce these barriers by treating brain health and caregiving as legitimate workforce issues.

Brain health can be incorporated into existing communications and wellbeing strategies rather than introduced as a separate campaign. Employers can:

- ▶ Include brain health in preventive health and chronic disease communications
- ▶ Educate employees about the value of annual physicals, cognitive assessments, and routine management of cardiovascular and metabolic risk factors
- ▶ Reinforce the role of physical activity, sleep, nutrition, stress management, cognitive engagement, and social connection in supporting brain health
- ▶ Make caregiving resources visible before employees reach a crisis
- ▶ Use employee resource groups, peer networks, or caregiver forums to build connection and share practical support



Recognizing Symptoms of Cognitive Decline in the Workplace

Cognitive decline begins gradually, and changes may first become apparent at work. Someone with early-stage Alzheimer's may experience difficulties including:

- ▶ Coming up with the right word or name
- ▶ Remembering names when introduced to new people
- ▶ Having difficulty performing tasks in social or work settings
- ▶ Forgetting material that was just read
- ▶ Losing or misplacing a valuable object
- ▶ Experiencing increased trouble with planning or organizing

Managers and HR teams should receive clear guidance on how to respond when changes in performance or behavior may indicate that an employee needs support. Managers should:

- ▶ Understand the warning signs of cognitive decline
- ▶ Respond with empathy and maintain employee privacy
- ▶ Connect employees to HR, EAP, leave, disability, accommodation, and care navigation resources
- ▶ Escalate concerns through established workplace processes when safety or performance is affected

For additional guidance, employers can refer to the Alzheimer's Association's *Cognitive Impairment in the Workplace* report and *Stages of Alzheimer's* resource.

ACTION STEP 3

Review wellness benefits, navigation, and employee support.

Most employers already offer services that could support brain health, but employees may encounter fragmented programs, unclear entry points, or gaps between diagnosis, treatment, caregiving, and workplace support.

Employers should map the experience of two key employee populations:

1. An employee who is concerned about changes in memory or cognitive function.
2. An employee caring for a parent, spouse, or other loved one with dementia.

For each journey, determine:

- ▶ Where the employee is expected to start
- ▶ Which benefits or vendors become involved
- ▶ Whether there is a clear handoff between services
- ▶ Where delays, duplication, or coverage gaps may occur
- ▶ Whether employees receive help navigating both clinical and workplace needs

Review the connections among:

- ▶ **Clinical care:** primary and preventive care, specialists, diagnostics, and pharmacy coverage
- ▶ **Workplace support:** EAPs, mental health benefits, medical and family leave, short- and long-term disability, and workplace accommodations
- ▶ **Caregiver and navigation support:** caregiver benefits, care navigation, legal and financial planning, and community resources

- ▶ **Related programs:** chronic condition management and broader wellbeing offerings

To support this review, there are several questions you can ask your health plan, broker, or vendor partners:

- ▶ **Where should an employee with cognitive concerns or caregiving needs begin?**
- ▶ **How are services coordinated across the health plan, pharmacy benefit, EAP, caregiving, leave, and disability programs?**
- ▶ **What utilization, access, outcomes, and employee experience data can be reported?**

This review can help employers determine whether the greatest need is a new service, better coordination among current partners, or clearer communication about resources already available.



Employer Spotlight

Miami-Dade County Public Schools

recognizes that brain health is essential to the overall wellbeing, productivity, and success of its workforce. As part of its commitment to supporting employees, the District is integrating brain health into its comprehensive workforce wellbeing strategy. Through collaboration across Employee Benefits, Human Resources, and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), the District is:

- ▶ Introducing brain health concepts to principals and teachers and identifying brain health as a core wellbeing priority
- ▶ Helping employees understand how brain health connects to, and differs from, mental health
- ▶ Using educational sessions and wellbeing activities to promote social connection, inclusion, nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and emotional awareness

ACTION STEP 4

Prepare for the evolving brain health and cognitive care landscape.

Scientific advances are changing how cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease are prevented, detected, diagnosed, and treated. Employers should monitor these developments and consider whether benefits, care navigation, caregiving support, and workplace policies remain aligned with employee needs.

Employers do not need to make clinical judgments. They should establish a basic level of brain health fluency and assign clear responsibility for monitoring developments in the care landscape and assessing their workforce implications. This responsibility may sit with a cross-functional group that includes benefits, HR, occupational health, legal, employee relations, and wellness leaders.

A lead or small cross-functional team can:

- ▶ Monitor major developments in prevention, detection, diagnosis, and treatment of cognitive decline
- ▶ Identify implications for benefit coverage, navigation, leave, disability, and accommodations
- ▶ Ask health plans and vendors how they are preparing for changes in cognitive care, such as emerging diagnostic tools and disease-modifying therapies
- ▶ Brief senior leaders and benefits committees when action may be needed
- ▶ Access to relevant clinical services and specialists
- ▶ Leave and disability trends
- ▶ Employee experience with navigation and support
- ▶ Coordination and successful handoffs across health plans, vendors, and workplace programs

By assigning clear ownership, monitoring developments, and using data to identify emerging gaps, employers can move from awareness to sustained action that supports workforce brain health.

As part of this, employers should revisit their approach periodically and whenever meaningful changes occur in the care landscape to determine whether benefits, navigation, and workforce support remain aligned with employee and caregiver needs.

A focused set of measures can help employers assess progress over time, including:

- ▶ Awareness and use of caregiver and care navigation resources

“If we don’t take care of our brains, we can’t replace them. Employers can help create a culture that encourages brain-healthy habits and work-life balance while supporting employees in becoming active participants in their own wellbeing.”

*—Rosa Novo, Executive Benefits Director,
Miami-Dade County Public Schools*



HOW EMPLOYERS ARE BUILDING A FOUNDATION TO SUPPORT WORKFORCE BRAIN HEALTH

A multinational company in the energy sector with more than 100,000 employees and approximately 250,000 contractors developed a holistic health program that incorporated brain health into its broader approach to employee wellbeing and workplace culture. While the initiative was not designed specifically around Alzheimer's disease or cognitive decline, it established a foundation for addressing related workforce needs by strengthening brain-healthy behaviors, caregiver support, workplace culture, and coordination across health and benefits programs.

Business Case

- ▶ **Respond to Emerging Workforce Needs.** An aging workforce, cognitively demanding roles, and rising mental health- and caregiver-related absences highlighted the need for a more proactive approach to employee health.
- ▶ **Connect Brain Health to Performance.** Internal resilience and culture data showed that employees who felt supported and cared for were more engaged, productive, and likely to work safely. Those results prompted leaders to apply cognitive neuroscience more deliberately through leadership training and a broader holistic health pilot program. This work created a foundation for supporting cognitive performance today and evolving brain health needs over time.

Action

- ▶ **Train Leaders on Brain Health.** The company used cognitive neuroscience and internal data to educate leaders on how brain science, work design, and management practices affect cognitive load, resilience, psychological safety, and performance. This helped build organizational fluency around brain health that could support more informed responses as cognitive concerns emerge.
- ▶ **Reduce Stigma.** The company created opportunities for employees to share their experiences related to cognitive decline, dementia, mental health, and caregiving. Strong participation demonstrated the value of creating a workplace culture where employees feel safe discussing brain health and seeking support.
- ▶ **Assess the Work Environment.** A two-year pilot combined team education on sleep, physical activity, and nutrition—behaviors associated with long-term cognitive health—with measurement of workplace factors including job demands, autonomy, manager support, and relationships at work.
- ▶ **Respond to Caregiver Needs.** Employee surveys and focus groups identified caregiving strains, particularly among sandwich generation employees, and informed new benefits to support caregivers, including leaves of absence, protected time off, and additional EAP offerings. These supports can provide an important foundation for employees caring for family members experiencing Alzheimer's disease or other forms of cognitive decline.
- ▶ **Align Health and Benefits.** Internal health experts began working directly with the benefits team—two functions that had previously operated in silos—to prioritize evidence-based, cost-effective offerings, reduce duplicative programs, and improve access to care. The company also created a dedicated position to integrate health and benefits, helping it prepare for evolving needs related to cognitive assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and navigation.

Impact and Lessons

- ▶ **Workforce Insights.** Internal surveys identified measurable links between workplace culture and burnout, productivity, retention, engagement, and safety. Strong workplace relationships consistently buffered employees from negative outcomes, reinforcing the role of social connection in supporting brain health.
- ▶ **Scale.** A six-person team supported the work across more than 100,000 employees, demonstrating that employers can advance brain health without creating a large standalone program or making a substantial new investment.
- ▶ **Systems-Level Data.** Data on organizational and cultural factors can provide an important complement to information about individual health behaviors. Follow-up assessments can also help employers determine whether interventions are improving employee, team, and business outcomes.

HOW EMPLOYERS ARE BUILDING A FOUNDATION TO SUPPORT WORKFORCE BRAIN HEALTH

metrocare.



CENTER for
BRAINHEALTH®
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS



Metrocare's Engagement with Center for BrainHealth

Metrocare is the largest provider of mental health, developmental disability, and permanent supportive housing services in Dallas County. It partnered with the University of Texas at Dallas Center for BrainHealth, a cognitive neuroscience research facility, to implement a BrainHealthy Workplace™ engagement designed to translate brain health research into practical workplace strategies.

Business Case

- ▶ **Support Employees and Strengthen Client Care.** Metrocare employees navigate emotionally demanding, high-pressure environments daily. Leadership recognized brain health as a proactive, non-stigmatizing way to support employees. By making brain health a cultural priority, Metrocare sought to support wellbeing at work and home while strengthening client care.

Action

- ▶ **Build Visible Leadership Support.** Metrocare's C-suite completed a two-day Strategic Memory Advanced Reasoning Tactics (SMART) training led by the Center for BrainHealth. The training introduced practical techniques for managing mental energy, thinking strategically, and innovating, while fostering a shared understanding of brain health's personal and team relevance and a commitment to extend the initiative across the organization.
- ▶ **Activate Champions with a Train-the-Trainer Model.** Metrocare's health ambassadors also completed SMART training to build brain health awareness and knowledge and to prepare trusted internal leaders to disseminate the strategies to their teams. Self-selected Champions then led four topic-specific six-week sprints focused on strategic attention and innovation, making organization-wide implementation scalable and cost-effective.
- ▶ **Foster a Shared Language for Team Impact.** The sprint structure enabled teams to practice one strategy at a time. Champions adapted each strategy to their teams' strengths and needs, creating a shared language and team support for practicing brain-healthy workplace behaviors.

Measured Impact

- ▶ **Workplace Outcomes.** Post-sprint workplace pulse surveys and mid-sprint qualitative questionnaires showed that from baseline to the end of the fourth sprint, participating staff experienced increases of 34% in accomplishing tasks without distraction, 25% in mental energy, 19% in creativity, and 17% in handling daily demands.
- ▶ **Future Measurement.** With continued CEO support, Metrocare will be able to demonstrate impacts on existing KPIs as data becomes available.

Learn more about SMART brain training [here](#).

RESOURCES FOR EMPLOYERS

- [Health Enhancement Research Organization \(HERO\) Health and Well-Being Best Practices Scorecard](#)
- [Alzheimer's Association Cognitive Impairment in the Workplace Report](#)
- [UsAgainstAlzheimer's Business Collaborative for Brain Health](#)
- [UT Dallas Center for BrainHealth BrainHealthy Workplace™](#)
- [Alzheimer's Association Brain Health at Work™](#)
- [National Alliance The Hidden Cost of Cognitive Decline: What Employers Need to Know Webinar](#)
- [UT Dallas Center for BrainHealth Toxic Habits Quiz](#)
- [UT Dallas Center for BrainHealth Great Brain Gain Resource](#)

Additional employer resources are available [here](#).

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1015 18th Street, NW, Suite 705 • Washington, DC 20036

(202) 775-9300 (phone) • nationalalliancehealth.org

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